

## Book Review: The Inglorious Years: The Collapse of the Industrial Order and the Rise of Digital Society by Daniel Cohen

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**Cohen, Daniel. *The Inglorious Years: The Collapse of the Industrial Order and the Rise of Digital Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021. 192 pages. Hardcover, \$24.95.**

The twenty-first century has felt to many like an unending series of crises. Amid war, pandemics, and economic collapse, there is also the general sense that the world of the twentieth century has disappeared completely. Several assumptions about how economic and social relations should be conducted have been abandoned. The information revolution has taken its place with industry and agriculture as a key development in human history, and we are just starting to fully understand its effects.

Daniel Cohen's newest book, *The Inglorious Years: The Collapse of the Industrial Order and the Rise of Digital Society*, endeavors to explain those effects of technological and social change on our seemingly chaotic world. Cohen, a longtime professor at the Paris School of Economics and writer of over a dozen books, uses the movements of 1968 as an inflection point. In that year, young people throughout the world rose up in rebellion against the strictures of industrial society. Cohen argues, however, that this rebellion masked a deeper and more insidious change in society. It was not the students that changed the world, but rather technological and social developments.

The West became a service economy, one with endemic low wages and an automatic limit on its growth. Computers and the internet only changed the contours of this service economy, creating new jobs while destroying old ones and making people productive in new ways. Cohen argues that many of the changes of the past two decades can be explained by this new economy: "humans are the new product, that are to be educated, connected, repaired, entertained. The digital world 'industrializes' the service economy, creating a hybrid being of flesh and algorithms" (p. 168).

Cohen's book is at its strongest when it is in his wheelhouse. His exploration of growth in an industrial versus a postindustrial world is particularly insightful. Cohen does a masterful job of explaining the pitfalls of the service economy and how recent technological developments may end up changing that economy forever. According to Cohen, "digital society must also learn to live with us, individuals composed of flesh and dreams. New regulations must be followed, new social and artistic critiques made, to keep the digital world from swallowing us up entirely in its network of surveillance and addictions" (p. 158). As he notes at the beginning, Cohen's predictions have been accelerated by the pandemic and the renewed relevance of Zoom, remote health screenings, and virtual events. His work is timelier in 2021 than it was in 2019.

This book excels when it tells the story of late twentieth and early twenty-first century growth and economic change. It is much weaker, however, when it tries to serve as an all-encompassing history of the past seventy years. Cohen frequently tracks off on strange tangents that have little to do with his central argument. Some of these sections, such as the ones on Jacques Lacan, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, bury the reader in a sea of dense argument. Others, notably his offhanded mention of Republican operative Steve Bannon, seem arbitrary and mostly opinion-based (p. 74). Cohen feels the need to cover every topic, even if his coverage is perfunctory and distracting. This sense of distraction is amplified by the many typographical and grammatical errors that pervade the English translation.

Cohen's book is a dense, meandering, but ultimately clever take on the current world. The book is not for the casual reader of economics or sociology. It is far from a relatable text like those of Paul Krugman or Robert Reich. However, Cohen's many allusions and discussions of theory will attract an academic audience interested in recent philosophy and interpretations of

contemporary history. Despite its flaws, Cohen's accomplishment in this book is admirable and will go down as a sound academic analysis of our current, anxious age.

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