

On forestalled innovation

by Aidan Cornelius-Bell

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Dear friends,

I spent a little of my time today listening to other contemporary Marxists [1] -and then wondering about how to add to some aspects of their argument/s. In particular, in the interview I'm referencing, there's a piece on meritocracy, capitalists, and innovation. Because interviews suck there's too much pressure on the thinking and I think we're robbed of Blakeley's authentic response. So, I wanted to think about my own views on this, and how this might fit in the historical materialist but also intersectional approach we bring to mind reader together.

For Marx, innovation under capitalism represents *a* manifestation of human creative capacity - what he terms "species-being" - twisted and alienated through capitalist relations of production [2]. This twisting, and subsequent alienation, is what we have when the mainstream parrot: "Musk invented the electric car" . Worker's natural drive to creatively transform nature and society becomes subordinated to capital's need for constant revolutionising (read: reduce cost) of the means of production. This revolutionising, while represented as technological progress, serves only to deepen worker alienation and exploitation through increasing the organic composition of capital. The capitalist class mystifies this process, presenting innovations that emerge from collective social labour as the products of individual genius entrepreneurs. As Marx notes in *Capital* directly: "The social character of labour appears to us to be an objective character of the products themselves" [3]. This fetishisation of innovation mirrors the broader commodity fetishism that masks real social relations under capitalism. Hot.

Social Reproduction Theory reveals how innovation in care work, community organising, and social reproduction has been systematically devalued and appropriated under capitalism [4]. Women, particularly women of colour, have developed sophisticated systems for maintaining and reproducing labour power - from childcare networks to mutual aid systems - only to see these innovations commodified and privatised by capital. Indigenous knowledge systems, developed through millennia of sustainable relationship with land and community, face similar dynamics of appropriation and/or erasure [5]. Traditional ecological knowledge, sustainable agricultural practices, and communal governance innovations are first dismissed as "primitive," then stolen and patented by corporations when profitable. This represents a double exploitation - both of the original innovation and of the reproductive labour that maintained and developed these knowledge systems across generations [6]. The capitalist drive, then, to enclose and commodify all spheres of life thus produces a dual crisis -of social reproduction and of ecological sustainability. And at the nexus of race, gender and class this exploitation and expropriation is particularly devastating, and obvious. This brings the weight of hegemonic enforcement -any crack in the belief that capitalism is the "only way" is a threat, so racism, sexism, ableism and so on are deployed.

Okay, with some theory in our back pockets, let's pivot, slightly, to "innovation" in contemporary times.

Innovation emerges fundamentally from *workers* -from our daily struggles, creative problem-solving, and collective knowledge built through practice and necessity. The working class, through our direct engagement with production and society's needs, naturally develop new ways of thinking, doing, and being. This is an organic development (more on Gramsci in a moment). This innovation "from below" (in capitalist terms) stems from workers' intimate understanding of processes, materials, and social relations. Our innovations tend toward genuine solutions that benefit the collective rather than extracting profit. Whether

it' s teachers developing new pedagogical approaches, nurses honing better patient care, or factory workers improving safety protocols, the working class continuously innovates to make work more efficient, safer, and more humane.

Under capitalism, however, worker innovation is systematically appropriated and alienated from its creators. The ultimate gaslight. The capitalist class, through intellectual property law, management hierarchies, and employment contracts, "legally" steals these innovations from workers. Patents are filed in the company' s name, not the workers. Improvements to processes are codified as corporate property. The creative and intellectual contributions of workers are rendered invisible, while the fruits of our innovation flow upward to shareholders and executives who had no hand in their development. This theft of worker innovation mirrors the broader extraction of surplus value under capitalism. What a cool system we all consent to and participate in -and yet we wonder why there' s misogyny, racism, xenophobia, gaslighting, narcissism...

The capitalist class has pulled the ultimate con, warping our understanding of our own innovation through hegemonic control of media, education, and culture. They have constructed a mythology where lone genius entrepreneurs and visionary CEOs are the drivers of progress. This narrative erases the collective nature of innovation and the essential role of publicly funded research, worker knowledge, and social cooperation. Instead, we' re fed stories of brilliant billionaires working in garages (Tony Stark who dis?), when the reality is that most major technological advances come from massive teams of workers building on generations of collective knowledge.

Painting this in a concrete example, let' s take our mate Elon Musk -a most egregious example of this innovation theft and mythmaking in recent history. Tesla' s "unique" technologies were developed by an engineering team early on, Musk simply bought his way in with PayPal wealth and then forced out the founders -alleged engineers and workers replaced with a capitalist. SpaceX relies heavily on NASA research, technology, and contracts while Musk takes credit for the work of thousands of engineers and scientists. And, in case that wasn' t enough, his acquisition of Twitter showcases perfectly how billionaires use accumulated wealth to seize and destroy organisations in order to better push extreme-right political agendas. Musk' s increasing shift toward far-right politics, from amplifying conspiracy theories to supporting anti-democratic figures, demonstrates how concentrated economic power breeds capitalist hegemony, division, distraction and other anti-human traits endemic to capitalism' s virus.

Through his carefully crafted public image as a "genius innovator" , Musk exemplifies how capitalists claim credit for the collective achievements of workers. His companies have consistently undermined worker organising efforts, violated labour laws, and maintained dangerous working conditions while he amasses unprecedented personal wealth. The cult of personality around Musk serves to mystify the real relations of production and innovation, presenting him as a techno-king while thousands of actual innovators remain nameless and exploited.

The notion of meritocracy under capitalism is high on the list of insidious myths. The idea that wealth and power flow naturally to the most capable, innovative, and hardworking individuals is a farce -one which denies class privilege and the mass human suffering under capitalism. This fiction ignores the reality that success under capitalism correlates most strongly with initial advantage - inherited wealth, social connections, and structural privileges. While capitalist ideologues trumpet the "efficiency" of the free market in allocating resources and rewarding merit, the reality is that planned economic activity - whether in large corporations or state institutions - drives most major innovations and technological advances. The majority of foundational research and development that enables private profit is funded by public institutions and performed by salaried workers, not entrepreneurs seeking "market opportunities"-we couldn' t, as workers, even if we tried, we' d starve first,

or have our work stolen.

The mystification of innovation under capitalism represents, in Gramscian terms, a key battleground in the war of position between capital and labour [7]. The hegemonic narrative of lone genius inventors and visionary tech entrepreneurs serves to maintain capitalist control not just over the means of production, but over our very understanding of human creativity and progress. This cultural domination is sustained through what Gramsci termed the “intellectual and moral reformation” - where capitalist values become common sense through the work of traditional intellectuals [8]. However, this hegemony is never complete or stable -and importantly never represents liberation, even with moderate reforms applied. Worker innovations, Indigenous knowledge systems, and feminist practices of social reproduction all represent forms of counter-hegemonic knowledge production that challenge capitalist claims to innovation. The emergence of open-source technologies, mutual aid networks, and community-based solutions points toward alternative modes of innovation based on cooperation rather than competition. The task for organic intellectuals today is to make visible these counter-narratives and connect them to broader struggles against capitalist appropriation of collective human creativity. Only through counter-hegemonic movements can we reclaim innovation as a collective social process rather than a commodified product of capitalist exploitation.

Yours in solidarity,

Aidan

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