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Congressional Briefing

Automation and the Workforce

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Jonathan Coopersmith is Associate Professor of History at Texas A&M University. He received his D.Phil. in Modern History from Oxford University and his BA from Princeton University. His book *Faxed: The Rise and Fall of the Fax Machine* (2015) recounts the history of the device from its origins to its workplace glory days, in the process revealing how it helped create the accelerated communications, information flow, and vibrant visual culture that characterize our contemporary world. He is also author of *The Electrification of Russia, 1880-1926* (1992) and co-editor, with Roger Launius, of *Taking Off: A Century of Manned Flight*. Coopersmith has written widely on the history of technology and has been interviewed on the subject by the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, among others.

Louis Hyman is Assistant Professor in the Labor Relations, Law, and History department at the ILR school of Cornell University. He is currently working on a book entitled *Short-Sighted: The Rise of Flexible Corporations and Temporary Work in Postwar America*. A former Fulbright scholar and McKinsey consultant, Hyman received his PhD in American history in 2007 from Harvard University. His first book *Debtor Nation: The History of America in Red Ink* (2011) focused on the history of political economy of debt and was selected as one of the 2011 Choice Top 25 Outstanding Books of the Year. His second book, *Borrow: The American Way of Debt* (2012), explained how American culture shaped finance and in turn how finance shaped culture. His writings have appeared in the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Wilson Quarterly*, Bloomberg, CNBC, and other newspapers, journals, and blogs, as well as essay collections.

Dane Kennedy currently directs the National History Center and is the Elmer Louis Kayser Professor of History and International Affairs at George Washington University. He is the author of six books, the most recent being *Decolonization: A Very Short Introduction* (2016) and *The Last Blank Spaces: Exploring Africa and Australia* (2013) and editor or co-editor of three others, including *How Empire Shaped Us* (2016) and *Reinterpreting Exploration: The West in the World* (2013). A new book, *The Imperial History Wars: Debating the British Empire*, is forthcoming in 2018.



Since the 2008 Recession, concerns about technological unemployment (loss of jobs caused by technological change) have intensified. There is a long history of concern about the impact of technological change on work.

- The Luddite movement protested industrialization's impact on jobs in the early 1800s Britain
- During the Depression, workers displaced by technological change in agriculture, manufacturing, and office work led many Americans to express alarm about technological unemployment
- After the Second World War fears of unemployment related to the rise of automation resurfaced
 - o Linked to Cold War rivalry with the Soviet Union and worries about American "competitiveness" with Japan's economy
- Concerns about technological unemployment peaked following the 2008 economic crisis

How is the current period of techno-pessimism similar to earlier periods?

- Worldwide challenges of unemployment
- Concerns about growing foreign competitors and immigrants
- Sense of rapid technological and organizational change

Technology itself is not novel, but in recent decades it has transformed the employer-employee relationship.

- The New Deal solidified a particular kind of industrial-era full-time employer-employee relationship
- This system of employees receiving a regular wage or salary is giving way to independent contractors, consultants, temps and freelancers

Questions about technology's impact on jobs must be connected to access to education and training, work and leisure, income and security.

- Especially noteworthy are changes in the role of women in the workforce and the gendering of certain jobs

Our challenge is to find a way to create basic security for citizens, while pushing economic growth.

- Embracing the new reality of flexible, digital work, rather than fighting it, may provide independence and security for rural workers
 - o Gig economy provides one option: it provides the autonomy and independence of an economy before wage labor, and individuals possessed of the productive capacity of an industrial economy
- Independent workforce capitalism will not "naturally" be better for everybody and depends on specific policy choices
 - o We can draw lessons from the New Deal, and embrace policies that are innovative and experimental
 - o Areas of interest include labor law, licensing laws, and portability of pensions and medical insurance

Historically, new jobs emerged from the "creative destruction" of technological change that were better than the jobs that disappeared.

- This transition was often wrenching, not immediate, not obvious, and not in the same area