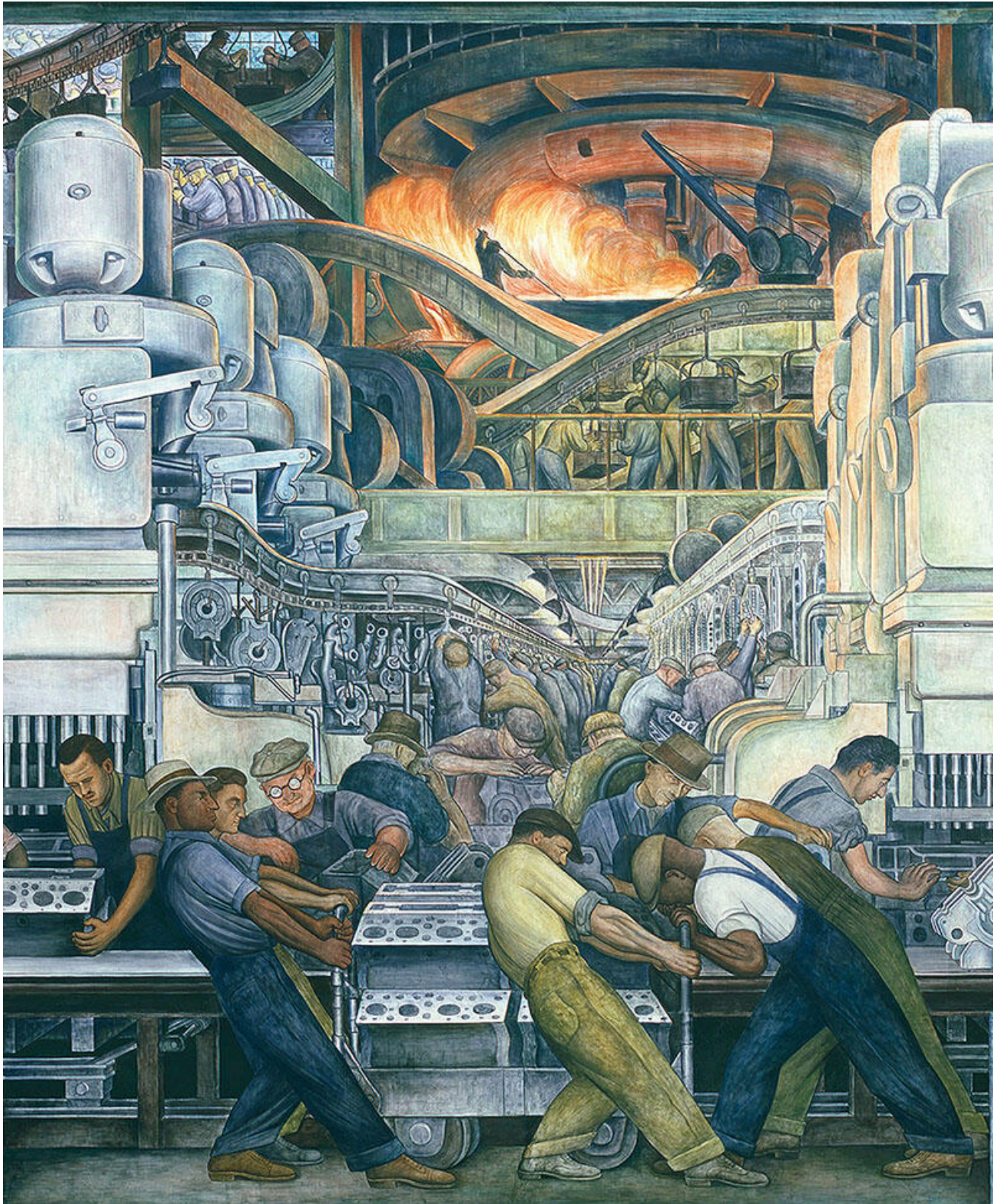# The Dialectic of Liberalism: Technology, AI, and the Worker

by **Brian Patrick Bolger** (June 2023)

Detroit Industry Murals (detail, North Wall), Diego Rivera, 1932-33

There existed from the Medieval period a codification of the

concept of a nascent class in Europe. This was firstly the idea of estate. In this case, the Third Estate of pre-revolutionary France. If a ' Cahiers de Doleances' (Book of Grievances of the Estates) was drawn up, as in 1789, the remarkable thing would be its familiarity, rather than its strangeness, with regard to the present. The Estates General which was convened by Louis XVI was an attempt to pre-empt the nascent revolutionary situation. The Third Estate then comprised of working class, peasantry and also the bourgeoisie. The First Estate of Clergy and the Second Estate of Nobility, in anticipation of greater dominion of the Worker class, had agreed to substantial reforms of financial privileges[1]. So early on, the bourgeoisie, skilled in the art of negotiation, of compromise, was able to quantify the Worker in a schema of estates. Robespierre and Saint Just were able to incorporate the values of elites into the question of sovereignty. So, this burgeoning power and dominion of worker was coalesced, branded, and then usurped by the emergence of the 'Fourth Estate' in the twentieth century, a phenomena of media control which sought to redefine work in an alienated way, and to see it in economic, merely contractual terms. Hence the ambitions of workers were held to be about wages, hours, 'conditions'. It formed the era of contractual organisation of society, of Fordism, of juridical domination by the middle class. Today the Fourth Estate, combined with the skill of security and legal prohibition, maintains the image of the Estates. Yet the Estates have changed. The structure of the Third Estate has cut the Worker adrift. The new bourgeoisie, the new elites of liberalism, have entered the realms of the Second Estate (the nobility), not through inheritance, but through monopolising the discourse of freedom. For the freedom of the bourgeoise is a different form to that of the worker.

This skill, this disingenuity, Hermes-like manipulation by the bourgeoise elites, saw the danger of labour to society from within its own realm of profit and capital. The worker,

however, when seen through the lens of alienation, does not picture himself as part of the Estates. In fact, the alienation of labour is not even economic. The freedom of labour is not to be found, likewise, in representative government. It is not to be found in liberal morality, derived as it is from the good and evil of Christianity. This was visible in the two world wars, spawn as they were from the ideas of reason and morality, yet requiring the worker to be irrational, hateful, beast-like during war. Here it was convenient for the elites to step back from reason, justice. The worker exhibits instead an 'elemental' force; one that was attuned to the nature of the seasons, to the moulding of artifices, to creating by hand the great structures of cathedral, factory, of ships. Consequently, the huge shift away from this elemental being, the displacement of labour, has resulted in the atrophy of present civilisation and the cultural cataclysms seen in war, famine and dislocation. The worker, cast away from the moorings of grounding, has lost its being, its 'telos.' Preeminent is to keep the worker cast adrift in 'society' whilst the powers in the 'state' remain untouched, a preserve of the elites. Therefore, problems assume, in modern debates, questions of administration, social justice, equality, all smelt into legal forms. It gives the appearance of pluralism, a phenomenon, whilst keeping powers centralised.

As well as the symbolic visage of the 'Estates,' there is the atomisation of the individual which takes on a useful function for society, but not the worker. For the atomised individual poses no threat. Yet for the bourgeois epoch the individual means freedom. The worker , on the other hand, realises freedom (i.e., it being a positive creative act) through work and its community, its union. The abstraction of individual rights, human rights present an appearance of legal protection, yet it is negative rather than creative freedom. Rights, as in feudalism, exist only in relation to certain groups. As we have seen the limits of democratic participation

have been removed through legal means, representative assemblies, by the foreclosing of participatory institutions i.e., trade unions, communal societies, federal powers. Radicalisation becomes something consumed by the individual, by corporates, a type of Christian virtue realised where no real power exists, where real critique is disbarred (hate speech laws etc). This apparent plurality of radicals increases atomisation as competing interests in society conflict with real power and freedom for the worker group. The attempt of reason (Kantian rights, against the irrational, the romantic) to soften the working class was then succeeded by the ideas of utilitarianism, by social insurance, welfare. Hence the only aspects on the table where economic ones. This was used to assimilate the working class, to offer pyrrhic access, but delimited and without power. This role suited the so called 'Labour' or 'Social Democratic' parties.

The role of the intellectual is not to assimilate the worker but to enable the assumption of power, the assumption of a will to power in recognising the 'form' of the present. The 'form' is something above the simulacra of appearance. It is, for the worker, this elemental essence. The realisation of the worker form is achieved both through the individual and also the community. Consequently, rather than abstract rights, the form of the worker is manifested in 'being', in doing. It was Heidegger, although not explicitly referring to the working class, but being in general, that human beings are able to confront the question of the meaning of being. In this, questions of ontology were dragged down from metaphysical abstraction and located in everyday being. Likewise for Aristotle human beings engage in the world through 'events' of meaning; building, creating, farming etc. For Aristotle the many modes of being are realised to the human in different ways. In labour, in creating or observing God. Human beings, unlike animals, operate in the world through this partaking of being. Now this role for the worker, whilst clearly articulated through the industrial revolution, has been

eroded. For Ernst Junger, this elemental property of the worker, is absent from the bourgeoisie, who operate in the realm of 'negotiation', safety and rely on the worker for sustenance. However, for Ernst Junger [2], the realm of Titans is reversed and the weak and superfluous bourgeoise dominate by manipulating language and power. It was not so much the Nietzschean loss of God, although that was also a way of encountering being, but the manifest loss of this working creative dominion, that induced the separation from authentic existence. It was also not so much the extraction of surplus value in the Marxist view, which has led to the dilemma of 'existens.' It was Junger's idea of the individual, which could be seen in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, not as an isolated atomised commodity, but a Titan:

> *It is only through staking one's life that freedom is won.[3]*

Heidegger's term 'Dasein' is important as it does not mean human being or a particular person, but a way of being formed of community (Heidegger compares this, for example, to language as a particular mode of speaking of a community). Now there has always been 'technics' throughout history and pre-history so the argument against the technological alienation thesis would be that technics is ephemeral, ever present. Heidegger uses the term 'poieses' to describe that engagement with materials and the natural world which produce or create i.e., the domain of the worker. As the world has moved towards a form of bourgeois extraction, to administration, to Artificial Intelligence, the human being has disowned his very nature.

The archetype of any society is patterns of being. These can be traditional or modern; the flow of agricultural seasons,

the repetition of ship building, the blending of artefacts in the factory. It is this disowning of labour, the removal of *control* of produce, of creation, not surplus value, which alienates and supports the dominance of extractive elites. Parts are sourced globally, then assembled in outsourced regions. Therefore, labour no longer owns artifice or creation, and this engagement with 'being' is broken. The long game of capital, of elites is to racinate even further through Artificial Intelligence, automisation. The New Deal, its agreement and homogeneity, has been jettisoned for the pursuit of profit with the accompanying social chaos.

Freedom is defined as participation. It is not through rights but through an existential action that homesickness and longing is solved. It is not an opposition of materialism or idealism, as in Philosophy. Neither is it a scientific solution or progress. The Ancient world, the Medieval world contained a 'teleology', a meaning to life that presupposed the active pursuit of this life. This was , for the Greeks, the quality of Ethics and Virtue; the political life of the polis. For the medieval world this was the Christian idea of redemption. For modernity, the post-Enlightenment contract was a confused morality resting in the abandonment of God. Nietzsche had noted the moral bankruptcy of Enlightenment thinking, rooted as it was in quasi- Christian thinking. With Aristotle, man was taken for what he was, not what he '*should*' be. But what he could become. The virtues and morality are part of a becoming within society; community, particular communities, with their idiosyncrasies, their traditions and taboos. The individual, as seen through the lens of reason, becomes in modernity, a subjective, atomised, being. This Enlightenment error was passed on as utopian thought in seeing a rational universalist morality for all people, for all nations. It was Nietzsche through the 'ubermensch', and Junger through the 'Worker', who set out the necessity for Homeric, Titanic virtue. The worker is anyone who wishes to break free from the Platonic cave of dark atomisation,

universality. This is participatory, society defining and individual defining. It is not through abstract liberal reason, by further racinating beings from biology, to blurring definitions of biology, of nature, by killing virtue in bourgeoise conformity.

The Greeks had the concept of '*thysis*' or opening to nature and the world. Through Artificial Intelligence, Technology, man and being moves away from thysis. Rational culture has been used to 'ban the opponent from the realm of society and thus from the realm of humanity and the law.'[4]

With Plato, the attempt to place form, to dissect life—to rationalise it—replaced the opening up. The Romans continued to place form on matter and this was sanctified in the modern era of science, exploration. The crux of the problem is that 'science' and rationality remove the human being from the necessity to develop skill, and this, in turn, removes being from essence. Everything is there on the Internet; discovery and exploration in a simulacrum of reality. Temporal life becomes destroyed as the 24/7 world impinges on being and time. And since 'freedom' is defined as work and creativity, then the delimiting of this aspect produces a collapse in freedom of the subject. Liberal universality erases the elemental forces of the worker by curtailing the romantic impulse and presuming the commodification of the world. Character and virtues have no place in the worlds of the outsider. Work will be further removed by Artificial Intelligence and automisation; the worker being one of many commodities for utilisation in the 'Panopticon.'[5]. Social dissonance and the abandonment of telos then produces the 'Dialectic of Liberalism'; the sunset of civilisation. The realisation is that being as constructed by man needs participation, needs the social animal. Liberalism, in its anti-heroic framing of life, in its destruction of virtues and Titans, removes man to the form of spectacle. Man is not the atomised individual but an intense, elemental force. Not an

observer in the bourgeois world of proxy wars and the recipient of welfarism; a mere commodity tax payer. The apotheosis of liberalism contains its own demise; as it reaches rationalisation through AI and efficiency, the nihilism against nature, the world is commodified, and breaks down. There will be a longing, a homesickness, a revolt against the sickness. Goethe, in his poem, *The Holy Longing* pleads with us that:

> *As long as you have not grasped that you have to die to grow, you are a troubled guest on the dark earth.*

[1] Chaussinand-Nogaret, Guy. The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: From Feudalism to Enlightenment, translated by William Doyle, Cambridge, 1985.
[2] Junger Ernst, Hemming, L. P., & Costea, B. (2017). *The Worker: Dominion and Form*. Northwestern University Press.
[3] Junger Ernst, Hemming, L. P., & Costea, B. (2017). *The Worker: Dominion and Form*. Northwestern University Press.
[4] Junger Ernst, Hemming, L. P., & Costea, B. (2017). *The Worker: Dominion and Form*. Northwestern University Press.
[5] Bentham's circular all seeing prison design of the nineteenth century.

Table of Contents

Brian Patrick Bolger studied at the LSE. He has taught political philosophy and applied linguistics in Universities across Europe. His articles have appeared in the US, the UK, Italy, Canada and Germany in magazines such as *Asian Affairs, Deliberatio, L'Indro Quotidiano Indipendente di Geopolitica,*

The National Interest, GeoPolitical Monitor, Merion West, Voegelin View, The Montreal Review, The European Conservative, Visegrad Insight, The Hungarian Conservative, The Salisbury Review, The Village, New English Review, The Burkean, The Daily Globe, American Thinker, The Internationalist, and *Philosophy News*. His new book, *Nowhere Fast: The Decline of Liberal Democracy*, will be published soon by Ethics International Press.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)