Behind The Headlines

Vol 53, No. 4 Summer 1996

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Behind The *Headlines*
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Canadian Institute of
International Affairs 1996
Published quarterly
$3.50 per single issue
$13.00 per year
(Canadian addresses add 7%
GST) GST Registration No. R1
0686161 o

Summer 1996
(Date of issue – October 1996)
ISSN 0005-7983
Publications Mail Registration
No. 2578

Printed in Canada on recycled paper

Contributions on topical issues in international affairs that will be of interest to members of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs should be addressed to the Editor, CIIA, 5 Devonshire Place, Toronto, Canada Mss 2c8.
Tel: 416-979-1851, Fax: 416-·-8575. Submissions, typed double spaced, with a minimum number of endnotes, must not exceed 6,500 words.

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Globalization and the Nation-State

GWYNNE DYER

Dystopias have always sold much better than utopias. One need look no further than the popularity of such novels as Erewhon, *Gulliver's* Travels, *Brave New* World, and *1984.* People are afraid of the future, and besides bad times make better stories. But the present level of foreboding about the future, at least in the older industrialized countries, is extraordinarily high.

We live in a world where the totalitarian threat that terrified two generations has withered and democracies are cropping up in the most unlikely places (South Africa, South Korea, Russia). We are seeing economic growth in countries containing over half the population of the Third World that will deliver them, in only one or two generations, to developed-country status. The forty-year threat of a global nuclear war has effectively vanished, and the world is a more interconnected, open, unified place than ever before. So are we pleased and grateful about all this? Of course not.

Globalization, in the eyes of the mass media and the more fashionable sages, means jobs going south and the death of traditional cultures. It means the impoverishment of the masses everywhere, while giant multinational corporations push democratic governments aside and take over the world.

Add computers, cybernetics, and so on, and we are heading into the world of Ridley Scott's film, *Blade* Runner. Or, more precisely, the world of William Gibson and *Neuromancer.* William Gibson is a Vancouver writer who specializes in stylishly nihilistic cyber-dystopias set in the near future, and for almost a decade his visions have had a profound

effect on the way other artists, and then ordinary folk as well, imagine the future. He recalled recently in an interview how he first saw *Blade* Runner at the beginning of the 1980s and staggered from the cinema in despair, convinced that somebody else had already cornered his nightmare future: mega-cities divided between the heavily guarded ultra-rich and the millions of starving poor trapped in a debased and mongrelized global under-culture.

Then he realized that he had an element to add: the alternative sensory universe of an evolved global network – a 'consensual virtual hallucination' – in which the old nation states rotted beneath a new triumph of corporate feudalism, challenged only by anti-hero cyberpunks who flitted through the matrix of data banks like rats in the wainscoting. So Gibson cheered up immensely and wrote a series of highly successful books, from *Neuromancer* to Virtual Light, that mapped out his dark vision of the future.

It's the secret formula for success as a futurist. You don't have to be right, but you have to anticipate everybody else's version of the future by five to ten years. Now half the world shares Gibson's take on what's coming, and he enjoys the status of a visionary. But is this really where we are headed?

About one thing, at least, Gibson *is* right: every aspect of globalization is a direct consequence of the revolution in communications technology. We are not moving people and things around the world any faster than we did thirty years ago – not very much faster, in fact, than we did sixty years ago. But we are moving information and ideas at a hundred times the speed and one hundredth of the price.

The global market, international terrorism, global media, even what may be an emerging global culture, for good or for ill – all these new phenomena are linked to the incessant, invisible flow of bytes around the world. But the attendant changes are scaring the bejesus out of a lot of people. They are also seriously eroding the traditional roles of the state.

The global market makes it more and more difficult for national governments to choose their own economic systems, or even to manipulate their domestic economies for social purposes. Global media undermine the national identity that is the foundation of the nation-state. And while the spread of education and the ability of modern media to penetrate borders have meant a triumph of democracy in many countries, near-universal democratization seems to be accompanied by a plague of vicious ethnic conflicts and a collapse of 'leadership.'

The hardest position from which to analyze any phenomenon is

from the middle of it, but that is what we are condemned to try. Where is this irresistible flood of change taking our societies and our economies? If it is towards disaster, is there any way we can steer or divert it? How do we even begin to dissect 'globalization' and distinguish what is truly integral to the process from what merely happens to be going on at the same time?

Let us begin with the dominant optical illusion of the 1990s: the media-driven perception that the post-Cold War world is disintegrating into a bloody chaos of ethnic wars. It is simply not true. Not only has the threat of a great-power nuclear war receded beyond the reach of vision, but the sum of local wars, insurrections, and genocides has, if anything, decreased since the end of the Cold War.

Consider the major, long-running internal wars that were under way in the late 1980s (many of which were already decades old). There was El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala; Afghanistan, the Punjab, and Kashmir; Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and the southern Philippines; Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia; Burundi, Chad, and southern Sudan; Mozambique, Angola, and Namibia; Peru and western Sahara and Kurdistan. I have probably forgotten a few, but it is nevertheless an impressive total.

Of those wars, only half a dozen are still going full blast: Afghanistan, Burundi, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, southern Sudan, and Kurdistan. A few others – western Sahara, Peru, and Cambodia – straggle on in a much lower key. The majority have ended, and in many cases the end was achieved by free elections (often administered by a United Nations peacekeeping force) which led to more or less democratic governments.

We also had some new wars in the early , of course: genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia; savage civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia; bitter ethnic disputes in Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Chechnya; a nasty succession squabble in Tajikistan; and a dreadful civil war in Algeria. But with the exception of Algeria and the possible further exceptions of Rwanda and the west African horrors, all these new struggles are already over or are now drawing to a close – and all of them, except Algeria, fall within the two remaining belts of major conflict in the world.

Organized violence is a far less widespread phenomenon on this planet in the mid-1990s than it has been at any time in the past half-century. Indeed, over 90 per cent of the world's population now lives within regions where there is virtually none of it. The remaining wars were heavily concentrated in just two areas of conflict, one running

along the southern frontiers of the former Soviet empire and the other running east-west across the middle of Africa, from Sierra Leone to Somalia.

The sorting out of ethnic and other disputes in the southern parts of the former Soviet domain is now virtually at an end, and it has cost far fewer lives than were consumed in similar processes during the winding up of the British, French, and Portuguese colonial empires. Indeed, it is an illustration of the remarkably pacific character of our times that the collapse of the huge and highly militarized Soviet empire cost fewer than a thousand lives in all of the heavily industrialized regions from the inter-German border to the Urals, which are home to almost 30o million people. It is also a reflection of our times that most of the successor states, including all of the big ones, have ended up more or less democratic.

The other belt of conflict, across the middle of Africa, is both more intractable and more difficult to explain. It is clearly related to the accelerating collapse of the post-colonial state structures in the region, but the reasons for that collapse remain both controversial and obscure. It is likely that there will be more tragedies in this region, but they are – and I hope Africans will excuse me for putting it this way – essentially local phenomena. Even most of Africa is not involved.

So why do we have a perception of a world overrun by ethnic hatreds and consumed by violence? Partly because the end of the Cold War has left us far more time to fret about lesser threats to the peace. In the mid- 98os, we in the developed world paid less attention to carnage in Africa and elsewhere because we were caught up in the debate about medium-range missiles in Europe and other minutiae of the East-West confrontation. But mainly we are deceived by the same media phenomenon that leads us to believe that our own domestic society is far more violent than it actually is: the instinctive preference of news editors everywhere for stories that are spectacular, violent, and tragic.

It is not their fault; when they run such stories, we watch them. Indeed, if they didn't carry stories about the horrors in Rwanda or Bosnia or wherever, we would rightly accuse them of hiding the truth from us. But it is only a very partial truth, and we cannot expect the media as currently constituted, particularly the broadcast media, which operate under severe time limitations, to put these stories into context for us. In practice, that is our responsibility. It is up to us to apply the appropriate windage and put these stories of violence and chaos in a broader context, and we do a remarkably poor job at it.

As a veteran of the Vietnam journalistic wars once said to me: ` Every story about the Vietnam war ought to have started with the sentence: In 99 per cent of Vietnam today, nothing happened.' None of them did, of course, nor do many of the stories from Burundi or Chechnya today bother to point out that far larger populations in the great majority of other states in the region are living in peace. The squeaky wheel gets the grease; the catastrophe gets the spotlight.

That is the down-side of global media with instant access to bad news everywhere. But there is an up-side, too, and in my opinion it is of far greater significance. It is the unstoppable global reach of the new media technologies that have brought the ideas of democracy and human rights to practically every society on the planet and triggered the avalanche of democratization that is the defining political trend of our time.

I have argued elsewhere, drawing on the flood of new evidence being produced by anthropologists and primatologists, that the idea of equal rights is hard-wired in human beings, and that the 5,000-year record of tyranny and institutionalized inequality in human history may simply be a transitory aberration. The egalitarian ethic of most pre-civilized human societies, after all, operated in groups that hardly ever exceeded two hundred people and could be enforced by direct social pressure among individuals who knew one another personally

Once we moved into agrarian civilizations, with their vastly greater numbers of people, those social disciplines ceased to function. Moreover, it was literally impossible to run a society of a million people on the traditional human basis of rough social equality and consensual decision-making because a million people could not communicate with one another. At least, they could not do so before the advent of mass communications, for which we would have to wait about 5,000 years. In the meantime, if you wanted the benefits of a mass civilization, then you had to pay the price: autocracy, hierarchy, militarization. Early mass societies had to be run from the top down, by force.

But if I am right in my suspicion that this necessary compromise ran against the fundamental grain of human nature, then you would expect us to begin rebelling against it as soon as the technologies of mass communications made it theoretically possible to escape from our dilemma and run mass societies on a more egalitarian basis.

That, I believe, is what began happening around 200 years ago, as soon as the first mass societies acquired an effective, albeit very slow, means of mass communications: the printing press, coupled with mass literacy And as mass media spread around the planet and proliferated

into half a dozen new forms over the succeeding two centuries, democracies – societies based on the idea of equality of rights – have proliferated in their wake. Indeed, it now seems close to impossible for any society to remain formally hierarchical once it has experienced mass media for a couple of generations. Vast inequalities will remain in practice, of course, but the principle of equality will dominate the value system.

This probably has nothing whatever to do with Western values,' except in the sense that the West, for reasons that may have nothing to do with its purported democratic inclinations, happened to be the first part of the world to acquire the technology of mass communications.

Three centuries ago, the dominant values all over the West were precisely those now defended by Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's elder statesman and former prime minister, and the ayatollahs of Iran. And I suspect that if the Chinese had been the first to develop effective mass media, then they would have been the first democrats. The rest of us would imagine that we were emulating them when our traditional patriarchal societies crumbled – and all the while we would complain about Chinese cultural imperialism.

This is speculation; the apparently irresistible spread of democracy around the planet is not. It spread relatively slowly in the first century and a half and was confined in large part to the Western societies which were then the sole possessors of the means of mass communications. There were many false starts (notably in Latin America, where idealists brought democratic ideas to populations who because they were largely illiterate were effectively excluded from the society-wide conversation about means and ends that mass media facilitate).

There was also a great deal of violence involved in the revolutions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that sought to overthrow the existing hierarchies. We were emerging, after all, from five millennia when the main instrument for effecting political change was violence. And often that violent origin condemned the populations of the revolutionary states to a new kind of tyranny, allegedly in the service of equality – old habits die hard.

But looking back from 1996, as the dust begins to settle, you can see that even the least successful and least democratic of these revolutions – Mexico in 1910, Russia in 1917, China in 1949 - did form part of the broader pattern. They were about human equality, even if they were subverted by people whose operating principles were drawn from a more recent and more hierarchical past.

The broader pattern is that democratization has followed in the

wake of the mass media as they spread around the world. Let any society be permeated by mass media to the extent that even half of its population is plugged into a sort of rolling society-wide conversation about who we are and what we want, and the democratic revolution will follow within one generation, two at the most. And it hardly seems to matter whether the media are censored or not: the mere existence of media which obviously could be the basis for a democratic mass society seems to be enough to make people aspire to that previously impossible goal.

Does this sound too starry-eyed? Then explain by some other, more `realistic' means how it is that almost all of Latin America has got rid of its dictators in the past fifteen years. Explain what happened in South Africa, contrary to the expectations of both the experts and informed South Africans. Explain why the tactics of the 'people power' revolution in Manila in 1986 were emulated, within half a decade, by South Koreans, by Bangladeshis, by Thais, and (unsuccessfully, alas) by Chinese and Burmese. Explain how the entire Soviet empire was democratized from within. And explain, while you're at it, how almost all of these miracles were accomplished with little or no violence, in marked contrast to the democratic revolutions of earlier times.

There is obviously a learning curve at work here, in which late twentieth-century revolutionaries have become more adept at using the mass media to gain mass support and have discovered that avoiding gratuitous violence is the key to getting the media on side. They have even become proficient at using non-violence to manipulate directly the psychology of the oppressors and their troops.

Equally obviously, global mass media enabled these examples of successful non-violent revolution to be spread from one country to another very quickly. One of the principal organizers of the Tiananmen Square protest in Beijing in June 1989, Wang Jun-tao, told me that he and his colleagues at Beijing University were inspired by the events in Manila to study Gandhi and Martin Luther King, in the hope of emulating their non-violent tactics to achieve democratization in China without risking a civil war.

You could add one further technical element to the explanation, which is simply that electronic mass media (which do not require a literate public) began to permeate most Third World countries only after decolonization, in the 1950s and 1960s. If we allow the usual one-generation time-lag, it is hardly surprising that those societies should begin to undergo spontaneous democratization in the late and . The result is that, for the first time since the rise of civilization,

a clear majority of the human race now lives in countries that are more or less democratic.

'More or less' democratic? Yes, of course. Did you expect everything at once? American democracy, for the first 80 years, was a slave-owning democracy. It was generations before any democracy in the world gave women the vote. It is still possible to argue that the poor are effectively disenfranchised in almost every democratic country. But we have nevertheless travelled a long way from societies governed by absolutist rulers where inequality was legal and hereditary – which is where it all started, less than 250 years ago.

So we should be tolerant of the imperfections of democracy in Argentina and the Philippines and South Africa and patient about the speed with which Mexicans and Taiwanese and Eritreans are moving in the same direction. We should notice instead that the human race, taking advantage of the new technologies, is evolving a global political culture – not a transplanted Western culture, though its early history was mostly in the West – whose common values are equality, human rights, and democracy. This is a direct consequence of the 'information revolution'; it is the biggest political shift since the rise of the god-kings – and it is much nearer to the end than to the beginning.

So much for the good news. But what about the other, less positive consequences of the information revolution – of globalization? What about William Gibson's vision of a new Dark Age: a new economic feudalism dominated by those who control the information flows, in which nation-states and their hard-won democracies are rendered irrelevant and the mass of humanity everywhere is reduced to ignorant peonage? A lot of people worry publicly about this sort of thing, and they command a wide audience.

'A new vision of global solidarity is needed to match the push for globalization,' wrote Richard Jolly, chief author of the Human *Development Report* 1996 of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 'Without this vision and action, globalization will become a monster.' In his foreword to the report, James Gustave Speth, the UNDP's chief administrator, added: 'If present trends continue, economic disparities between the industrial and developing nations will move from inequitable to inhuman.'

The report is a numbing catalogue of what is not going right in the world, of a widening gulf between the world's rich and the world's poor, both between countries and within them: the assets of the world's 358 billionaires exceed the combined annual incomes of 45 per cent of the world's people; in 70 countries, almost all in the Third World, aver-

age incomes are lower than they were in 1980; in 43 countries, they are lower than they were in 1970.

In a select group of 15 Third World countries, mostly in Asia, there has been phenomenal economic growth, but even this is suspect. China, for example, will have to create 200 million jobs over the next ten years to provide employment for its young and growing workforce. And then there are the five forms of undesirable growth' identified by the UNDP report: jobless growth, ruthless growth from which only the rich benefit, anti-democratic voiceless growth, unsustainable futureless growth, and rootless growth which tramples on cultural identities.

This is a familiar litany, if somewhat ideological in its phrasing. The point is that you can draw up an almost identical list of the ills afflicting the domestic societies of the developed countries, where gloom about the economic future is probably deeper than at any time since the last great depression in the 1930s.

In North America the gap between the rich and the rest is widening dramatically – in the United States, the differential between the incomes of chief executive officers and of employees who are paid by the hour has grown fourfold since the halcyon decade of the –and the rage for corporate down-sizing has left large sections of what used to be the comfortable middle class anxious about their jobs.

Unemployment levels in major European countries remain stuck at rates two to three times higher than what was considered unacceptable in the . Even Japan, once the homeland of jobs for life, is starting to experience the trend towards the 'casualization' of labour, with all its attendant insecurity. And two months ago Bill Clinton, a Democratic president, signed a bill in the United States which would bring to an end six decades of guaranteed welfare for the American poor.

It is still quite a long way from here to the nightmare world of William Gibson, but you can see why people are worried. And since all these trends also seem to be connected to the globalization that results from the information revolution, maybe they, too, are unstoppable.

But only if all the above is true; only if these are the dominant trends of our time, and not just random data chosen for effect; and only if these trends, to the extent that they are the dominant reality of our time, are truly consequences of the changes enforced by globalization and the information revolution.

Insofar as the allegedly widening gap between the developed and the developing worlds is concerned, it is simply not true. The UNDP report is a classic example of the deliberate misuse of statistics for polemical purposes.

The mere '15 Third World countries, mostly in Asia' that are experiencing sustained high economic growth include China, India, and Indonesia – which together account for almost half the human race. And the '70 countries whose average incomes are lower than in 1980' were almost all either African countries (whose economic, social, and political plight is well known but virtually unique) or east European countries going through a steep drop in production that is almost certainly a temporary aspect of the economic transition from communism.

The total population of those 70 countries is 1.5 billion, which is certainly a lot of people living in poverty But that same statistic tells us that average incomes are stable or growing in the countries inhabited by the other three-quarters of the world's people – and other widely available statistics tell us with undeniable clarity that a clear majority of the population in what used to be the Third World lives in countries where the average income is growing far more rapidly than in the developed countries.

It is true, as the polemicists insistently tell us, that the income gap between the top 20 per cent of the world's population and the bottom per cent has doubled since 1961, but that is predominantly because of the African disaster. The gap between the top 20 per cent and the middle 60 per cent is closing, and closing remarkably fast. That is the reality of the global market: the relatively rapid emergence of a broad global middle class in Asia and Latin America and the equally rapid emergence of a global underclass in most of Africa and, to a lesser extent, in much of the Middle East.

This is not a pretty picture, and it is fraught with dangers for the future, for Africa and the Middle East are also the regions where democracy is weakest or simply absent, where the environment is most fragile, and where population growth is highest. But it is not the world the UNDP would have us believe in, let alone the one William Gibson envisages. And for all its defects it suggests a future less dangerous, and less appalling, than the terminal nuclear confrontation between a billion rich Northerners and five or ten billion starving, desperate, reckless Southerners that seemed such a plausible future to people in the 1970s.

But what of the North and its troubles? To the extent that most of the rest of the world is successfully using the template of economic development which was first cut in the old industrialized countries – and is, therefore, likely in due course to undergo the same social and moral transformations as well – the North can be seen as the pit canary

of an industrialized global society. If it goes wrong up here, it will probably go wrong down there a little later. And a lot seems to be going wrong up here, even if it would not yet excite much pity in Indonesia.

Exactly what is going wrong, and why, is a fiendishly complicated question, however. It is probably best to start by eliminating the answers that are obviously wrong.

The most popular answer among non-economists for some years has been that jobs (or at least 'good jobs') are going South. The direct consequence of the industrialization of large parts of the Third World, in other words, is the de-industrialization of large parts of the developed world. But if this were true, it would be so for the first time in two centuries of spreading global industrialization. In all other cases, the older industrialized nations have simply moved up the value-added ladder.

It is true in certain specific cases, such as the concentration of maquiladoras along the northern border of Mexico, that good first-world jobs are being moved south in search of lower-wage workforces, but this is a minor component in the changing pattern of employment in the industrial world. According to a study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), published in the June 1995 issue of *Financial* Market Trends, 'there is little evidence of a shift in manufacturing capacity' away from the highly industrialized countries.

The OECD is a grouping of the 25 most highly industrialized countries, and its study of the share of OECD investment going to non-OECD (newly industrializing) countries was commissioned because of 'the concern that multinational enterprises are relocating costly production facilities to the non-OECD world and then exporting back to the home market.' But it turned out that 'neither the present location choices of the multinationals nor their pattern of sales offer much support for the delocalisatiori hypothesis.'

In 1994, the report calculated, only 17 per cent of the total stock of foreign investment by the ten biggest OECD outward investors was in non-OECD countries; all the rest was investment from one highly industrialized country into another highly industrialized country. And most of the foreign investment, both within the OECD and outward into the Third World, was intended to produce goods for sale in that foreign market, not for export back to the home market. In the specific case of United States overseas investment, for example, ' only **11** percent of total sales go to the home U.S. market. Of this, only one-fourth

comes from outside the OECD area' (that is, from the Third World).

The bottom line? 'It is more the actual and future potential of these markets which is enticing firms than their low wage costs. Relocating production to lower wage countries may be important in some sectors such as textiles, but it does not appear to figure prominently for foreign direct investment overall.'

Forgive this digression into statistics, but it is important because it knocks the bottom out of the myth that the jobs are going south. They are disappearing, but they are not being stolen by the Third World. So why are they vanishing? And is this trend leading to the collapse into corporate neo-feudalism that many fear? I would like to offer here two possible partial explanations and then take a stab at a more comprehensive one.

One partial explanation is the long-wave cycle' first described by the Russian economist Nicolai Kondratieff, that is, a global economic cycle of some fifty years in length, superimposed on the shorter oscillations of the normal business cycle, which has produced major decade-long depressions at roughly half-century intervals ever since the 1790s. Both the timing of the 50-year rhythm (, 1840s, 1880s, 1930s, and so on) and such classic indicators of a Kondratieff trough as an unsustainably high debt-to-gross national product ratio say that the 1990s should be a time of deep and stubborn economic recession for mature industrial economies. Which it certainly is.

Other economists have subsequently theorized that Kondratieff's long-wave cycle is related to the time it takes for a new dominant technology (for example, the steam engine, the internal combustion engine, or computers) to mature, develop multiple applications, permeate and transform the entire economic structure, and finally reach saturation level. In any case, to the extent that Kondratieff was right, the current dearth of good jobs in OECD member countries is a cyclical phenomenon, not an apocalyptic one.

A second partial explanation is simply intellectual fashion. The corporate rage for `down-sizing,' `out-sourcing,' and the like, which has destroyed millions of jobs in the member countries of the OECD over the past five years and has 'casualized' millions of others, is not rooted in any rigorous economic theory. It owes at least as much to the currently dominant political ideology of the managerial class.

To some extent, we are dealing with a psychological disorder: the corporate equivalent of anorexia. There have doubtless been many cases where shedding excess employees was the only way for a firm to survive and prosper, but we all know of other cases where down-sizing

has simply disrupted lives and lowered morale without enhancing either productivity or profitability. Intellectual fashion can be a very powerful and destructive force in the short term, but in the longer run it is results that matter. A recent survey conducted by the Society for Human Resources Management found that while more than a third of the personnel managers in the United States who responded said that downsizing had improved profits, a larger proportion said that profits were the same or lower after all the pain. And while over half those surveyed had laid off employees since the beginning of 1994, only 23 per cent anticipated lay-offs within the next two years. The peak of this fashion may be past.

Do these two explanations, singly or together, fully account for the number of people in the older industrial countries whose working lives are ending in their forties; for the proliferation of low-paid, unskilled McJobs; for the transformation of the very nature of 'work' that is taking place before our eyes? Probably not. So let us plunge into rather deeper waters. What is actually happening to 'work,' and is it taking us towards a Gibsonian world?

The nature of work is undoubtedly shifting again, as it has several times since industrialization began some two centuries ago. As recently as 125 years ago, in most of what are now member-countries of the OECD, 80 per cent of the working population was engaged in agriculture, some as self-employed farmers, others as landless casual labourers. In very few of those countries does the agricultural sector now employ more than three per cent of the population. Most of the rest eventually found work in industry and services. They did not, at first, have much security of employment – as recently as the turn of this century, barely 50 per cent of workers in the industrialized world belonged to a company – but as the industrial economies matured the pattern shifted until most people no longer did jobs, rather they had jobs. By the 1970s, somewhere around 90 per cent of the workforce had permanent jobs. Now, however, the tape is running backwards, and there is no doubt that the information revolution is to blame because automation has consequences that are different than those that followed the mechanization of the industrial revolution.

The industrial revolution multiplied many times the productivity of the average worker, but because consumption expanded dramatically, too, it was necessary to employ more workers. Automation, by contrast, eliminates the need for workers – in repetitive physical tasks to begin with, but later in repetitive intellectual tasks as well. And 75 per cent of the workforce in most industrial countries, according to Jeremy

Rifkin's calculations in The End *of* Work, are performing repetitive tasks of the sort that are prime targets for automation – not just in manufacturing industries, but in service industries and in middle management as well.

Nobody can say with confidence how far down this road we are likely to travel in the coming decades, but such phrases as jobless growth are already an uncomfortably familiar part of our vocabulary. Both the long-term rise in unemployment rates in most industrialized countries and the growing number of 'qualified' workers having to make do with low-skill, low-wage jobs suggests that the trend is real. And this road, if travelled long enough, could lead to Gibson's future.

Not *will* lead to it, however; just *could.* There is certainly cause for concern, and it is almost impossible for any one country to try to deal with the problem by a radical restructuring of its domestic economy –job-sharing, shorter working hours, and the like – because a free-trading world of global markets will give short shrift to any nation that independently adopts a less 'efficient' mode of production. That is the problem, and at the moment it threatens to tip us into a frenzy of cost-stripping and job-elimination that might, if pursued blindly to ridiculous extremes, deliver us into something like a pale replica of Gibsonland. So, how can we defend against this perhaps remote but nevertheless appalling prospect?

Our first and strongest line of defence, oddly enough, is the state as remodelled by the democratic revolution. The ruthlessly tyrannical states that filled all of our earlier history were instruments for the maintenance, in a pre-technological era, of a social order much like the one Gibson fears in our future, and it was new communications technologies that gave us the means of destroying their grip on the world. It is possible that the further development of these same technologies will destroy societies based on equal rights, but it seems unlikely.

The state is far from dead, and democratic states are quite capable of imagining ways to mitigate and channel the effects of economic change in defence of the interests of all their citizens. The trick, in a globalized world, is that they can do it only in co-ordination with one another, which ultimately demands that politics, too, must be globalized.

That is a tall order, but it is not an impossible one. The global reach of modern communications media for the first time makes it possible to arrive at a common analysis and devise a common international approach to the problems of a changing global economy.

It won't come easily, but the pressures pushing people in this direc-

tion will be immense – especially since we will have to contend at the same time with the ever more severe environmental consequences that will result from continuing with our present economic system. Cooperation comes more easily in a leaky lifeboat – and, as is often the case with technology, the same global communications systems that are the source of our current problems, used differently and in a different context, can help to solve them.

`Tired as I am of all the hype about the Internet and the info-highway,' William Gibson said recently in an interview with the Guardian newspaper, 'I suspect that from a future perspective it will be on a par with the invention of the city as a force in human culture. People still don't understand the Internet is transnational. Cyberspace has no borders, and that's fine with me because I had my fill of nationalism in the Vietnam war.'

`But nation states had this honourable potential, the democratic tradition that gives people some kind of say ... So I have a central professional duty to remain as deeply ambivalent about technology as I can, to recognise the downside.'

The downside is there, and it is scary. But, far from being over, the game has barely begun. And so far, on balance, the right side is winning.

GWYNNE DYER is a historian and journalist whose most recent major work was the six-part radio series, Millennium, which aired on the CBC in the spring of 1996.

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