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Paul Krugman and the Prophets of Doom

Three new books wrestle with our most vexing economic questions

March 2, 2020 Michael Giltz

How did we get into this mess? What is life like for the abused and ignored blue collar workers living in a hollowed out America, the distraught people given voice in very different ways by Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders? Will the economy get better or will robots just take over and push us aside?

Three new books wrestle with these questions by focusing on the past, the present, and the future. Oxford economist Daniel Susskind sees robots taking over a lot of the jobs done by humans. We need to prepare for this coming transition, and Susskind promises to show us how. Pulitzer Prize winners Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn look at middle America through a very personal lens. They tell the stories of the kids that Kristoff shared a school bus with growing up in a hard-scrabble rural town. And Nobel Prize winner Paul Krugman slaps together a bunch of New York Times columns stretching back 20 years, along with longer, sometimes wonkier articles written for the Gray Lady and other outlets.

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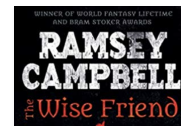
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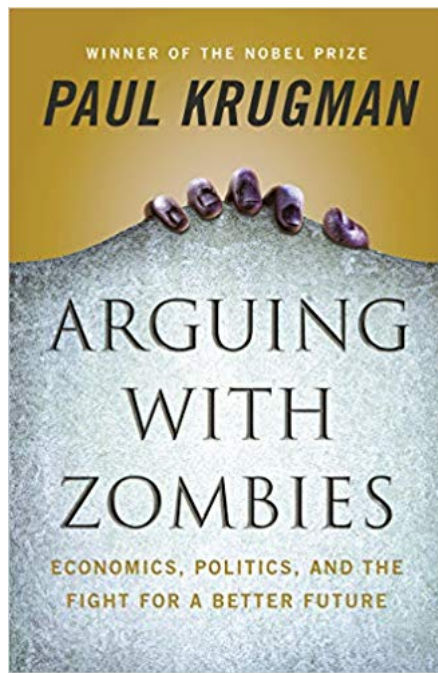
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Susskind doesn't do what he says he'll do, so perhaps Siri can answer the questions he left me with. Kristoff and WuDunn are so afraid of critiques from the far right that their book is scared of its own shadow. Funnily enough, the collection of old columns by Krugman is by far the most satisfying tonic for what ails us today.

You Better Work It

Let's start with the future. Susskind properly titled his book *A World Without Work: Technology, Automation, And How We Should Respond*. However, he's an economist comfortable with facts and figures. Predicting life 50 years from now, wrestling with the philosophical and ethical implications of many (or most!) jobs disappearing and then deciding how we as a society should value people who don't punch a clock? That's not Susskind's cup of tea. So the vast majority of his book stays firmly in the past and present.

Ever since the Luddites, people have worried that technology will supplant humans. Susskind looks at the various upheavals and explains why it hasn't happened before. Then he explains why it *will* happen this time.

His analysis is useful and clear. For example, looms and tractors didn't end work. For most of human history, technology increases productivity and eliminates some work...but other work pops up in entirely new places. People went from farms to factories to freelancing, but work remains out there.

Take the long view and that loom or laptop has been a massive boon. Still, it's massively disruptive, living through those massive disruptions. Sure, society found new opportunities, but that's cold comfort to the artisan who hand-crafted beautiful chairs in the style his father taught him and now sees crappy glued-together junk churned out by a factory. Technology hollowed out entire regions. Ninety percent of the population transitioned from farming to something else, anything else. That's not easy; just ask the coal miners and natural gas frackers of today.

So people were right to be afraid. The latest predictions that automation will dramatically shorten the work week and eliminate tens of millions of jobs might be a decade or two ahead of schedule, but that doesn't mean they're wrong. Why are they right this time? One reason is people assumed robots needed to duplicate the remarkable versatility of human intelligence. And the machines couldn't. No machine would ever beat a Grand Master at chess. Then it did. Well, no machine could triumph in the even more complicated game of Go, they said. Then it did. So humans keep moving the goals farther and farther down field, insisting none of these achievements is the equivalent of being human. And they're right.

But who cares? It turns out machine learning can break down and accomplish lots of work without Star Trek's Data becoming a reality. "Robots" can do stuff like deliver software to write legal contracts or programs to scan x-rays for medical anomalies or algorithms to craft great acoustics for concert halls. No, machines can't mimic humans yet. But they don't need to in order to take our jobs.

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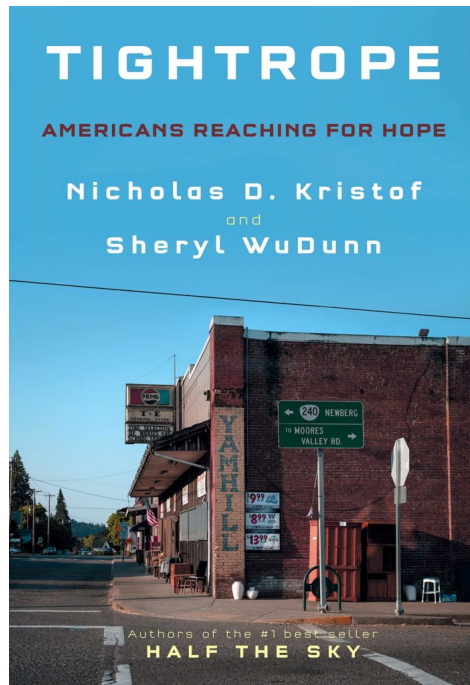
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Susskind's analysis of the past and present is all well and good. But it's not the book the cover and blurbs and even the introduction promise. He tackles a future without work and how we might think about it only in a vague and rushed final section that's not even worthy of being a blog post. Susskind inadvertently guarantees at least one more job for humans: writing the book he didn't.

Walking the Tightrope



In *Tightrope*, Kristoff and WuDunn follow the blueprint of less ambitious authors. Every once in a while an enterprising columnist tracks down the guy or girl they went to the prom with or their gang of friends pictured in an old photograph. Hey, whatever happened to them, they wonder. Long lost acquaintances are dug up and humor and heartbreak invariably follow.

Nicholas Kristoff grew up in Yamhill, Oregon, a rural town that prospered for decades in the 20th Century. People worked hard and their kids had better opportunities, better lives...you know, the American Dream. The bottom fell out, life in Yamhill deteriorated for decades, and Kristoff escaped. But he never forgot the people left behind. This book uses the stories of the people he shared a school bus with to illustrate what happened to their town and their world. Can you feel empathy for someone who physically abuses their spouse or deals drugs or engages in petty theft? Yes, you can.

Their book has two problems. The friends profiled do get their due to a degree. Yet too often they're just place markers to tell a drier, less interesting tale of statistics and trends. You sense a better, more narrative-driven story waits to be told. Instead, the writers forget the people presumably at the heart of this story just like society does.

Worse, Kristoff and WuDunn are comically afraid of the ignorant attacks they expect this story to draw from the far right. Again and again and AGAIN they stress how people must take responsibility for their personal actions.

They also repeatedly couch their story with caveats and foolish qualifiers. At one point, they discuss how and why French people live longer, are healthier, enjoy more vacations and have higher overall satisfaction with their lives than people in America. They are, in short, happier than the average US citizen for many good reasons. hilariously, Kristoff and WuDunn rush to reassure us they much prefer the American way of life. Meaning they prefer to die younger, be sicker, have fewer vacations and be miserable? Their timidity is embarrassing and ensures *Tightrope* has no passion, no strong narrative and no chance of reaching anyone but the very liberals who already agree with them.

Arguing With Zombies

Then there's Krugman, my favorite columnist at the New York Times. But who wants to read old pieces written ten or twenty years ago to address some then-raging debate? Well, I do, because *Arguing With*

Zombies is a satisfying reminder that we are not going crazy, that facts matter and the collapse of the Republican Party did not begin with Trump.



Paul Krugman. Photo Credit:
Fred R. Conrad/The New York
Times

He breaks the book up into 18 sections, each one tackling a subject like Social Security, tax cuts, or inequality. You get an intro to the topic at hand followed by columns and articles and blog posts in chronological order. Quite enjoyably, you watch Krugman lose his cool. For years, or even decades, he patiently describes basic economic principles and the facts of the matter as widely agreed upon by the experts. But by end of each section, as he loses traction in the prevailing political winds, Krugman thunders like an Old Testament prophet decrying the hypocrisy all around him.

It's very satisfying. As a bonus, Krugman is so good at explaining basic economic principles that most of his articles remain timely and useful. Republicans still insist cutting Michael Bloomberg's taxes or cutting Social Security benefits are really good ideas. Krugman tirelessly keeps explaining why they are absolutely wrong and have no evidence to back them up and never will. He keeps trying, and helps keep us sane in the process.

Tags: Arguing With Zombies, Daniel Susskind, Nicholas Kristoff, Paul Krugman, Sheryl WuDunn

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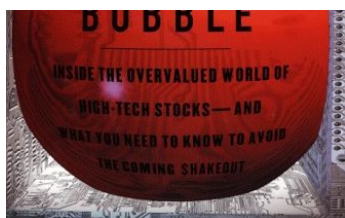


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Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York City covering all areas of entertainment, politics, sports and more. He has written extensively for the New York Post, New York Daily News, New York Magazine, The Advocate, Out, Huffington Post, Premiere Magazine, Entertainment Weekly, BookFilter, USA Today and the Los Angeles Times. He co-hosts the

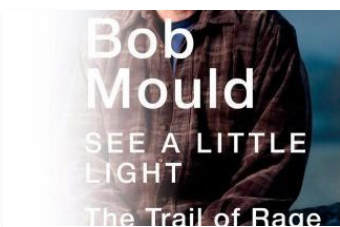
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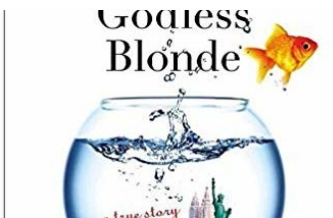
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