

## Human Skill

*Mike Cooley  
1934-2020*

*John Palmer*



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*John Palmer was Public Affairs Director of the Greater London Enterprise Board and is a former European Editor of The Guardian. This is his foreword to The Search for Alternatives: A Mike Cooley Reader, published by Spokesman in 2020.*

Prophets and prophecy have not always had a good press. Too often prophetic visions have had limited relevance for those in society and especially the world of work confronting real and immediate challenges. Prophets with their feet placed firmly on the ground and, specifically, those concerned with the so-called ‘mundane’ world of work have been very rare indeed.

Mike Cooley has every reason to be counted as one such ‘prophet.’ He has rightly been described by the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, as “... the most intelligent Irish man, the most morally engaged scientist and technologist Ireland has sent abroad.” He is certainly a visionary of a future where human skill and labour work in partnership with science and technology rather than in servitude to them.

Born in Tuam, County Galway in Ireland, Mike Cooley studied advanced computer based engineering in Germany and Switzerland. He first came to public attention as a result of his pioneering role in the British trade union movement as an advocate of human skill being enhanced by and not harnessed or displaced by technology.

As a trade unionist working in the Lucas Aerospace company he played a key role in outlining how workers could confront the threat of mass redundancies by showing how their skills could be adapted to produce alternative “socially useful” products and demonstrated practical examples in health, transport and other sectors.

The socially responsive ethos of the human-centred movement generated by the Lucas Workers’ Plan of 1976 is summed up in the Mike’s statement that “there cannot

be islands of social responsibility in a sea of depravity”. He also warned about “the appalling gap between what technology could provide for society, and what it actually does provide.”

“The tragic waste our society makes of its most precious asset—the skills, ingenuity, energy, creativity and enthusiasm of ordinary people”; and “the myth that computerisation, automation and use of robotic devices will automatically free human being from soul destroying, backbreaking tasks and leave them free to engage in more creative work.”

Mike Cooley’s vision was of a human-machine symbiosis as an alternative potential for work life. He saw this as part of wider European humanistic movements such as ‘Democratic Participation’ (Scandinavia) and ‘Humanisation of Technology and Work’ (Germany). These European human-centred movements provided a basis for the establishment of the ‘Anthropocentric Systems and Technology’ programme of the European Union during the 1990s.

If his approach had received the political support in the wider labour movement it deserved, perhaps the worst depredations of Thatcherite ‘slash and burn’ economics in the 1970s and 80s might have been mitigated or avoided. In later years his role as Director of Technology in the innovative Greater London Enterprise Board (GLEB) allowed these ideas to reach a wider audience.

But its work was undermined when Margaret Thatcher’s government closed the Greater London Council which had sponsored the creation of the GLEB. Alas the longer term benefits of the radical strategies Cooley and others canvassed were more often realised in other European countries rather than the UK. It was left to others to invest in projects such as a pioneering ‘road/rail bus’ and a new type of portable kidney machine. We are still paying the price today in the post-industrial desert created by the ‘free’ market, particularly in the former industrial areas of Britain. The economic deprivation and social inequality generated by the free market system has spawned new forms of extreme right populism.

Mike Cooley has also played a crucial role in developing thinking about how the interplay between the diversity of human skill and the calculation capacity of the machine can lead to enhanced productivity and enriched human expertise, combining human ingenuity and technological innovations.

Cooley has warned us of the danger of the objectification of human knowledge and experience into information and data, risking human judgement becoming mere calculation and turning the human into a mere robot. This was dramatically expressed in his pioneering book *Architect or Bee?* Alas neo-liberal capitalism has taken us down a very different path. The monumental squandering of the creative potential of working people – in partnership with human centred science and technology – has led to the emergence of casualised labour in both industries and services. Far from productivity being given a massive boost, too many people work in low productivity sectors, low paid and often without adequate protection from unemployment and fluctuating income.

When Mike talked about the complex and little understood relationship between a worker's innate skills and the tools and technologies available to them, he would draw on a rich knowledge of history. "Think of the breathtaking achievements of the mediaeval workers who built the great cathedrals. Who were the architects?" we heard him ask.

His response was clear:

"Actually there was no separate cast of architects giving instructions to a passive work force. Rather every stonemason and building worker had an innate sense of the potential design born from long and intimate knowledge of the materials with which they were working."

The impressive scope of Cooley's thinking is well reflected in his subsequent books *The Human Price of Technology*, republished in 2016, and *Delinquent Genius: The Strange Affair of Man and His Technology* which was published in 2018 by Spokesman. He was quick to identify the gender bias in the pattern of contemporary work and skills distribution.

The thrust of Mike Cooley's human society focused analysis has a striking parallel in the rapidly growing world-wide movement – led by young people – against climate change and for radical, green policies in all the major aspects of our economic, social and individual lives to counteract it. It is a development profoundly welcomed by him as the climate change threat to our planet and its people looms ever larger. In a sustainable world economy, the values and goals of Michael Cooley's work on human centred technology are sure to be reflected.