

Rabbit Holes

On traps for intellectual milieus

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In absolute, global, authoritarian capitalism¹, one of the most notable consequences of the increasing alienation between intellectual milieus and the actual use of the outputs of this milieu is the combination of blindness and devotion with which many excellent scientists follow their prescribed tasks. This group of scientists working along the lines of the capitalist exploitation process broadly falls into two different groups: For one group, it is the final use of their research results, which simply remains *permanently* out of their sight; for the other group, a shallow cover narrative, a ‘moral’ defence of what they are doing, is holding them back from any doubt. The second group typically works inside an ideological bubble held together by financial and reputational incentives stronger than any intrinsic trajectory their own work could point to. What follows in this short paper does not concern this second group – social background, opportunism, and the structure of the embedding economy play a densely interwoven role that cannot be easily described in a short text. Here the focus is on the first group.

For this group, the two main characteristics are *devotion* and *blindness*. At first sight, the relation between them looks simple: If you have to tackle a difficult intellectual task, then you need time. You have to check what other scientists have done. Is there a state of the art? If so, what does it mean with respect to what you are planning? The time needed is not available for more remote questions². The better your task can be *isolated* from its intellectual surroundings, the less likely you will have the time to look at seemingly less important neighbouring problems. As Descartes already argued in his pathbreaking text on the scientific method (Descartes, 1637), the first step always is to break up a complicated problem into smaller, manageable pieces. Of course, today’s highly interconnected global production system (not to speak of its social-political-economic overlay) in many fields has made it almost impossible to find small pieces that can be sufficiently

¹ Compare (Hanappi, 2025) for a detailed characterisation of this contemporary form of capitalism.

² The boom in technical mastering of how to advance AI applications is a good example, compare (Brynjolfson_2026).

isolated. When a sub-task appears to be small enough to be assigned to a certain small group of scientists, then the supervising research director has to make sure that her or his team *believes* in the (isolated) importance of its sub-task. All work time has to be spent on it! And since there always is a certain amount of personal emotional benefit derived from achieving a task, the team will follow this advice. They will be caught up in their efforts to fulfil the task; they will be blind to everything else. This is how devotion breeds blindness. Several amplifiers are usually present in this development: To be good at a sub-task, you need sub-task-specific knowledge, and you learn corresponding jargon. This knowledge and its jargon exclude less devoted scientists from outside the team, and thus provide the possibility to feel to be excellent. Moreover, a team can always celebrate its exclusive (and excluding) value through its direct internal communication.

The less-known second part of Descartes' advice for scientists concerns the necessity to *integrate* the previously solved smaller problems. To synthesise these pieces is usually much more demanding than breaking them apart. Once the sub-task is done, it could be the research director who combines the different sub-tasks. But is it really the research director, or is it rather a person better to be called a research *manager*? A manager typically is an agent acting on behalf of an owner, as his or her hand (in Latin: manus). Therefore, the achievement of the task is not just the scientifically sufficiently correct assembly of sub-tasks; it also consists of surveilling the overall profitability of this part of the production process. As profit is defined as the difference between revenue and cost, it is clear that a research manager has to focus on cost reduction. The research staff has to be as cheap as possible; if part of its activity can be outsourced to state institutions - paid by the taxpayer - this has to be organised. But who is then the decision-maker defining the goals of research, defining what the task should be good for?

The overall goal of a capitalist firm simply is the highest possible profit in the shortest time³, maximum revenue minus minimal cost. This envisaged amount of money, profit, is independent of what the involved activities - including research - actually are doing as long as they conform to the overall money maximisation goal.

Of course, the revenue side of money-making is always a problem. It depends on what Keynes called *effective demand*⁴: It is *not* the need of a human individual that is the sole determinant of what occurs as demand on markets. The human individual has to possess money to become an element of effective demand! At this point, the central political innovation of *finance* capitalism in the 20th century comes into play: the *production* of demand through financial instruments. Banks produce *credit*, which allows ordinary physical demand, which would otherwise lack a possession-indicating dimension, to become effective demand. This process can be installed either in a direct way, consumer credit, or via government credit, building up

³ This is why capitalism implies a continuous push on speed. The faster profit is available for a new investment, the stronger the growth - the accumulation - of capital.

⁴ This concept is the core of Keynes' famous book (Keynes, 1936).

government debt⁵. In the latter case, the government can use *social transfers* to transform the short-run profits of firms - manifested as 'capital market' - into the long-run stability of society by enabling consumption of the working class. This was the original idea of Keynes. Of course, the state as a demand producer can also channel its resources towards the - national and international - exploiting classes. It can be more convenient for firm owners to use 'their' government to make their customers pay via higher value-added tax. As a special case, government expenditure can be a monopsonistic action of a state leading a war, or pretending to prepare for a war⁶. Supply and demand for credit is shaping the trajectory of the interest rate structure on global capital markets⁷. The big players in capital markets not only include wealthy corporations and funds, e.g. large pension funds, but also government agencies.

For the considered layer of scientists working on a sub-task, all these pre-decided events usually remain in the dark. They may work on a software package for fast, high-resolution pattern recognition that requires specialised mathematical skills, yet they will never know the final product they contributed to was a fighter jet used by feudal states in battles in the Middle East. The highly intelligent workforce with its expensive academic abilities is caught and arrested in a cage of blind devotion to the abstract work it has been assigned to.

These are the many **rabbit holes** which exist and which are intentionally built to neutralise the potential progressive force that academically educated students could form if they learn what their activities in the end will be used for. Force them into their jobs in time and make sure that they do not ask twice what their work is contributing to. It pays their rent and makes good money for an invisible boss - and that's it. Once you are inside the rabbit hole, you are invisible - but content.

Rabbit holes are not confined to be reserved for mathematicians and engineers, though these occupations are particularly suited for subject-specific narrow-mindedness. Their higher level of necessary focusing makes it easier for persons to find self-satisfaction in restricting their attention to their job. For other occupations, the two standard explanations for 'job satisfaction' - often a synonym for the absence of political ambitions - have to be sufficient: (1) Salaries for research managers are higher than salaries for researchers, (2) The higher position in the internal power structure provides prestige and increased self-esteem. So, if you are only a researcher, try to become a research manager; your career path is already set. At the peak of your intellectual career, you might be the founder of a school of economic

⁵ For details compare (Hanappi, 2013).

⁶ In this case, it will be the - national and international - weapons industries, which will boost their revenues.

⁷ A careful reading of volume 3 of Capital (Marx, 1894) published by Friedrich Engels after Marx' death, shows that he thought that the capital market is the only market where the price, the interest rate, is determined by supply and demand, and not by the relative exploitative power relation. Today, authoritarian political entrepreneurs can drag these equilibrating tendencies evidently also quickly in the abyss of global financial crisis.

or sociological thought, or the master of a new kind of generally accepted professional jargon⁸. In any case, as long as you don't leave your career path, you have remained harmless to the exploiting class. Evidently, a career path does not really exist for the majority of researchers. At best, they can survive in a lifelong waiting position⁹.

Seen from this perspective, the provision of 'rabbit holes' is a strategy of ruling classes to sterilise potential intellectual unrest. The Rabbit-Hole-Strategy is an attempt for a nation-wide streamlining of an important component of class rule, in particular in war-times the availability of technical intelligence is of utmost importance¹⁰. With the advent of Artificial Intelligence applications, parts of these jobs might be replaced by automated systems - though at the moment most human work still seems to be cheaper¹¹. The problem-solving strategy in smaller firms is rather to get rid of old and expensive employees and to replace them with fewer, less educated young ones. Therefore, the source of turbulence in labour markets might originate in supply shocks of less educated young workers with migration backgrounds, paralleled by a marked increase in pension payments for Europe's retired population.

In the long run, 'rabbit holes' thus will turn out to be *only a transitory phenomenon*. Increased labour productivity should result in shorter weekly working hours and a longer education stage for young people. The question of finance for all parts of the population will need a revolution in global distribution anyway. For the growing share of older people, who return from their rabbit holes to their private lives as retirees, this implies that they can actively contribute to the deep epistemological break that the environmental crisis¹² will enforce, compare (Hanappi, 2026).

This flows into a final concluding idea: The lifetimes freed by technological advances during and after the capitalist mode of production are appearing as politically particularly fruitful possibilities¹³ for the somewhat older generation that has retired from the active work process. They might organise as what has been named the 'class of organic intellectuals' by Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci, 1930). This global class of organic intellectuals has been proposed as the link between theoretical insight

⁸ The jargon of business consultants is not science: 'The pretence of doing science—without its clarity, rigor, or epistemic ambition—does more damage than openly acknowledging one is not attempting science in the first place.' (Solberg Solberg Söilen, 2025, p.31).

⁹ An early accurate description of this state of affairs in French academic life was provided by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1988).

¹⁰ Particularly frightening cases are the physicists Pascual Jordan and Lenard & Stark (two Nobel Laureates), who early on openly supported Hitler's fascist regime, compare (Dahn, 2019).

¹¹ In (Bonin et al, 2026) the employment effect of the introduction of AI in Denmark seems to be concerning mainly employees with tertiary education, who are better paid. It is estimated to be about 11% and is mainly achieved by not hiring new staff, when employees retire.

¹² Empirical work shows: The more unequal the distribution, the deeper is the environmental crises, (Taioka, 2026). A fundamental break in the mode of perception will be unavoidable.

¹³ This evolutionary jump in perception linked to a closer interdependence between environment and adapting population is investigated in (Smallegange, 2026).

and the actual social subject, which can bring about revolutions¹⁴. The flowers might blossom out of former rabbit holes.

¹⁴ Compare (Hanappi, 2020).

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