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We Fight Ideas with Ideas

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The article hereunder does not necessarily reflect the views of the New Unity Movement. It is published in The Worker as a contribution to the necessary debates that need to take place with respect to the question of a credible left project that will campaign for the options mentioned.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN LEFT: POVERTY OF IDEAS

Shaun Whittaker and Harry Boesak

Speaking in September 2024 in Cape Town on “The Rise of the Authoritarian Right in the World and South Africa,” Radhika Desai asserted that the South African Left forces suffer from intellectual and political poverty. She declared that these forces must do a Marxist analysis of capitalism as contradictory value production, and to not only focus on redistribution but also the democratic organisation of production.

That political economist contended that neoliberalism was the price to be paid for the end of apartheid. There was not to be any meaningful transformation. Big business was allowed to move overseas so that the corporations could not be seized, but the extensive welfare system was dismantled. The narrow “white” corporate elite were joined by an unproductive and parasitic “black” elite.

So, given what Desai maintained, in the spirit of constructive debate, should we not ask several critical questions? Firstly, who is the authoritarian right in South Africa today? Can we recognise that there is a “black” or “African” authoritarian right-wing that is implementing and defending neoliberal capitalism, and that the social disintegration caused by it has given rise to a social conservatism that is filled with discrimination against people from other African countries as well as other perceived minorities? The ANC-DA comprador administration represents neoliberal barbarism, but because of Africanist chauvinism there is limited opposition to it at the moment. It signifies the spectacular failure of the SA Left. Not to mention the situation that SA is the most unequal country in the world. It ought to be such a source of tremendous shame to us. Instead of the ongoing romanticism of a “black” or “African” elite who apparently liberated us, is it not about time to admit that they are class enemies? Furthermore,

there have been no meaningful efforts on the part of the SA Left to develop the means of production from below. There is undoubtedly an urgent need, for example, to build mass cooperatives.

Desai, who is the convenor of the International Manifesto Group, referred during her presentation to their document “Through Pluripolarity to Socialism: A Manifesto.” The 2021 manifesto makes many crucial points. The collapse of the Soviet Union was hardly the end of the socialist project. The focus point of the global economy has in fact moved to the flourishing socialist market economy in China. The Communist Party of China made that country the key to the socialist struggle. It is imperative to understand that there is no universal political model, and that the “unproductive plunder” of neoliberal capitalism led to an impasse for the capitalist project. Unfortunately, the SA Left appears to be lost in the utopianism and ultra-leftism of Western Marxism. The fashionable discourse about decoloniality in SA, for instance, is merely an anti-Marxist project. It is all about the left-wing pretensions of social liberals. It is part of the widespread disparaging of the accomplishments of actually-existing socialism in China, Cuba and Vietnam. The SA Left has a long history of splits between Stalinism and Trotskyism, with no noteworthy support for Maoism. Maybe this explains its confusion and vilification of actually-existing socialism in China today. In his book

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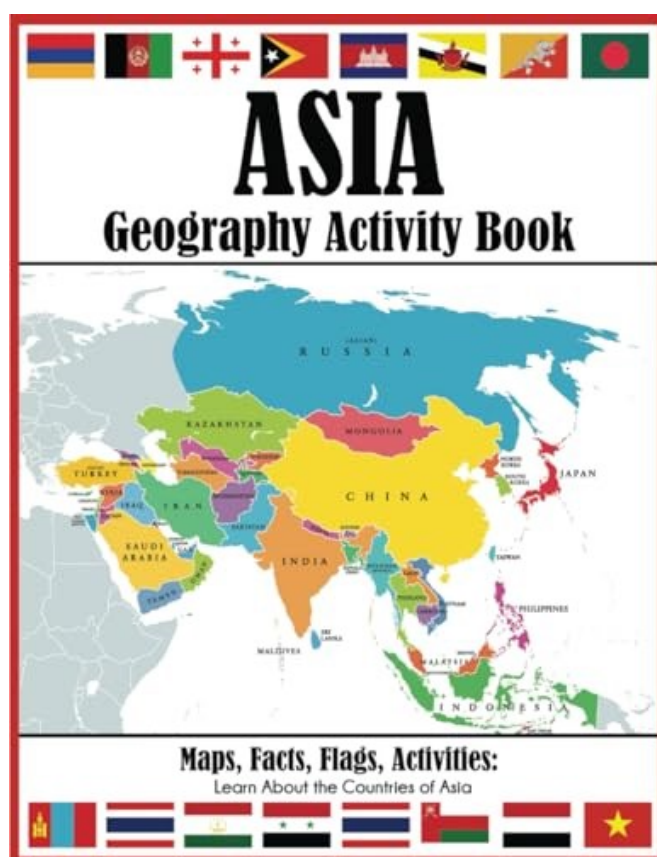
“Western Marxism,” the Italian Marxist Domenico Losurdo accuses Western Marxism of searching for an imaginary purity, while the rise of China is an anti-imperialist project to construct socialism. If anything, the whole-process people’s democracy of socialist China is far superior to the low-intensity (liberal) democracy of toothless parliaments. China’s development is a serious attempt at modernization through a socialist market, not the social degeneration caused by the capitalist market. Similarly, BRICS offers a different paradigm from the neocolonial and imperialist framework of the West. If anything, BRICS represents a genuine attempt to delink from the Global North, on the long road to revolution of the Global South (Samir Amin).

Isabella Weber (How China escaped shock therapy) has written a detailed account of the post-neoliberalism economic debates and the socialist market in China, while Prabhat Patnaik (Re-envisioning socialism; Beyond liberalism) insists that actually-existing socialism failed to secure individual agency and that a highly decentralised system is rather required. The Global Left moved beyond the SA Left with their debates. Is the SA Left stuck in timeworn discussions? Ultra-leftism, for example, thinks that the SA state is sub-imperialist but fails to grasp that the post-apartheid state was downgraded by Western imperialism to merely be another neoliberal state in the Global South. We must reframe the political dialogues. When are we going to begin to have serious deliberations about socialism with African characteristics? Can we learn from Eastern Marxism or are we adrift in Eurocentric chauvinism? Can we overcome this fetish of ideas? The SA Left had courageous and intense debates in the run up to the 1994 elections and must do this again now.

So, what is the way forward? It’s essential that the SA Left should escape obsolete ideas and put up a concerted struggle against this neoliberal conjuncture, otherwise the lumpen-development of the hollow neoliberal SA state will get worse. Neoliberalism (revanchism) is “something near to financial fascism” (Michael Hudson). The obsession with debt reduction in SA is a deliberate strategy to enable the absorption of surplus value by the financial elite. The SA state can transcend the neoliberal straitjacket and expand aggregate demand through a fiscal deficit or a progressive wealth tax (and an inheritance tax to prevent tax evasion). Large numbers of government jobs can quickly be created. Expanding public services is the most crucial since neoliberalism specifically targeted the care sector. However, fiscal discipline is imposed on the SA state by big business, not by any objective constraints. It reflects the political

power of SA big business. But where is the political power of the SA working class to counter this? What is required is massive public investments – especially a job guarantee programme towards full employment - and living wages indexed to the cost of living. Moreover, there is a critical demand to address the cost-of-living crisis in SA and to fight for the regulation of prices on essential goods (food, energy, transportation, housing and utilities). Is the SA Left up to the task?

The authors are currently members of the Marxist Group of Namibia. Whitaker was previously with the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action and Boesak with the Worker’ Revolutionary Party (Namibia).



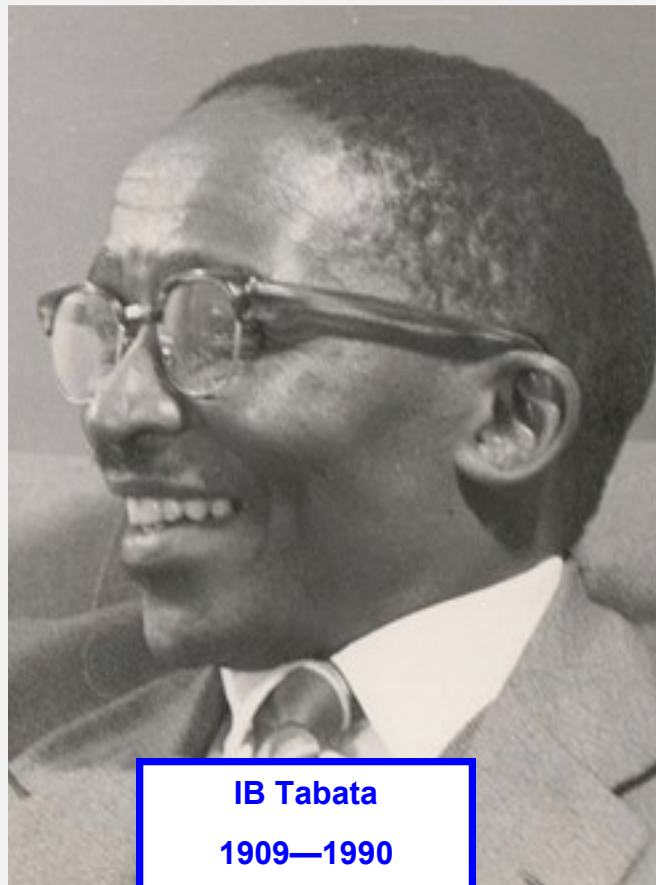
China’s population: 1.409 billion

India’s population: 1.451 billion

HERITAGE DAY – THE MYTH OF THE RAINBOW NATION.

Heritage Day, euphemistically also known as 'National Braai Day' is a public holiday in South Africa celebrated annually on 24 September. The day was introduced by former president Nelson Mandela in 1994 after the fall of Apartheid and is meant to celebrate and bring together South Africans *'from all different backgrounds'*

"South Africans are encouraged to celebrate their culture and the diversity of their beliefs and traditions, in the wider context of a nation that belongs to its entire people." Laudable as this might sound, it is not without its ironies. Many schools encourage learners to come dressed in "their traditional wear". Identity politics comes to the fore. Xhosas, Zulus, Vendas, Sothos "Indians", "Coloureds", and the European Nations including the Afrikaners are called upon to "unite in diversity". How Ironical? In the South African context, strange as it may seem, no one calls on the citizenry to build the South African nation.



Secondly, while the ruling ANC government is keen to promote the idea of a "rainbow nation," it does not address in any meaningful way the fact that we – the working people of the country – are more united by our immiseration under the capitalist system which the ANC government so avidly champions, than we are divided by the separate identities which apartheid imposed on us, and which now the ANC continues to uphold and reinforce.

Colonialism and Western Civilisation are being discussed in all corners of the globe and especially in South Africa with diametrically opposed opinions being expressed.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who composed the racist picture of a "Rainbow Nation" in South Africa and several homilies about white and black keys on a piano, was wont to promise us a dismantling of apartheid in SA. However, neither he nor leading ANC government officials and apologists ever dared to consider the demolishing of the entire social economic structure in SA from 1994 onwards. Corporate power was assumed eternal. The transition from "apartheid to democracy" would be achieved in a seamless movement in which new persons in parliament, provincial and local government, would rapidly replace old and new political structures. A plethora of auxiliary political and cultural organisations grew which brought in the new administrative strata and judicial cadre.

In the first place, "a nation that belongs to its entire people" is a highly contestable notion. When more than 70 percent of private farmland belongs to 9 percent of the population, and 80 percent of total wealth is owned by 10 percent of the population, then who is trying to fool whom by asserting that the nation belongs to all of us?

Who created Western Civilisation?

We should all become aware that westerners alone did not create Western Civilisation. Moreover, the African is not inferior to the "Westerners" or the "Civilised nations" as alluded to by westerners. IB Tabata in his monologue, *"Contribution to Modern Civilisation"* avers that the concept of Western Civilisation is a myth, that there is only *Human Civilisation* to which all human beings, all over the world have contributed. The people of Africa made as huge a contribution to the development of Human Civilisation as any other. The discovery of the "new world" with its spices, sugar, cotton and tea had the effect of hastening the slave trade. These events contributed largely to the birth of the industrial revolution. It is estimated that during the 16th – 19th centuries, 50 million slaves were transported from Africa. Would the industrial revolution have taken place at the time without the labour of the slave trade? The workers and peasantry are the backbone of society – in this society, it happened to be the slaves.

The European colonialists continued the rape of Africa with extraction of minerals being their prime target.

Exploitation on an unprecedented scale followed with an avarice unknown anywhere in the world prior to this. Between 1765 and 1938, the British colonisers took 45 trillion sterling from India. No attempt has been made to repay these monies. The exploitation and theft on the African continent by the European colonisers is incalculable. This is continuing to this day. All minerals viz. oil, gold, diamonds, coal, platinum, uranium, iron ore, as well as fruit and fresh produce are exported to the European countries and the USA. They literally own the farms on the African continent and sell at prices that the poor in Africa, who work on these farms, cannot afford. North America was developed by slave labour under the most atrocious conditions.

However, these twin evils – capitalism and race – are two sides of the same coin. The history of South Africa is the history of racial capital, in terms of which ownership of the means of production was centralized in the hands of a European elite, underwritten by an indigenous class of enforcers armed with a battery of segregationist and apartheid laws.

1994 did not undo the disparities in wealth distribution caused by decades of segregation and apartheid. If anything, the post-1994 era worsened these disparities. Today, thirty years into the post-apartheid South Africa,

as a nation, our socio-economic stats make dreadful reading. Consider the following:

- The country's unemployment rate stands at 33.2 percent (42.9 percent if one considers the expanded definition). Almost half our adult population lives in poverty. According to the Department of Statistics, 49.2 percent of the population over the age of 18 falls below the upper-bound poverty line, which stands at an income level of R1183 per month.
- Informal settlements in South Africa grew significantly after the end of apartheid, driven by factors such as the dismantling of apartheid's spatial planning and increased migration to urban areas in search of economic opportunities.
- While the government has made significant strides, exceeding the 93% milestone in early 2025, some schools, particularly in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo, continue to face challenges with unsafe and inadequate sanitation facilities, violating learners' rights to dignity, health, and education.
- While the exact number fluctuates, reports in mid 2025 indicate that around 383 public schools in South Africa (2% of public schools) lack access to running water, with other estimates suggesting at least 25% of public schools do not have a reliable water supply. Additionally, there are widespread issues with water quality, as a 2025 project found 43% of school water samples to be unsafe for drinking, impacting overall school water access and hygiene.
- Virtually every sector where the state is responsible for catering to the needs of the public is in crisis healthcare, education, transport, and crime-prevention.

When the unemployment rate remains high for too long, it would have to lay off more employees to balance the falling revenues and stay afloat. The motor manufacturing industry, a significant employer in the Eastern Cape, has already had to close down, GoodYear with approximately 3000 workers and Mercedes Benz having retrenched 900 of its workforce, some on a voluntary basis.

When one considers the role of capitalism in the creation and reproduction of poverty



Ladies in Traditional wear.

Posted by Donaven George on December 3, 2020

among the masses of people whose role in the system is to produce the wealth expropriated by the owners of the means of production, one is inclined to focus mainly (if not exclusively) on the class of parasitic capitalists, both local and global. However, there is a considerable sub-species of beneficiary: and that is the non-producing layer of the political elite and their hangers-on in the state bureaucracy.

These elected leaders and their cronies will be hoping that their terms in office will be rubber-stamped in the 2026 municipal elections.

There remains the enormous unfinished task of bringing about the wide-scale unity of the oppressed. This is of paramount importance if we are to make any meaningful inroads into the state of oppression which engulfs us. We need to heed Trotsky's words – written more than 80 years ago, but a powerful guideline for our times:

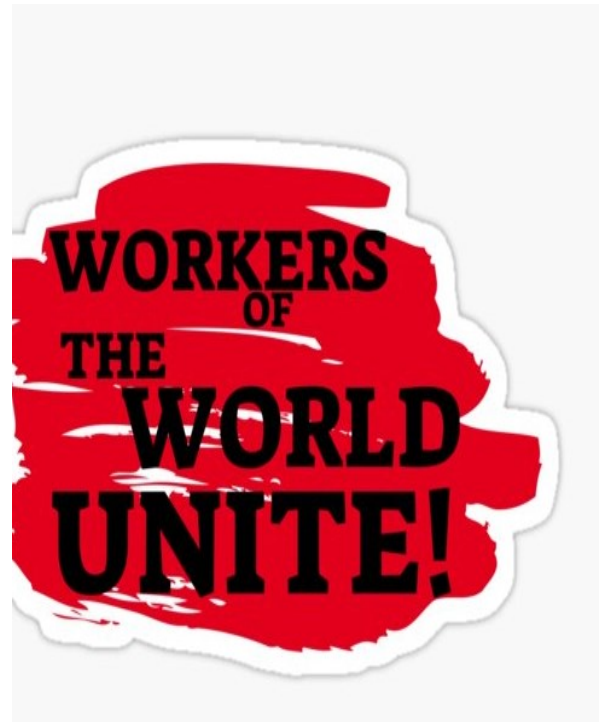
The strategic task of the next period – a prerevolutionary period of agitation, propaganda and organization – consists in overcoming the contradiction between the maturity of the objective revolutionary conditions and the immaturity of the proletariat and its vanguard (the confusion and disappointment of the older generation, the inexperience of the younger generation). It is necessary to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution. This bridge should include a system of transitional demands, (italics in the original) stemming from today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat.

In 1994, when the Workers' struggle was aborted by imperialism, the new tasks of revolution demanded the re-awakening of the people. Moreover, we have to show what class forces need to stand in the forefront of the revolutionary movement.

The critical factor is that the modern working class is the decisive force in the advance of history. The combined power of all these efforts moves ineluctably into a socialist resolution of the affairs of humanity.

In addition, for the completion of the socialist revolution, we shall need nothing less than the re-awakening of all the people of the world. To this end, we must join all like-minded organisations in a principled United Front by even marching separately, but striking together.

WORKING PEOPLE OF ALL LANDS, UNITE!



IS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) THE ENEMY OF LABOUR?

The emergence of AI as a new “great leap-forward” in capitalist technology has re-ignited the debate around the role of technology versus that of labour in the production process. Marx’s labour theory of value contends that only labour creates surplus value; thus, if AI is going to result in the accelerated displacement of labour from production, then it follows that the rate of profit is going to fall—which, of course, will lead to a crisis of capitalism.

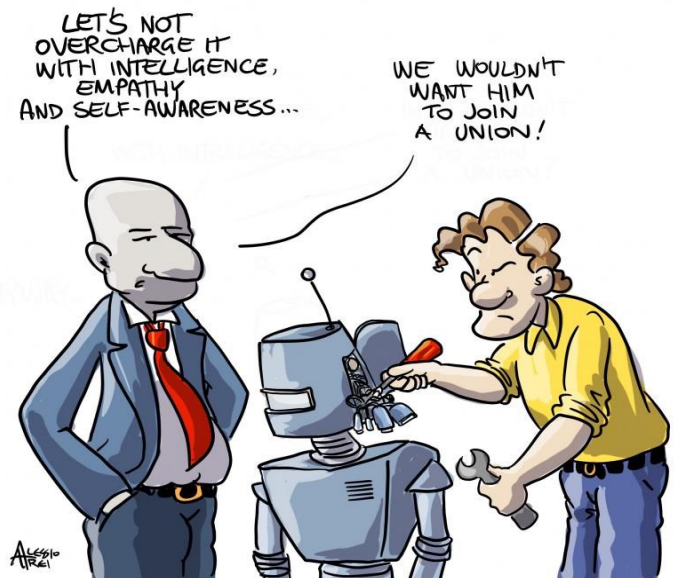
“What if” scenarios are being constructed around the expectation that AI could usher in the final demise of labour. In other words, could surplus value be produced entirely without the input of human labour power? If so, this will result in the falsification of Marx’s labour theory of value, or at least, in the elimination of the conditions which validated it (i.e. the era of industrial capitalism).

There are, of course, many ifs and buts to consider. For example, it has always been the case that maximising profits has been the core goal of capitalist owners of the means of production. Thus, if it is cheaper to make use of human labour power, then human labour power will be preferred to automation. It will be no different with AI.

Some theorists hold that it is premature to be having this debate, as the actual possibility of AI (completely) replacing human labour is remote at best, and if it does happen, it will be far into the future. In the meantime, the elements and aspects most conducive to profit maximisation in the here-and-now and in the immediate future are likely to be the main focus of capitalist competition.

Currently, we are seeing huge levels of investment in AI. Companies like Google, Microsoft and Apple are scurrying to achieve leadership in AI capacity, particularly to exploit the “machine learning” capability of the technology, so that more and more ambitious applications of the technology can be envisaged.

Like all previous breakthrough technologies (e.g. steam power, railways, the Internet)



there will be major disruption of labour markets and the lives of ordinary people. The neo-liberalism of the past plus-minus 50 years has drawn countless millions of people around the world into a relation of dependency, which means that if there is going to be an AI-induced jobs bloodbath, very likely millions of workers (and their families and institutions) across the globe will be detrimentally impacted.

In principle, working class struggles will have the same focus as in the past: how to revolutionise capitalism so that it is transformed into a system – with its technology – which serves society as a whole, and does so with due regard for the welfare of the planet. In terms of this approach, modern labour-saving technology is not regarded as a no-no, but as an asset for the benefit of all. Thus, the anti-capitalist struggle will not be for the elimination of technology, but for the overturning of the system of capitalism itself.

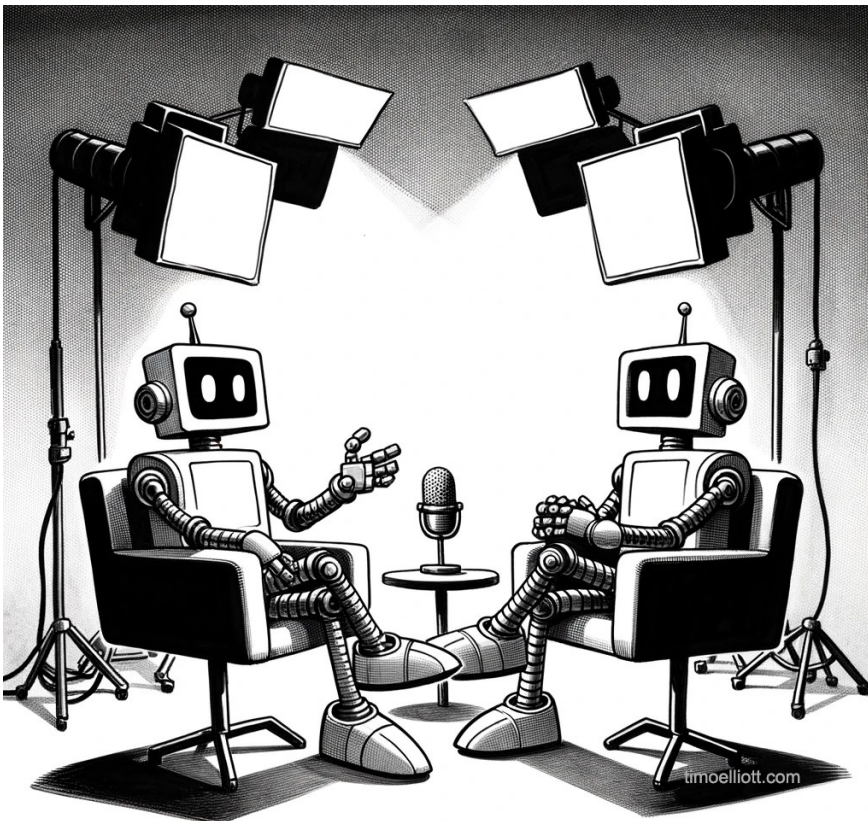
Point 2.1 of the Unity Movement’s Ten Point

Programme states that every person in the country shall have the right to work. And 2.3 addresses worker rights in relation to changing technology:

[The Right to work, living wages and just benefits for all workers] . . . means having in place a continuous, on-going employee training and development scheme geared to ensuring that employee skills grow in line with changes in technological and other work processes. There shall be a focus on narrowing the distinction between manual and intellectual labour, such that the accompanying inequalities are eliminated

Right now we are seeing AI being used in the service of fascistic governments like those of the US and Israel, particularly in their anti-social surveillance strategies, and in the manufacture of weapons of war. We are also seeing that AI's need for vast data processing and storage space is aggravating the climate crisis. Global unemployment is expected to skyrocket in the near future, as capitalist profit-seekers replace workers (including skilled workers) with this new, rapidly-evolving technology. Clearly, the harm is outdoing the good.

AI is decidedly in the wrong hands.



And tonight's topic is "how can we tell if humans are actually intelligent?"

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