

Humanizing the Machine

After Orwellian despair, the rise of a human bureaucracy

by Marjorie Kelly

The *machine* is an intriguing term, one that has lost a certain cultural significance since the 1920s and '30s, when it was used to refer to the rising machine spirit, and the whole complex of the nascent industrial society. This was the "Machine Age," when the horse-drawn buggy was being pushed aside by the automobile, which multiplied from half a million in 1910 to 26 million in 1930. This was the era of Henry Ford and mass production, of superhighways and skyscraper cities, of new materials like chrome and stainless steel. It was the beginning of mass culture—and with the birth of radio in 1920, the beginning of mass advertising.

From our vantage point a half century later, we view such developments with a jaundiced eye—but let us not forget that the Machine Age was a time of optimism, a time of great hope for the possibilities of the machine. Artistic celebration of the machine was everywhere, with lamps and sculptures made from industrial parts, paintings done in a new cubist style, and everyday objects—from kitchen faucets to lounge chairs—designed with a new "streamlined" appearance. Even the Depression failed to kill this utopian faith in technology. Indeed, many Europeans saw America on the verge of creating a wholly new culture, perhaps even a new age.

But it was not to be—at least not so easily, or so soon. What the hardship of the Depression had hinted at, Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought into full view: beneath the gleaming surface of the machine lay a violent and destructive power. It is a side of the beast we have come to know too well in our time, with environmental devastation, bureaucratic oppression, worker alienation, and the ominous threat of nuclear war. Our helplessness before the machine is mirrored in our art, particularly that art that depicts the

human form. As critic Michael Brenson wrote in 1985, "Never before, not even in the art of Byzantium, has the human figure seemed as spatially uprooted as it is now. Never have there been as many skulls . . . never as many disembodied heads, feet and hands." In our contemporary mythology, Machine Age utopianism has given way to Orwellian despair.

But perhaps both myths are simplistic. If life wasn't really so magical in the 1920s and '30s, perhaps it isn't really so bleak in our time. It may be that our despair is just as misplaced as that earlier optimism. Of this much we can be certain: America is the land of the machine, and always will be. In that lies both our peril, and our hope.

It is said that each race has its role, its destiny to play out, here on the planet. The role of the red race has been protector of the earth, keeper of the sacred secrets. The role of the yellow race has been guardian of the ancestors, keeper of the ancient wisdom. And the white race, what is our role? Our history shows us as the destroyer, the violator: the cowboys who massacred the Indians, the land owners who enslaved the blacks. But can it be that a whole people has no purpose but evil? No role but destruction? I think not. I think we have written only the beginning of our tale, and not the end.

We are not keepers of wisdom, clearly, nor of secrets; it is something more tangible, more material, that is entrusted to us. I recall the observation of George Santayana, who said that Americans are idealists working on matter. Indeed, it seems that what the white race holds in trust is the key to the machine. We are the ones who brought the machine into the garden, and only we can tame it.

If our fathers before us used industrial might to crush all in their path, we

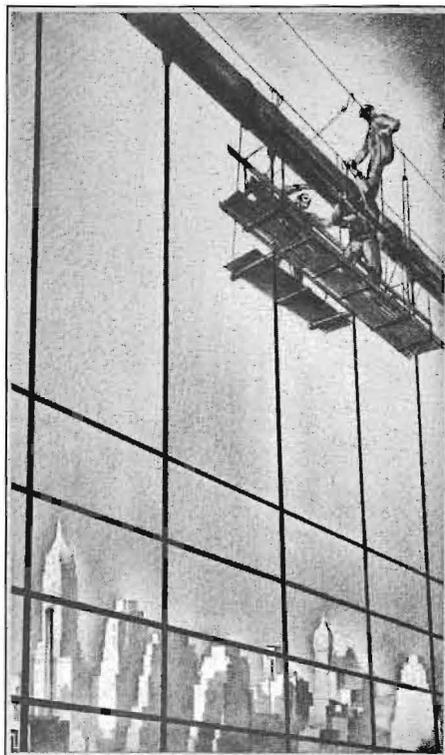
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need not be so callous—for the technology that destroys life is also the technology that can nourish it. Already, when we look about, we can see that power is passing to more responsible hands. A new, more human spirit is rising in business, and the signs are unmistakable.

We can see the new spirit in the changing relationship between workers and managers—with the growth of employee ownership, Quality Circles, human resource management, and worker participation in decisions. We can see it in the emerging new style of leadership—not a distant boss giving orders to hapless subordinates, but a leader trying to build a team, working to evoke a spirit of cooperation. We can see it in talk of vision and intuition, in talk of organizational development and organizational transformation. We can see it in the new demands being made on industry—demands for plant safety, affirmative action, pollution control, and South African divestment. We can see it in the rising commitment to socially responsible investing, and the growing use of shareholder resolutions. Business is being urged, led, cajoled to a higher level of accountability, a new level of social responsibility and human compassion.

Many executives are coming to see the corporation in a new light—as part of a group of stakeholders, a group that also includes employees, suppliers, and customers. Many managers are coming to view their organizations less as machines than as *organisms*—as human communities that require human guidance, not dictatorial control. Every day my mail brings flyers advertising seminars on building better teams, managing difficult employees, and delegating more effectively.

In every issue of *Business Week* I see the signs of change: December 14, Michael Milken says employee ownership will be the next wave in the corporate buyout movement; January 11, the magazine salutes Merck for donating enormous supplies of medicine to the Third World, to combat river blindness; January 18, *Business Week* declares greed is out and social commitment is in. The magazine tells of General Motors dealers confronting top management, and quotes a consultant who says, “Manufacturers in the future are going to have to earn



Louis Lozowick, *Bridge Repairs (Repairing the Brooklyn Bridge)*, Lithograph, 1938.

loyalty, not dictate it.” In a separate story—about General Electric’s Management Development Institute—experts are said to believe that “old-fashioned bureaucratic management is simply not going to cut it anymore.”

The bureaucratic machine, in its creaky and slow way, is changing. If we read the times as a farmer might read the seasons, we can see that now is seed time, and the time of green shoots. In Meso-American mythology, this year marks the end of nine hell cycles, and the beginning of thirteen heaven cycles. We have reached a kind of solstice in history, when darkness has reached its peak, and the ascent of the light has begun. We are entering a new time when power—the central power of modern society—will be in the hands of the light.

That is not to say, of course, that we can simply sit back and watch change wash over us. What we are witnessing today is a window in time, an historic opportunity for change—and like any opportunity, it requires our intelligent participation. But if we work with the tides of history, as a farmer works with the soil and the sun and the rain, we will be carried easily to success. There is movement underway today that is as inevitable as the coming of spring after winter: humanizing the machine is an idea whose time has come. ☞

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