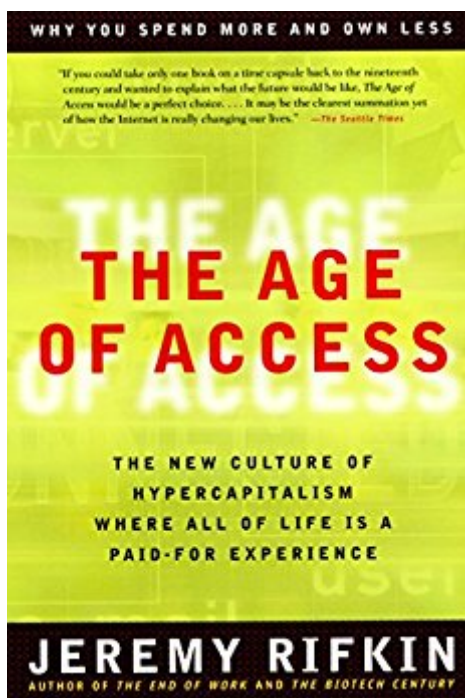


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The Age Of Access: The New Culture Of Hypercapitalism



Synopsis

Visionary activist and author Jeremy Rifkin exposes the real stakes of the new economy, delivering "the clearest summation yet of how the Internet is really changing our lives" (The Seattle Times). Imagine waking up one day to find that virtually every activity you engage in outside your immediate family has become a "paid-for" experience. It's all part of a fundamental change taking place in the nature of business, contends Jeremy Rifkin. After several hundred years as the dominant organizing paradigm of civilization, the traditional market system is beginning to deconstruct. On the horizon looms the Age of Access, an era radically different from any we have known.

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Customer Reviews

DNF @ p.30. While the thesis is interesting, I just read 30 pages in which he restated his thesis approximately 40 times. The first 30 pages could be five without losing a single bit of what he's saying. Probably less if I cared enough to edit this for him. I'm disappointed because it's an

intriguing idea but I don't have the time or energy to read 266 pages that should be cut down to 30 (so, technically, I should have already finished this book).

Do you remember the dot.com revolution? Mass customization, location-based offers, intelligent e-business and all that? Much of it was, as Alan Greenspan famously said, irrational exuberance. But, some of it was true. The fact that Rifkin wrote this book in the heat of the dot.com boom (2000), and that he still got much of it right, is a testimony to his insight. As good as this book is, there is proof that he is not a perfect prognosticator. For example, he also wrote a book called "The End of Work". That sure hasn't happened for me yet. The best parts of this book are in the middle. Toward the end of the book, his analysis of postmodernism and its relationship to the network economy is great. Some of his key points: there is a significant shift underway from products to services and that even what we understand as products today are being offered as services, there is a significant shift from a production-based capitalistic economy to a network economy, and there is a shift toward commoditizing human relationships as we are currently witnessing with the social networking sites. This is a good and amazingly current book.

Your life is part of a larger drama. As you grow up you are presented with numerous options as to the character you will play. What attributes should your character have, what personality traits, what reputation, what should your character strive to be? Will you take on different personas at work, in social situations, in simulated environments? The choice is up to you, but your choices are presented by advertisers who seek to steer you in a particular direction and supply you with the props to act out your character of choice. Once you acquire the physical props needed to reinforce your character (which have limited revenue potential for the companies supplying them), you need to compliment your props with experiences. Maybe you want to play a distinguished individual; one who lives in an exclusive golf community with others of similar status and means. Your character of choice has the newest cars, the latest gadgets, and adheres to the norms of others playing similar roles. You own little if anything and consume most everything as a service - you lease your car, despite "owning your home" you have to pay for all kinds of memberships and fees to keep up the act. You script your social circles and cultural experiences. The majority of your relationships are based on monetary exchange and are pre planned. You are able to purchase cultural experiences based on what market research has determined you want to experience. You are presented with that which others have determined you want to see and will pay the most to experience. Your experiences don't reflect reality, as it exists in nature, but the "reality" which you want to, and think,

should exist. If you have enough financial resources you can rent the exact character you want to play, buy all the necessary props, and engage in all the appropriate cultural experiences. Everyone will treat you just the way you want to be treated. You'll be able to script your whole life. Will your relationships be built on trust, empathy, compassion and other genuine human emotions? Does any of this matter? Is there any difference between a life where everything is a paid for experience and one where it is not? Is this much ado about nothing? That's up to you to decide. Jeremy vividly describes how such scenarios may affect you. Another fundamental issue in "The Age of Access" is the private ownership and control of public assets and natural resources. Should a private entity be allowed to claim exclusive ownership of the radio spectra over which all sorts of communications are broadcast? Should a biotech company be able to patent (and therefore have exclusive use) of a particular gene that has always existed in nature but has only recently been discovered and put to a particular use? Should companies be able to have patents on the very building blocks that make up life on Earth? Should they be able to patent things that make up your body? When it comes to property rights, where is the line between private property and the right of humanity to share in and access the natural wealth of the planet? Monsanto, through the development of "Terminator seeds", has already shown how such patents and associated biological tampering may be used for the financial gain of a few to the detriment of the food supply of the world. [Terminator seeds were developed by Monsanto as a way to claim intellectual property rights and revenue from farmers. The seeds are bio-engineered to be sterile so that instead of simply harvesting seeds at the end of one crop season to be used for the next, the farmer would have no choice but to ante up to Monsanto for seeds for next years crop.] The parallel is made between cultural diversity and biodiversity. As the world's natural resources are depleted, can we continue our current lifestyles, our massive energy consumption? Many other works contend the answer is no. Rifkin compares biodiversity to cultural diversity. Can capital markets continue to operate if the very social fabric and trust on which they are built is transformed into continuum of paid for experiences? "The Age of Access" is brilliant. It raises issues that will become more and more important as we move forward into the age of "hyper-capitalism". Will it matter if your life becomes a series of subscriptions and paid for experiences? Should any private entity be able to claim control over things like genes or radio spectra or should they remain in the public domain for all to use? Is it in anyone's interest for corporations like McDonalds's, Dunkin Doughnuts, Starbucks, and others to steamroll local cultures and business outside of the US in the pursuit of profit? Rifkin presents scenarios that address these and many other questions. You may or may not agree with issues and perspectives in the book but its one book you can't afford to pass up.

Rifkin states that the new economy is one in which cultural experiences are exchanged for money such as in tourism. He sees this development as the growth of capitalism into the cultural sphere in which cultural experiences become commercialized. He thinks that the work that we do now will be done by robots or computers in the future. The waning blue and white collar work will be replaced by opportunities in cultural work. The commodification of relationships means that people will buy the time, attention, and affection of other people. Another feature of the new economy is that it deals in ideas and images, more than physical assets. Companies outsource the manufacturing of their product and concentrate on the design of the product only, such as with computers and cars. Companies also like to outsource manufacturing to non-union subcontractors so that they don't have deal with unions. Cheap labor overseas manufactures the product. The intangible asset of the new economy is the knowledge or imagination of the associates in firms such as Microsoft. This company does not own many physical assets, but its stock still is valuable because of innovativeness of its knowledge workers in coming up with priceless commercial ideas. A new way of accounting needs to be devised to measure intangible assets such as knowledge, morale, progressive leadership, and creativity of different firms. Although Rifkin is excited about the new economy, he worries that non-commercial ideas will go by the wayside in a world in which only commercialized ideas are important. Franchisees do not have as many rights as business owners do. In fact, the supplier often controls how the business is to be run. The contract can be broken if the franchisee violates any of the rules. Franchisees pay for the business formula and the name of the business, hoping for success without the risk of ownership. Rifkin predicts that small business will become extinct and will be replaced by franchises because the new economy is based on supplier/user relationships, not ownership. The franchisee is not autonomous and therefore cannot come up with any creative ideas on how the business should be run. What we formally owned in the past will no longer be ours in the new economy. Rifkin informs us that we don't even own our genes because life science companies have patented them. If we want gene therapy, we will have to pay for the privilege of using their knowledge of the patent. Gene therapy may increase health care costs because of the expense of the genetic tests. We also will not own our seeds in the future because life science companies have patented the seeds that they have genetically modified. The seeds will be leased to the farmer for one growing season only. Heavy fines will be put on those who save the seeds to grow next season. Rifkin suggests that we need to revamp our anti-trusts laws for the knowledge economy so that monopolies will not control intellectual property. The leasing of cars shows that businesses are turning to a service-based rather than a product-based economy.

They seek the lifetime loyalty of the customer by establishing a relationship with him. I suppose that this will have an advantage for the customer since the supplier will seek the satisfaction of the customer over a lifetime, not wanting to betray trust. In the future, it will be assumed that products will come with long term service; if they don't, they could be rip-offs because the seller does not wish to maintain the product over the years. Invasions of privacy may occur if such suppliers are always seeking to find out what your buying habits are. Service relationships have also helped companies save money and the environment by having a service find out a way to provide that service more cheaply and less wastefully. The relationship between PPG painting and Ford Motor Company is given as an example. The switch to product based economy to one in which service is emphasized has come about because there is more profit in providing added long-term services for a product, rather than selling the product as a one-time event. An over-production of goods means that it is difficult to sell products as one-offs and still make money. Products that are similar also have to have services that will differentiate them from the competition. The ability to customize a product to the customers needs is now able to be done. This mass customization replaces mass production of the previous era. In the new era, products are given away as the bait that will hook the customer into a relationship with the business over the long-term. With the commodification of relationships in the new era, customers are ones that businesses seek to control, not so much the products. Companies will increasingly seek to sell to the same customer over the lifetime many different products. The customer is the market in this sense. With new technology, companies are able to find out what the buying habits of customers are and then cater to their preferences. Controlling the customer means that the company wants to become so "embedded" into the lives of customers that they can't live without the company. Changes to another company may become too much of a hassle, given the complexity of the commercial relationship. Corporate institutions wish to control the customer, just as they did the worker during the industrial era. They want to control economic life as opposed to having the masses control it. The purpose of capitalism is to keep increasing its power over our lives, even to the point of setting up communities of interests to help sell their services. Planned communities are also a way that corporations sell a lifestyle while abridging the ownership rights of the people who live there.

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