

Paving roads to the information superhighway

by Chibli Mallat

It would be a delusion to think that economics on the world market do not start, for an American president, at home. Beyond an unprecedented period of growth discussed in the early part of this series, the question of what is happening inside America in terms of society's reaction to the economic revolution brought about by the information age in general and the internet in particular arises.

Mobility and stability are two sides of the same coin in the information age, and both sides seem to meet in a synthesis defined by ubiquity. Ubiquity, an attribute of the Almighty if any, is what the US/world citizen can increasingly afford in the internet age.

In more prosaic terms, the ubiquity of the internet age makes a person today mobile and stable at the same time, as communication puts an individual actively in touch wherever he or she may be on the planet: there was of course such a sense since the telephone went international, and it was reinforced when televisions moved to satellite mode. But with the second-generation internet, already upon us in fiber-optic and other high-speed relays, images travel as quickly as characters in our e-mails.

The rest follows: in the same way that one can get any English book in print at Amazon.com or speculate on the Euro from a bedroom in Cairo, the ubiquity made possible by the information revolution is socially staggering because it allows a person to be in a place without being there.

The rest, then, should follow, and it does to some extent: office work from home is possible, so are shopping and trading, the remote performance of engineering checks and repairs, even surgery, not to mention the tele-wars which bring home images of death from thousands of kilometers away.

With the versatility of e-service, we seem to have only seen the tip of the iceberg so far.

The trend is not stoppable, and there are new opportunities which the imagination is simply unable to fully grasp. Naturally, the warmth of immediate human relations will still be needed, but e-mail friendships, like e-mail commerce, also form an enriching experience which many people will attest to. Ubiquity is happening, and society is adapting willy-nilly.

But does the workplace really follow? Despite massive computerization of society, the world of labor relations seems to lag behind, horizontally in the office or at the plant and vertically in the corporate hierarchy.

Even in pure economic terms, recent studies have led economists to wonder whether the information revolution has affected business as dramatically as is widely supposed. One economist has calculated that 88 percent of industry may have only been marginally affected, but surely this is exaggerated if one thinks of the role of the computer everywhere in modern life.

What is true is that the phenomenon is accentuating the gap between countries in a way that our planet cannot afford morally or physically. Extrapolating on the problem of those left out on the domestic American scene, a US president can make a difference in the way the workplace can be made more accommodating for the large mass of his people, inside America, and by ricochet, the world at large.

For true leadership, the first reachable objective is connectivity, which is the condition

to start leveling the field internationally. To be fair, the Clinton administration has wholeheartedly supported “the information super-highway,” a term it has fully embraced, if not originally coined. But more is needed, by thinking about the internet in the same way one thought about the electricity grid in America at the turn of the century as an essential part of the next stage of capitalism. The formula, to borrow from Lenin’s “Socialism = electricity + Soviets,” is that “21st-century world capitalism = internet + x.” One can differ on x, but not on the internet.

What might actually come under x? While economists differ over the ways in which computers and the internet have affected the rate of productivity, the business cycle, or the formation of capital, one way to look at the problem is from the point of view of those who are left behind. From this perspective, the disenfranchised in today’s America and the rest of the world can be regrouped by order of magnitude: as women, the “third age,” and the unemployed. Let us briefly look at each in turn.

1 Women. The issue is better left for women to fathom, but two criteria can help measure microchip-related progress in their case: equality in pay is one dimension, the introduction of the value of work at home another. How connectivity impacts both requires a serious reflection for which I have no space here, but the way forward is surely toward a stringent gender equality in the remuneration of men and women. There should be no room left for the structural inequality endemic to patriarchal societies at a time when the chief machine tool is a keyboard, the gender-blind economic pivot par excellence.

As for the economic value of work at home, connectivity should also affect it fundamentally toward better shared family responsibilities: more men at home, more women working in the office from home, choice of time and place, less commuting, etcetera. Beyond the new social ubiquity, the ingenuity brought by the information revolution should thin out the boundaries between workplace and home, men and women, and working people and the “leisure class” dear to the visionary analysis of classic American sociologist Thorstein Veblen a century ago.

1 “The third age” has profited from technological progress in computers and medicine to the extent that it is no longer recognizable as “the last age.” The 20th century, by extending life expectancy by some 20 years, forces a new distinction between third and fourth age, “the senior boom” referred to extensively by President Clinton’s 1999 State of the Union message.

While all the pitfalls of the fourth age—overall precariousness, physical frailty, debilitating illness, inadequate pensions, social exclusion—are generally those of the previous third age, the ones that confront large sectors of the population which remain remarkably productive beyond their 60th birthday are equally daunting. For those who wish to quit active economic life upon “retirement,” society must allow withdrawal with dignity. But it must also make room for a more versatile concept of labor which addresses what Clinton described as “the aging of America,” and the concomitant aging of the world, where wealth production and distribution must now spread over an additional fourth generation in a person’s life cycle. There must be a strategic effort to use the ubiquity of the information age and its versatility to accommodate senior citizens who wish to continue working, albeit at the pace and intensity of their choice.

1 The unemployed. In most cases, the unemployed benefit least from the information age, which is often directly responsible for their unemployment. The picture is murky, though, and the information revolution is credited in America with the creation of new jobs at a rhythm unknown in more than 50 years. But with unprecedented fusions in computers, telecommunications, and networks, it is not sufficient to simply

acknowledge that the information age has created many new jobs.

There is, overall, no easy interventionist policy by the state, and the next president has no blueprint, Keynesian or otherwise, that would readily apply. With the destruction of trade unionism as we have known it in the 20th century, it may be time to think along two lines adumbrated by French scholar Robert Fossaert. One is closer attention to the computation of “budget-times of men, women and children,” so as to give some economic coefficient to “the quality of life.” One derivative application is a four-day week for equivalent output and pay, a practise which is increasingly the norm in large corporations and a terrain of investigation and improvement whose economics need to be computed across the social board for Veblen’s “leisure class” to come of age.

The other Fossaertian direction is to go beyond drumming up ineffective troops at Seattle-like World Trade Organization meetings and to create intelligent counter-powers, or watchdogs, to the masters of the corporate world in banking and in high-tech. With serious and informed counter-powers, based in government or in civil society, “opposition” to globalization can be made constructive and effective. To act against the harsh logic of world markets, ketchupping the IMF president will simply not do: the “opposition” needs to build a network of criticism in the same way as it has built unprecedented connectivity and access to information for like-minded people everywhere.

Alternatively, decisions should be left to the marketplace. The marketplace may be pitiless, but one knows from 400 years of capitalism that it cannot be lightly bucked. One would hope, as a matter of principle, that the president of now-ubiquitous citizens of the world will at least be able to deflect the harshest sides of a wanton capitalist world system. If “21st-century world capitalism = internet + x,” surely x is inclusion of the left out or left behind. What is the point of government otherwise?

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