

# Towards a new 'general intellect'

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A lot has been written about the potential of digital technology and AI to 'upskill' the workforce and raise standards of living, but there's little sign the 'knowledge economy' has developed in the way its advocates expected. Digitalisation and AI have indeed become integral to new types of production. But rather than facilitating a move towards highly skilled and secure work for the majority, the old style regular employment of the manufacturing era has been replaced by growing prosperity for a technical elite, the new 'masters of the universe' and their supporting cast of data scientists, software

designers and systems engineers; but low paid digital 'precariousness' for many others.

Without the income to share in any future economic benefits that technological advances might bring, legions are enslaved in a 'rise and grind' culture, resulting from the spread of 'micro' or 'click-work'; performing repetitive tasks, labelling data and annotating images - activities that the tech giants do not consider economically viable (at least yet) to automate. In many cases contracted only for the length of a given task and lacking any sense of

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participating in a collective labour process, they know little about the exact nature of the product they are contributing to. According to the TUC, people in England and Wales who performed this type of work via an online platform at least once a week grew from 5.8 per cent of the working population in 2016 to 11.8 per cent in 2019, rising to 14.7 per cent in 2021 (equivalent to approximately 4.4 million people). Half of those relied on it for half of their income. Meanwhile, thousands more endure extreme conditions and oppressive levels of surveillance in Amazon-style *Digital Factories* (Altenreid 2022).

These developments, particularly the increased polarisation and the continued collapse of many 'middle jobs' that has been a consequence, fit well with Marxist theories. But in the little-known *Fragment on Machines* (a section within the *Grundrisse*) Marx himself appeared to contradict this, and consider that the scientific advance of the productive forces and level of fixed capital was producing a new 'general intellect'. (As well as the development of a 'social individual'), *'the development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force in production . . . under the control of the general intellect'* (706).

Marx did not develop this concept; he uses it only once. As a result, interpretation has been open to controversy. Marx on the one hand states that the worker will play a peripheral role, excluded from the production process, but also that they might assume a 'watchman' or 'regulator' role (on a par with the white coated technicians of today).

There's then a hint that the increased level of 'social knowledge' rather than direct labour has the power to 'undo' capitalist social relations and facilitate a drift towards a classless society. Following in this tradition, though still wanting to emphasise the importance of a political transformation, Smicek and Williams in their (2015) *Inventing the Future* and Aaron Bastani (2019) in *Fully Automated Luxury Communism* (2019) map out blueprints for how 'in the twenty-first century, new technologies will liberate us'.

If developing and extending the general intellect beyond those involved in high skilled employment (Marx was clearly not in a position to anticipate the rise of low paid, low skilled sectors, like the UK hospitality industry, let alone the army of self employed, but app-directed, delivery riders) is not just desirable, but also necessary to transform society (the idea that technological advance

automatically leads to a transition into socialism also needs refuting!) there's serious work needed on how this could be achieved. Reforming the state education system would seem the obvious way forward. There continues to be interest in curriculum reform - of both content and in the way knowledge is delivered; and there's growing opposition to the way in which schools and colleges have become 'exam factories' with a 'teaching to test' culture dominating the classroom. There's also continued support for breaking down academic-vocational divisions post-16, while universities have long been seen as potential sites for struggle and change.

But rather than being a 'social good', education is now increasingly 'zero-sum' - with individual students competing against each other for labour market places or post-grad study. The student vanguards of the prosperous 1960s and 1970s have now been replaced by debt-laden 'toiling millions' in a heavily stratified HE sector (though this does not mean students are not willing to protest). The education system has been described as like 'running up a downwards escalator' where you have to move faster and faster just to stand still. This situation is unsustainable but it has to be made reformable - the current generation of young people is the most electronically sophisticated and creative ever, sharing an online general intellect in contrast to the atomised and academic culture of the school.

Many workplaces, including large numbers in the public sector, and not only in industrially unionised sectors like the railways, also continue to have a culture of collectivity and solidarity. Trade unions have been integral to the defence of pay and conditions, but where they continue to be strong, and in the context of rising militancy, using new technology they could help formulate alternative plans for providing goods and services, which would both maximise workplace skills and widen decision making but also increase purchaser and client satisfaction, thereby creating a new *Democratic Professionalism* (Lethbridge 2019). Unions could also help to promote real 'lifelong learning' through expanding their education programs. Taking advantage of new developments in on-line learning, unions can also seek to extend the general intellect to those beyond their membership base. Emulating the Lucas Plan of the 1970s, there is potential to build alliances with local authorities and the research community, but also to develop new technology in the way it could and should be for a new general intellect to flourish.