Twitter Thread by Mencius Moldbugman



Mencius Moldbugman
@moldbugman



There is a recent new word in Chinese that I think deserves introducing into the Western neoreactionary canon.

The word is ■■ (nei-juan) which has been translated as "involution". Originally a Chinese phenomenon it increasingly applies anywhere there is modernity.

To capture the essence of what "involution" means it helps to picture a spiral in your mind. Our modern narrative says that as we progress technologically we should progress OUT of the spiral and have more free time to be capable of ever more amazing things...

But what if the progression of technology and society actually sends us WITHIN the spiral in an infinite number of ever-decreasing circles? What if we are walking DOWN the spiral staircase of progress rather than UP?

"Involution" in its original meaning has been used to describe agrarian societies and how their development actually leads to self-perpetuating processes that prevent change and progress rather than encourage it.

Increased food production has limited many civilisations and sent them into stagnancy rather than allowed them to grow. This stagnancy can continue for millennia in safe environments till threatened, other times it drives the civilisation into extinction from external threats.

The classic example was anthropologist Clifford Geertz's book "Agricultural Involution". Its thesis was that many centuries of intensifying rice cultivation in Indonesia had produced greater social complexity without significant technological or political change.

The book addresses the misconception that as agricultural societies become more sophisticated (better tech, better tools, more knowledge and more farmers) their food output would be expected to be greater too. More tech, more workers, more rice = growth! But it doesn't!

In the study Geertz did on Indonesia he noted that only small increases in output occured - just enough to cover what the additional workforce consumed. Each additional worker consumed the extra amount they produced. Hence, centuries of stagnation.

If you place this phenomenon back into the Chinese context it is easy to vision how China's early successes led it to miss out on the industrial revolution and experience centuries of technological stagnation. More rice = more bureaucrats = more bureaucracy = less innovation.

As a civilisation grows it requires bureaucrats to keep the more complex machine governed, but the additional bureaucrats consume food gains and require taxes to fund them. The bureaucracy inevitably grows and we now enter the world of diminishing returns - that slayer of Empires

Let's return to our present age. Is technology really freeing up your time or instead making you its prisoner? Retro-futurism promised flying cars and robot maids that would give us lives of leisure, but instead we are working more than any generation before us.

Our lives are more competitive than ever. Just to stay still we have to do more. Kids are forced through school, extracurricular activities, volunteer work, etc - just to get a good school place... that will later saddle them with debt and spit them out into a job-scarce economy.

The two drivers of involution are competition and technology. Market competition forces us to work more and more for diminishing returns in saturated markets putting in extra hours for less money. Company profits go to hiring non-revenue producers who require you to work more.

Start-ups begin lean with teams of productive workers and generate huge profits but are then destroyed when they are forced to bring in HR managers, accountants, management consultants, lawyers and other leeches. Your country is the same. Especially if you live in the USA.

Products are never completed or are in endless development because the committees involved can never agree or they bring in endless and needless changes to justify their existence. This is why perfectly functional apps and websites "improve" yet become basically unusable.

(This would be a good time to re-introduce my theory of "techno-crapitalism" which is closely connected to, and a result of, involution.)

https://t.co/g5ykb1fjq2

> Starting to formulate a theory that I\u2019m tentatively terming \u201cTechno-Crapitalism\u201d: the tyranny of half-broken technology dictating your lives for capitalist gains; immiserating the consumer-user in the process.
>
> — Mencius Moldbugman (@moldbugman) October 4, 2020

Technology is the other driver of involution. Advances in technology are hindering us and making us less productive rather than the opposite. This is done to save money which is then redirected to the ever-growing leech class.

Think back to a decade or two ago. If you wanted to book a flight a travel agent did it for you. Raise an IT issue? You asked the IT guys. Airport check-in? You didn't have to do anything but queue... Scanning supermarket items?

Now you are expected to do it all yourself.

Technology didn't free you. It added more complexity to your life so now you have to operate the self-service machine at the supermarket yourself and print off your own luggage tags at check-in. In so many small ways you were forced to take on more tasks.

For me, the easiest & clearest example of technological involution can be seen when trying to access your bank account. At one time you just needed a name and a PIN number. Then you needed a password. Then another. Then 2-factor authentication. Then a digital token. It won't end.

All of this achieves nothing - worse, it transforms people into soulless bugmen who cannot escape the downward spiral they are trapped in. All they can do is grind, consume, and build nothing. This is the third leg in the tripod of involution: Samsafication.

I named Samsafication after Gregor Samsa in Kafka's The Metamorphosis who wakes up one day to find himself changed into a monstrous vermin. Involution creates a society of barely functioning techno-crapitalism which in turn Samsafies its citizens into empty autistic bugmen.

Involution is also a philosophic term cited by Deleuze. It's a process of turning in upon oneself. Our innovations are now inward, not outward. Narcissism-enabling video apps rather than space ships. We are the mirror of the feminine rather than the shield/spear of the masculine.

To conclude, let us return to the spiral analogy. In seashells there are 2 types of shell: those that elongate and spiral outwards and those that twist inwards creating complex structures that ultimately lead nowhere. Take a look at your country or company. Which do you live in?

Real progress cannot happen in such conditions. Nobody is looking up, we're just afraid of falling down. We are paralysed by a fear of losing what we already have.

Destruction precedes rebirth. It's the only way to exit the endless spiral of imprisoning algorithms that await us.

PS - read Uzumaki by Junji Ito.