

Review of *The War on Normal People: The Truth About America's Disappearing Jobs and Why Universal Basic Income Is Our Future*, by Andrew Yang, Hachette Books, 2018, 284 pages. US\$16.99 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-316-41421-0

Large-scale economic upheavals often lead to redefinitions of the relationship between the American government and the people. The fallout from the Industrial Revolution—epitomized by tragic events such as the 1894 Pullman Strike and the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire—bred the widespread public expectation that the government would act on behalf of workers to regulate companies' behavior. Monopolies and child labor were outlawed, and unions went from organizations whose members were [occasionally murdered by federal troops](#) to legally protected institutions at the heart of the American economy. As President Theodore Roosevelt described it, the government became the guarantor of a "Square Deal" for American workers. Decades later, during the Great Depression, Roosevelt's cousin Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" normalized federal jobs programs and social security as a means of stimulating the economy and providing economic security for older citizens. Andrew Yang argues that America is experiencing another Industrial Revolution- or Great Depression-level event dubbed "the Great Displacement," which merits a similar, fundamental reimagining of the relationship between the federal government and the American people. He warns of the need for a paradigm shift, and he offers solutions for how we can prevent catastrophe before it's too late.

In "Part One: What's Happening to Jobs," Yang tells the economic history of the United States over the last few decades. He identifies improving technology, financialization, changing corporate norms, and globalization as the main culprits driving both increasing wealth inequality and what he calls "the Great Displacement" of millions of American workers who have departed the workforce. He then proceeds to define "normal" Americans as those who find themselves at the median on all metrics: an American with less than an associate's degree making about \$17 per hour (in 2017) and living in the suburbs. He then argues that advances in artificial intelligence and automation will displace millions more blue- and white-collar workers alike in the coming years. Despite all this displacement, he maintains that automation is an inevitable, net benefit to society that will result in better, cheaper goods and services. However, he argues that these changes will require us to think more deeply about what makes human beings inherently valuable. Finally, he responds to the usual objections to his level of concern about automation. Chiefly, he denies the common belief that—in light of similarly disruptive technological shifts through history—his level of concern about automation is an overreaction. Yang counters that "[t]he speed, breadth, impact, and nature of these changes are considerably more dramatic than anything that has come before" (70).

In "Part Two: What's Happening to Us," Yang shifts gears to analyzing the more sociological side of the fallout from the economic changes in Part One. He begins by arguing that the people in the "bubble" of prosperity who have succeeded in our modern economy nevertheless find themselves deeply unsatisfied with their hypercompetitive lives—despite incredible material luxury. He then discusses people outside the "bubble" and how their disadvantages in life compound upon one another, in contrast to the relative cushions that people inside the bubble enjoy. As an example, he describes how, when industry leaves towns like Youngstown, Ohio begins a vicious cycle: opportunities disappear, so people with the means move away, and fewer opportunities present themselves. The result of this cycle is stark economic polarization whereby educational, business investment, and dynamism are increasingly concentrated in a few areas. He then examines the effects of this polarization on families and argues that—through our collective inaction—we are setting up more women to take on the task of parenting alone, which is bad for both kids and parents.

Meanwhile, the US is creating a “permanent shadow class” of people on federal disability benefits, which he describes as a de facto form of long-term unemployment insurance (133). He ends the section by assessing our nation’s current economic, political, and social situation: Americans are barreling towards even greater disruption, deeply mistrustful of institutions, and practically incapable of stopping inevitable technological changes. He warns of the possibility of mass unrest or even violent revolution if we fail to act soon.

In “Part Three: Solutions and Human Capitalism,” Yang proposes a universal basic income (UBI) that he calls the “freedom dividend,” a monthly payment of \$1000 per month to every American age 18 to 64 that’s funded by a value-added tax designed to capture a segment of automation’s economic gains (166). He points to a diverse array of historical figures, including Thomas Paine, Richard Nixon, and Milton Friedman, who all endorsed some form of UBI, and he argues that it won’t disincentivize work because \$12,000 is barely enough to subsist on. To back up his claim, he points to historical and current examples of UBI in action, including [Alaska’s Permanent Fund](#). He also advocates for “human capitalism,” a new variant of capitalism characterized by three basic tenets: first, “humanity is more important than money,” second, “the unit of an economy is each person, not each dollar,” and third, “markets exist to serve our common goals and values” (200). In service of this vision, he argues for many reforms, including the creation of a social credit system: a new type of currency wherein people accumulate credit for helping others and can draw on that currency when in need.

The most striking argument in the book is that, despite the bleak picture he paints with regard to the effects of automation, Yang doesn’t recommend that we seek to stop technological advances. He highlights the enormous benefit from, for example, automated trucks—namely their increased efficiency and the massive expected reduction in traffic accidents from eliminating human truckers. He includes the story of Ellie: an Artificial Intelligence (AI) therapist that can treat soldiers for PTSD better than a human can because the mostly male patients are generally more comfortable confiding in a computer than a real person. Throughout the book, he routinely emphasizes that technology will likely make services more consistent and cheaper. In other words, Yang is not a Luddite seeking to destroy the machines that are putting people out of work. Rather, he focuses his attention on forward-looking changes to the American economy, providing an implicit rebuke of those who might seek to “Make America Great Again” by attempting to restore the past.

Perhaps the most interesting narrative element in the book is the two distinct classes of Americans that Yang describes. He uses many different pairs of descriptors, but perhaps the most foundational duo he employs is the title of Chapter 10: “mindsets of abundance” and “mindsets of scarcity” (101). He describes the people in the abundance group as “white-collar,” “in the bubble,” and “people who have already won [in the economy]” (49, 9, 9). By contrast, the scarcity group is “blue-collar” and “normal” (50,18). Generally, the former group has benefitted from automation and globalization. They tend to work white-collar jobs, live in cities, and have college educations. The latter group is the exact opposite: blue-collar, exurban or rural, and non-college educated. He tries to keep his feet in both worlds, so at times, it can be hard to discern for whom he is writing. He begins the book by saying that he’s writing from inside the bubble, but a few pages later, he argues that it’s better to be leading the revolution than it is to be experiencing it, with his message seemingly a warning to those inside that bubble. As such, Yang seems to be speaking to the concerns and circumstances of both groups.

In my view, reconciling the gap between those groups is vital to the future of our country, and we need leaders, political and otherwise, who can speak to both groups the way Yang describes. From a normative perspective, workers who have lost out during the automation revolution are

victims of bad luck and the inherent uncertainty of the ever-changing world economy. From a pragmatic perspective, normal Americans' legitimate grievances, if ignored, could culminate in the type of violent revolutions we have seen throughout world history. Whether Yang's solutions would be effective is a separate matter that only time can truly answer, but Yang's book provides a measure of the challenges that lie ahead.

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