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[Book Review] Judith Bessant, The Great Transformation: History for a Techno-Human Future

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Book Title: 'The Great Transformation: History for a Techno-Human Future': Routledge, 2017 (ISBN:1317286294), 349pp.

Author: Judith Bessant

Reviewer: Aditya Ray

Introduction

The Great Transformation: History for a Techno-Human Future by Judith Bessant is an important book that attempts to answer two hugely important questions of our time, namely; i) how do we make sense of the widespread impact of rapid technology-led transformations taking place in the world today, without being overwhelmed by them? And ii) how might we respond to the various social, ethical and moral challenges these transformations pose? In answering these fundamental questions, Bessant weaves together insights from historical sociology, philosophy and cognitive co-evolutionary theory and argues strongly against various 'determinisms' associated with visions of our shared technological future. Bessant's multi-disciplinary approach correctly emphasises the relational and reciprocal link between technology *and* humans, without factoring out human agency and responsibility. Overall, this book should be read as both a descriptive endeavour and a prescriptive one, which whilst underlining the historical 'co-evolution' of technology and human consciousness also emphasises how we *may* learn from this history and respond to the impending challenges of our collective techno-human future.

Key Arguments

Early in the book, Bessant establishes a useful theoretical 'sense-making' framework, underlining the two opposing 'determinisms' popularly associated with technology and its impact *on* humans. The first kind of popular 'technological determinism' views the existence of technology as ostensibly autonomous and independent of humans, which nonetheless determines and shapes society, culture and practices' (p. 20). The second kind of determinism however is based in the strong sociological frame that 'sees all technology and science as socially constructed', that is designed, developed and used by people, and thus dependent completely on their decision-making (pg. 22). Eschewing the false binary between these two opposing views, Bessant argues in support of the 'relational and transformational model' for understanding the relationship between humans *and* technology, basing her claims on critical realist conceptions which draw on social ontological models that do not emphasise structure at the expense of 'habitual practice and the unequal distribution of various resources and capitals' (p. 33). The point then is not to think in exclusive terms about how human's shape technology or vice versa, rather to develop a 'techno-human' understanding, where both are seeing as co-evolutionary, shaping our past, present and futures.

However, is there anything exceptional about the current moment of techno-human transformation? Using historical-sociological accounts, Bessant answers in the affirmative. Several historical sociologists have cited middle centuries of the first millennia BCE as the original period of 'significant and simultaneous change in human intellectual and cultural history in four major civilisations of the wold namely China, India, Middle-East and Greece' (p. 42). This was the first

Axial Age – a period of 'new departure within mankind' that involved a 'critical reflective questioning of the actual and new vision of what lies beyond' (pp. 42-43). Bessant states that in civilisations where the (first) Axial Age came into being there was the establishment of 'theoretic' culture based on the fundamental 'recursive' nature of human cognitive and linguistic ability - described simply as embedding of structure within another structure - which ultimately gave rise to development of 'governance by abstract theories and analytic thought' (p. 55). Fast forwarding to the contemporary moment, Bessant contends, that what we are currently witnessing, is the next stage in the development of human consciousness that is 'at least as profound and far-reaching as the first Axial Age' (p 58). This latest shift in consciousness is based on advances of new technologies that are enabling 'new modes of theoretic governance vested in international standards and control systems that are embedded in non-biological memory devices' (ibid.) (think for instance, the Interweb or Google!). Bessant maintains that with the new 'Techno-Axial Age' we have entered a phase where 'whatever emerges as a new consciousness culture will involve a conception of the interconnectedness of body-brain-mind-consciousness-culture evolving across time' (p. 82). Such an understanding is crucial as we enter deeper into a new 'techno-Axial Age' where modern technology is not just realigning key aspects of human work and labour, but also reshaping our entire lives in profound ways, thus necessitating a radical rethink of our fundamental socio-political and ethical engagements.

Bessant provides several interesting case examples of new technologies primarily in advanced economies that combine algorithmic neural-networks, machine learning programmes that use powerful hardware systems and advanced forms of artificial intelligence (AI) - things 'millions even billion times smarter than humans' (p. 178). However, these new technological breakthroughs and advancements have also brought forth new challenges for humankind – from more immediate questions of sustaining employment and living standards, in the age of rapid automation and rising inequality, to more abstract questions as to whether humans, as creators of new kind of (super) intelligence, are at all ready to play Gods. Following this, Bessant asks - 'what new arrangements, policies, education and ethical frames do we need in conditions that are radically different from those we have been accustomed to?' (p.82), especially since 'governing ideas and representations of late-modern capitalism are failing to provide what is needed to give meaning to and to make our societies cohere, and further secure our political cultures to resolve or at least manage disputes as they seemingly did once' (p. 82). Bessant highlights the three main economic crises the world has seen (in the 1890s; the 1930s, and 2008-) as important cases for learning from the past, as we enter the period of unprecedented and disruptive change. However, Bessant also provocatively argues that even after the development of better technologies of memory externalisation (its storage and recall), what is demonstrated by these recurring episodes of crises, is that it is not 'knowledge' or 'rationality', rather 'designed ignorance' and 'wilful blindness' that play a formative role in creating them (p.87). Bessant stresses that we cannot be complacent or just succumb in the face of economic and political dogmas, hollow exhortations and ignorance of our political leaders and institutions, rather we must emphasise once again the value of 'recursivity' - the core element of human cognitive processes that enables an unyielding 'historical imagination' and capacity for 'mental time travel' that helps us to learn from past mistakes (p.113).

In the concluding chapter, arguably the most ambitious of the book, Bessant introduces her 'social design principles' that can help and guide thinking about new social imaginaries and arrangements

in the techno-Axial Age – 'the possible paths ahead and the preliminary steps we might take to move towards them' (pg. 17). Briefly stated, Bessant's design principles, inspired by different social philosophies, seek to build an ongoing and rigorous engagement with ideals of 'anti-determinism', 'freedom', 'plurality and dissent', whilst also promoting 'ethical enquiries about the good life' through 'public deliberation', fostering a kind of 'education that is committed to questioning, experimentation and practical wisdom'. These principles are keenly driven by their regard for the idea and politics of 'deep freedom' (Unger 2014) and the concept of *phronesis* (practical wisdom), aimed at imagining and creating ways of re-organising work, production and social relations. Overall, these design principles seek to enhance our collective and institutional capacities to take better and more informed decision for building a fairer society 'without surrendering to deterministic thinking that forecloses on human agency' (p. 184).

Reflections and Critique

While much popular and academic writing has emerged in recent times around the challenges of the approaching high-tech revolution and its impact on the future of work and society, *the Great Transformation* stands out in its effort to contextualise these challenges within the larger politico-philosophical and ethical concerns for retaining and expanding 'deep freedoms' (Unger 2014). With this book, Bessant has called for a renewed politico-ethical engagement, revising and updating older systems, processes, policies, education and ethical frames that are currently failing to 'make our societies cohere to our changing realities' (p. 82) and/or prepare us to meet challenges of the emerging techno-Axial Age. The core intent of the book can be understood as proposing ways to course-correct and wrest back control in the digital era, which otherwise threatens to constrain human autonomy, its capacity for contemplative action and democratic governance. The ambitious scope of Bessant's book is truly reflected in its 'Polanyi-esque' title: 'The Great Transformation'. Indeed, much like Polanyi's seminal work from 1944 that traces the rise of the market economy and the counter movements in the face of grown commodification of society, Bessant's book can be viewed as a bold effort to highlight pathways for a democratic 'countermovement' in the face of both real and imagined changes in markets, society, everyday lives and consciousness cultures resulting from contemporary technological transformations.

There is little doubt that the book makes timely contributions to both explaining and arguing for a more profound engagement with digitalisation and the growing domination of the technical *rationale* and technical *actors* (technocracy and technocrats) in global governance, however, the discussion in the book can also be found lacking in certain respects. First, the book's engagement and coverage of evidence and discourses on the impact of technology, automation and overall digitalisation on consciousness cultures beyond the ambit of the global North is conspicuous by its relative absence. Specifically, it would have been refreshing to see more in-depth engagement with ideas, evidence and concepts from the global South. This engagement is critical for the discussion not because the global North and global South together make the world whole, but also to recognise that digitalisation, its realities and impact are not unidirectional, rather shared, shaped and calibrated as much by people, institutions and societies in the global South today as in the global North. The addition of sources from the world beyond the rather cognate and featureless world of western capitalist economies would have also had the effect of further validating and

nuancing some of the book's generalising claims and solutions, whether they be in the field of education, social policy or global economic governance.

A second, related issue comes through in the book's engagement with institutions. It is important to note here that Bessant writes primarily from the standpoint of western-liberal institutional experiences and contexts. Bessant's larger assertion it appears is that modern liberal institutions are not liberal *enough*, in that they do not promote the creation or expansion of an autonomous society - one that encourages the capacity to think recursively and reflexively. This leads Bessant to propose a new social imaginary that however displays both a hint of nostalgia and generosity towards institutional conduct that is inherently aligned to the common frameworks of 'shared dialogue' and 'global commitment' seamlessly integrating both plurality and dissent. The assumption in the proposed social and political imaginary is which institutional actors display a high degree of flexibility and self-awareness and can (implying both motivated and able to) change as much, and as quickly as societies and individuals do. This somewhat idealised framing of institutional structures however bypasses *power-based* understandings and *bottom-up* notions of socio-political transformation, democratisation and change, specifically those that cannot be accounted (for) within normative institutional logics or in the language of capitalist modernity (*See, e.g.,* Gilroy 1982; 1987; 1993, Hall 1980, Wouters et al. 2013). This is an important oversight, since not only do democratic contestations to power *from below* often effectively diagnose social injustices but also fix accountability with those devising the rules of the game. Ultimately, in her proposed social political imaginary, Bessant appears to put greater emphasis on the life-affirming capacity of governing institutions to not just act, but act quickly, reflexively and for the greater good. In doing so, her schema is surprisingly forgiving of the coercive and majoritarian impulses of modern nation states and the underlying classed, gendered and racialized logics of exclusion. Indeed, a question one is left to ponder after reading this book, is whether a radically transformative 'politics of deep freedom' (Unger 2014) in the 21st century can be conceptualised without first interrogating and rectifying the flaws within the deontic ethical principles of classical western philosophies and (their) derivative modern-liberal institutions which tend to conceptualise the moral individual as an 'impersonal, impartial agent that is unembodied and devoid of emotional bonds, interpersonal relationships, particular commitments and projects' (Applebaum 2002:358).

To conclude, this is an extremely thought-provoking book, worthy of high recommendation. The book will likely appeal to the scholarly audience across the social sciences, including researchers and students engaged in thinking and writing about politics and ethics of modern technology, as well as technology policy and governance.

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