

Footnote: Burnt Bridges

If, having crossed a bridge, you burn it, you cannot return from whence you came. If a society adopts new technology, and some later become unable to afford it, they can't just return to doing things the way they did before. The means are no longer there. They've been supplanted by the new technology. [PDF]

Vicious Scenario

Picture an idyllic agrarian society of the distant past. Its people have direct access to the terrestrial resources by which they can transform their labour into their needs of life. Times are good. There is time to think and plan. Time to study the mysteries of nature. Time to invent. Machines make work easier and less time consuming. People have more time for leisure and further invention. Then in jumps the capitalist to market the inventions. He hires some to leave their land and work for him to mass-produce them. The market saturates. The vast majority of the people now possess them. A generation passes. The old skills which the machines made obsolete are lost forever. The whole society now depends on them. Without them it could no longer function.

Picture the industrial society it has become. The complex dynamical forces of its free market system fibrillate wildly in a chaotic cycle of boom and bust. People lose their jobs. They descend into the economically-inactive poverty of 'benefit' dependence. They can no longer afford services now vital to the basic functions of everyday life. They cannot revert to the old ways of acquiring their needs of life because the means are no longer available to them. The land has long since been commandeered by the wealthy elite. The modern transport infrastructures have overwhelmed the quiet tracks along which one could safely journey by foot, bike, horse or cart. The fax, email and mobile phone have supplanted the chatter of the village green or market square. Those who can no longer afford the new technology are imprisoned in suburban isolation.

Society has burned its bridges. Cars, trains, boats, planes, phones, fax machines, the Internet, modern housing estates, supermarkets have progressively locked people into total dependence on new technology. It has deprived the individual of the option to fall back on the old ways and methods of providing their needs during hard times.

Vital Connection

The human being is not self-sufficient. It needs what the Earth provides. In the Third World and in the past, people were able to gain their needs directly from the Earth. They had to put more work into getting less. Nevertheless, it could be done. It was possible. They had a stable and viable economy. In the First World of today, people are denied direct access to the Earth as an economic resource. They are kept from it by an impervious wall of wealth, power, influence and law. The source of their needs of life is now exclusively the capitalist free market. But access to the capitalist free market is only available through certain channels. These channels are becoming ever more dependent on technology. So if you want to maintain access to the only source of your needs of life - if you want to stay connected to society - you must be able to afford the technology to do so.

The average double income family of today finds it convenient to go shopping once a week at the supermarket. They buy their weekly supplies in one trip. But they need a car to carry it all in. They need a refrigerator and a freezer to store it in. But they have them. They can afford them. So it is all right. What society does not seem to realise is that this has resulted in all the little shops close by going out of business. They are no longer there. By the time this double-income couple reach the age

of 50 (36 if they are in the IT industry) and lose their jobs, they will no longer have their car(s), refrigerator and freezer. Once these wear out they will not be able to replace them. Then they will have to shop every day. They cannot store perishable food. They will have to walk at least two or three miles - five to ten if they live in a village. They will have to trek along dangerous roads with no pavements along which yuppies cream round blind corners in their 4-wheeled bullets without a care about skittling a few hapless walkers.

The upshot is that going back to doing without a car, refrigerator and a freezer is not an option. One is not free to walk to the local shop with a basket the way my mother used to do when I was a child. The shop isn't there any more. Society has burned the bridge back to the option of local shopping.

Access to Jobs

Transport technology has not increased job opportunities. It has merely made them more specialised and dispersed them over a wider area. In consequence, the ability to travel is not an advantage; it is a necessity. Where I live, a car gives one access to a vastly greater number of potential jobs than does public transport. I am convinced that where I live, without cars most would not have the jobs they do have. Many would be unemployed.

Long ago, all inter-business communication was by mail. Then came the telephone. It was quicker and more interactive. It demanded less planning and forethought. More and more people used it. Society at large came to rely on it. Nowadays, one is simply *expected* to have one. If a prospective employer cannot get you on the phone when he wants to arrange an interview, he phones someone else. When the benefits are cut and you can no longer afford a phone, you are cut off from your job market.

The fax machine made it quicker and easier for people to exchange documents. Many times, I have been asked to fax my details to a prospective employer or employment agency. Frequently an invitation to an interview has not included a 'how to get there' map. When I phone for directions, the prospective employer *expects* to be able to fax a map to me. I do not have a fax machine. And I certainly cannot afford to buy one. Latterly, in my sector of the job market, almost all communication is by email. If you cannot afford an up-to-date personal computer and an email account with a Internet Service Provider, then you simply don't exist.

Society in general - and business staff in particular - no longer have the patience to write letters. Having become reliant on modern communications technology, society has burned the bridge as far as mail is concerned. The mail service is still there, but if the majority won't use it, the minority can't use it to communicate with them.

Modem Analogy

Through various sophisticated techniques, modern modems can transfer data across telephone lines at rates which were impossible only a few years earlier. But telephone connections vary in quality from time to time. The fastest data rates can be used only when the connection is of top quality. As the quality degrades, it is necessary for the modem to 'fall back' to a lower speed and a less sophisticated technique. Engineers have always realised this in the design of modems. Whenever they implement a more advanced technology, they always leave in place the old ones. This means that when the modem encounters a bad connection it can always fall back automatically to an older slower method of getting the data to the other end. Modem engineers do not burn their bridges.

Society, on the other hand does. The continued presence of a form of infrastructure depends on its profitability relative to other options. If the majority prefer a better, more expensive service, then the

older service will no longer be worth providing for the minority who cannot afford the better one. Consequently, that minority ends up with no service at all. They are cut off and isolated from the majority who can.

Conclusion

It is assumed that the poor of the First World must always fare better than the poor of the Third World. But the former don't have the option to fall back to a Third World life-style and survive. They may acquire certain First World conveniences during their good times, but when benefit is cut and the food budget goes negative, it becomes all too obvious that their cars, refrigerators, washing machines, televisions and VCRs cannot be eaten. Technology is easily affordable in the good times. But when the bad times come, their cars, refrigerators, washing machines, televisions and VCRs are old, obsolete, out of date and completely un-saleable. You can't even exchange them for the money you need to stave off your hunger.

Free market forces will not preserve the means of economic fall-back for the poor to be able to acquire their needs of life in austere times. This can only be done through deliberate economic intervention. And it is something any society is morally obliged to do. Monetary 'benefits' are not a valid substitute for that means. Those who decide benefit levels are simply not qualified by knowledge or experience to know what and how much the poor need. Only the poor themselves can know. All we ask is that the rest of society cease to deny us the means of turning our labours into our needs of life.

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