

The Age of Access: How the Shift from Ownership to Access is Transforming Modern Life

Jeremy Rifkin
(Penguin £8.99, 312 pp.)

Things have moved on a lot since Belloc and Chesterton eloquently disposed of Capitalism (and Socialism) in the name of Distributism. The Market appears to be triumphant. The most we can say against it is that it must have "limits". Not everything should be treated as a commodity. People, for example, and perhaps their body parts. The genetic code. Certain drugs. Some would add weapons of mass destruction. But the longer one looks at this list - and is forced to extend it - the more arbitrary it appears. What is the intrinsic reason that distinguishes objects that may be traded and legitimately consumed from those which may not? Is this purely a pragmatic matter? Some other principle, a structural or even moral principle, seems to be required.

The Catholic tradition seeks this principle in the idea of the human person, a unity of body and soul, directly related to God as its Creator, which is not to be treated as a means to an end. Principles such as solidarity, and responsibility towards the Creator for resources and creatures entrusted to our care, are also implied here, along with a critique of consumerism, both as a spiritual attitude towards possessions and as an economic system driven by the excessive cultivation of desire.

All of this is fine, and important, but a Church which thinks in centuries and measures every statement cautiously against received wisdom is not best equipped to notice, let alone comment upon, every new development in a world that is being transformed by the impact of new technologies every year. The attempt to apply moral principles in such a world is the task less of the hierarchy, perhaps, than of the faithful who are living and working there. They must be prepared to move and think a bit faster. Reading Jeremy Rifkin, whether we end up agreeing with him or not, is just the stimulus we need.

Rifkin is not a particularly religious thinker, although he has worked closely with many religious leaders, bringing them together on more than one occasion into a broad coalition. He is an activist, virtually a one-man think-tank, and for many years an intriguing and insightful critic of various aspects of Capitalism. He has written a string of best-selling books. *Time Wars* and *Empathy* explored the consequences of the measurement and commodification of time, the most serious of which was the growth of a society founded not on empathetic relationships but on the concept of mere "efficiency". In *Biotech Century* he attacked genetic engineering and the new eugenics. The *End of Work* noted the growth of a "third sector" of unpaid

service, outside the normal conception of a market economy. Along the way, in *Algeny*, he took a swipe at Darwinian evolution (long before such attacks were made fashionable by the "intelligent design" movement). He even waged a campaign against the industrialization of meat (well before the European BSE and foot-and-mouth crises).

Christian, Jewish and Muslim thinkers should take Rifkin extremely seriously. It is true that he tends to sensationalize everything he touches. This is partly for practical reasons: his Foundation on Economic Trends in Washington (www.foet.org/) is funded not only by donations but by the income he can generate from books and lectures. But although he is despised by many scientists and technologists as an obstacle to research, and as a gadfly they could well do without, his instincts are generally good, and the issues he draws attention to - often in advance of anyone else - are issues of deep, and often religious, significance. While the rest of us sit around vaguely wondering about the morality of certain new technologies, he is busy setting up the legal roadblocks and focusing the spotlights that make a public debate of such issues possible, before it becomes too late to do anything about them.

Each of Rifkin's books is based around one central "big idea", around which are clustered a myriad other insights and pieces of evidence. *The Age of Access* to some extent synthesizes many of the themes he has been exploring in other books, but it is not lacking in originality. The biggest idea in *The Age of Access* is that markets, based on the concept of ownership, are giving way to networks. "Ownership is based on the idea that possessing a physical asset or piece of property over an extended period of time is valuable. 'To have', 'to hold', and 'to accumulate' are cherished concepts. Now, however, the speed of technological innovation and the dizzying pace of economic activity often make the notion of ownership problematic. In a world of customized production, continuous innovation and upgrades, and ever narrowing product life-cycles, everything becomes almost immediately outdated." Thus, he argues, while property continues to exist, it is "far less likely to be exchanged in markets. Instead, suppliers hold on to property in the new economy and lease, rent or charge an admission fee, subscription, or membership dues for its short-term use. The exchange of property between sellers and buyers - the most important feature of the modern market system - gives way to short-term access between servers and clients operating in a network relationship."

The effect of this is twofold. On the one hand, ownership of physical capital "becomes increasingly marginal to the economic process". Secondly, its place is taken by new forms of intellectual capital. Wealth is invested in human imagination, ideas and creativity - in images, brands and concepts. This adds up to a long-term transition from industrial to cultural production: indeed, a shift from one kind of capitalism to another. The new "hyper-capitalism"

or "cultural capitalism" trades not in goods and services, but in experiences and relationships, travel and tourism, theme cities and parks, wellness, fashion and cuisine, games and music. Transnational media corporations span the globe, mining local cultural resources and repackaging them as entertainment. The work ethic is replaced by the "play ethic", for cultural capitalism is all about the "commodification of play" (in the sense of self-indulgence). And the key term around which this new form of capitalism revolves is access: the ability to connect, to access networks, to get what you want, when you want it.

Rifkin provides a deluge of facts and figures to support every element in this complex hypothesis. It is hard not to be swept away. A few questions suggest themselves. How "marginal" are the traditional forms of property if they actually undergird the ability of the media and entertainment moguls to build their vast empires? If the new wealth depends upon leasing, renting and charging for access, does this not simply reinforce the division between the haves and the have-nots: those who have the physical resources that constitute the communications infrastructure, and those who are content, or obliged, to live in the illusory world thus provided for them by the suppliers? And what becomes of those parts of the world and sectors of the global society that do not and cannot have "access"? As far as I can see, Rifkin has anticipated most such questions, and a lot more. He is not arguing on

behalf of the new capitalism, but describing it and exploring the implications. That is part of what makes this book so important.

The dark side of the Age of Access is dark indeed. Not only is the brave new world of short-term contracts, global advertising and virtual entertainment merely a high-tech version of the "servile state" described by Hilaire Belloc, but the trade that thrives most effectively within the networks thus created is one which provides access to illegal drugs, armaments, pornography ("digital skin") and even children. Furthermore, the new capitalism will arguably exclude the bulk of the world's population, which is likely to grow ever poorer as a result.

One thing Rifkin does not mention, for the book was published in 2000. On 11 September 2001 a man in a cave almost brought the civilized world crashing to its knees. Without industrial capital, with the minimum of material resources, bin Laden's network has been effective against the superpower of the West because of its access to technology - air transport, the postal service - which it was able to turn against its normal users. The al-Qa'eda network represents a new generation of terrorist: grim children of the Age of Access.

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