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Elon Musk Isn't Our Savior – Member Feature Stories – Medium

Exiled Consensus

14-17 minutes

If only the worship of Elon Musk were an energy source. If it were, we would have finally addressed our fast approaching energy deficits, albeit with an extremely toxic fuel. Hyperbolic tales of genius, ingenuity, and exploit run right through the American landscape like public transportation never did. As Kurt Andersen writes in *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire: A 500-Year History*, "Mix epic individualism with extreme religion; mix show business with everything else; let all that steep and simmer for a few centuries; run it through the anything-goes 1960s and the Internet age; the result is the America we inhabit today, where reality and fantasy are weirdly and dangerously blurred and commingled." The deification of Musk is a testament to the efficacy of propaganda agencies—or, more politely, public relations.

A large part of Musk's storytelling is centered around Tesla Motors, and the company's mission to "accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy." To evaluate whether the company is true to this goal requires dissecting Musk's claims, superficial metrics like vehicle count, the economic system within which the company operates, and the support provided

by public relations to obfuscate elementary facts. A potent cocktail of fabricated dreams, tailored business metrics, auxiliary projects, and Muskian Technobabble is the adrenaline that drives this exploit. Tragically, that same cocktail is fatal to the efforts required to actually achieve the world's transition to sustainable energy.

Engineering the Future

The confluence of electric vehicle manufacturing, solar roofs (a 30-year-old concept), vacuum trains (a century-old concept), and underground tunnels that increase traversable vehicle space can spin a warm cocoon of assurance. It can also spin hurricanes of excitement over indiscriminately used technical capabilities. As an example, let us consider vehicle manufacturing.

Despite operating a gargantuan cash-incinerating machine, Tesla Motors has enjoyed remarkable investor support in the public markets. Broadly, this support is based on an expectation of utter market dominance by Tesla in the electric vehicle age. Tesla is required to scale its manufacturing operations to cover various automobile segments. As Musk described in his July 2016 revamped company mission statement, "Today, Tesla addresses two relatively small segments of premium sedans and SUVs. With the Model 3, a future compact SUV and a new kind of pickup truck, we plan to address most of the consumer market."

I have already covered the fallacy of targeting systemic problems with only superficial technology solutions. Tesla's vehicle manufacturing operations stem directly from Musk's decisions—from the design cues and functionality of vehicles

to production targets. Hence, these core operations must be evaluated through Musk's estimates and executive decisions on auto manufacturing. Unfortunately, his record here is extremely bleak, and actually detracts from the goal of "accelerating the world's transition to sustainable energy."

For instance, unnecessarily powerful powertrains that put out blistering zero-to-60 mph times do not advance the efficient use of energy. The overly complicated falcon-wing doors on the Model X only increase design, manufacturing, and service energy and resource consumption, making production processes unnecessarily complex and inefficient. Skipping beta production only ensures poor quality and higher parts turnover, resulting in inefficiencies during the lifetime of the vehicle. Finally, the second Roadster's contribution to sustainable transport is enigmatic at best, fraudulent at worst.

Musk's tech-savior propaganda complex prohibits even the consideration of such bothersome facts. Indeed, even questioning his logic earns you an accusation of "doing the work of the devil." An egocentric project disguised as a noble cause, Tesla Motors peddles a vision of green highways carpeting the country, as if the vehicles themselves somehow generate pristine ecologies, occluding the effects of rogue and unchecked industrial metastasis on the environment.

As Upton Sinclair put it, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it." Strictly tied to market capitalization and revenue goals only, Musk's compensation assures rank disregard for ecological sustainability, waste management, and the restrained tactical deployment of resources needed to develop well-built vehicles.

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Instead, Musk maniacally charges toward token production targets, leaving a trail of waste and destruction in his wake, as Tesla factories continue to defy industry standards for scrap and rework rates. Each supposedly green vehicle is produced at a high environmental cost, not including the lifetime cost of constant service and repairs that must be subsequently conducted on low-quality vehicles. Combine this with a wealth-extractive subsidy structure for Tesla vehicles that siphons funds from the taxpayer to the corporation's already concentrated wealth, and you have few better examples of capitalism than Tesla Motors.

While incompetently managing factory operations, Musk has often graced the world with vacuous "insights" that are regurgitated in the media as examples of leadership. The exaltation of this fallible flesh and bone often involves frivolous advice on how to recreate Musk's success, or how to apply his leadership techniques in one's own life. Routinely missing from such breathless self-help pieces are suggestions to undermine the free speech of one's critics, ruthlessly exploit labor with the obligatory "must-do-so-to-survive" excuse, ridiculously ideate a privately run, fanboy-populated website to scrutinize journalism, and publicly muse about taking a public company private without any connection to reality when the scrutiny-scope is turned on you.

Super Brain Genius

It may help to peer into Musk's mind to follow his actions.

Alas, grasping the sheer brilliance of a once-in-a-generation mind is not a task for lesser men and women. Perhaps it is best to allow such a mind to express its own genius. Below are a few examples.

My Robots Must Move Like The Flash

When discussing CapEx (capital expenditure) and manufacturing speed during the Q3 2017 conference call, Musk solemnly opined, "If you can see the robot move, it's too slow. We should be caring about air friction, like things moving so fast. You should need a strobe light to see it. Um, and, that's incredibly critical to CapEx efficiency."

To be concerned with the impact of air friction on the movement of manufacturing robots is asinine. To think a strobe light would be required to see them is DC Comics-level thinking. Not for mere mortals.

The Science of Decisions

Another nugget of genius was fried during his recent email conversations with the *Wall Street Journal*:

> Mr. Musk said his actions and rapid decision-making can be misunderstood as erratic behavior. "It is better to make many decisions per unit time with a slightly higher error rate, than few with a slightly lower error rate," he said last weekend in a series of emails with *The Wall Street Journal,* "because obviously one of your future right decisions can be to reverse an earlier wrong one, provided the earlier one was not catastrophic, which they rarely are."

Because of course, catastrophes reveal themselves right away for your convenience. The unfortunate part is that "insights" such as these are plastered on T-shirts, regurgitated in tech conferences, and posted via LinkedIn memes as examples of otherworldly cognitive capabilities. Absolutely nothing is being said here.

Musk Gets Political

Then there was the time when Musk called himself a socialist: "By the way, I am actually a socialist. Just not the kind that shifts resources from most productive to least productive, pretending to do good, while actually causing harm. True socialism seeks greatest good for all."

This statement does not even rise to the level of being wrong. It has the dubious honor of being not-even-wrong. Meanwhile, the NLRB has accused Musk of coercing Tesla workers against forming a union, and he has openly implied that there would be consequences to doing so.

Manufacturing Hell

In the middle of the aforementioned self-inflicted going-private turmoil, Musk decided to shirk responsibility by giving a tearful interview to the *New York Times*. (Side note: Always concerned with disseminating accurate and important information, Musk has clarified that there were no tears.) Musk details spending nights at the Tesla factory and almost missing his brother's wedding, after which he went straight back to the deepest pits of manufacturing hell—a claim disproven by another piece in the *Times*, published twelve days later: "while

Mr. Musk is clearly working hard, his recounting paints an incomplete picture of his travels. He was away for five days during his trip to Spain, and on the way back, he stopped with his children in Belfast, Northern Ireland, to tour the 'Game of Thrones' set."

One would think geniuses have sharper memories.

Speaking of exhausting work, a recent Reveal report showed how Tesla left worker injuries off the books and created a hazardous environment by removing the yellow hazard signs and loud forklift beeps that are commonly used as safety measures in factories. Such precautions were removed because Musk disliked them, because of reasons. The report details various chronic worker injuries.

Yet the lively discussions generated by Musk's emotional *New York Times* interview depicting the 54th wealthiest person in the world putting in long hours without bodily harm easily eclipsed discussions about worker injuries — this during a time when more Americans are working multiple jobs simply to make ends meet.

Better Ways: Getting Serious About Sustainability

A cult of personality does not serve well when a society is confronted with the immense problems of climate breakdown and ecological disaster. Consumer virtue-signaling — as exhibited by the wealthy Musk superfans who needlessly hoard one of each type of car the company builds — only boosts the problem of renegade resource and energy consumption to meet arbitrary production numbers. In addition, space-age storytelling reduces the challenge of

developing a sustainable economy to an act of posting record-breaking zero-to-60 mph times, an antithesis of economical energy use.

Electric propulsion certainly needs to be a key piece of our transportation system. In 2014, Stanford University Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering Mark Jacobson and his team developed and released a 50-state strategy to move the U.S. to renewable energy. One of the key areas that the report examines is the reduction or elimination of extraneous uses that can be substituted with other systems. These substitutions must be developed by resourceful, tactical, calculative, and often tedious urban planning and energy management techniques.

It is not sexy. It is not supposed to be. In December 2017, public transit consultant Jarrett Walker eviscerated Musk's rush to continuously increase space for cars by digging tunnels and his aversion to public transit, which must form the core of urban mobility.

Unfortunately, ideologies surrounding tech-saviors detract from committing funds and resources to true solutions. These myths instead end up generating consensus for allowing Musk to develop his own Legoland in any area he pleases.

When consensus is absent, sending employees to sell the idea seems to be a new tactic, as evidenced by the astroturfing that recently took place during a public town hall in LA to discuss the merits and demerits of Musk's proposed tunnel, which would deal only with game-day traffic to and from Dodger Stadium. As one attendee described, "I thought it sounded kind of silly before, but now I'm convinced it's

ridiculous. The desperate attempts to show how it's going to help people in Los Angeles are kind of transparent. It has such a narrow scope and use."

Musk wants to hammer nails only by making more nails.

Trivializing public transportation while hawking cars is not a new or even an unpredictable mental gymnastics maneuver. For context, the number of cars worldwide is set to double by 2040. In this sense, Musk wants to hammer nails only by making more nails.

In addition to discussing the importance of wielding our technical capabilities responsibly and communally, I have also covered the need to include workers in decision-making through cooperatives, instead of concentrating all control in the paws of a tiger without his stripes. In addition, scheduling regular factory councils, guaranteeing engineering/worker representation on the board, and pulling improvement from workers rather than pushing it from the top (as Toyota has committed to doing), are all approaches that would produce a better company and more equitable decision-making.

However, such approaches would draw attention away from the unstriped tiger, puncturing the myth of his genius and seemingly solo accomplishments—an unacceptable outcome for the cat in charge. Perhaps Musk is one of the "responsible men" that James Madison referenced during the Constitutional Debates of 1787, or the "intelligent minority" that PR pioneer Edward Bernays praised in his book *Propaganda*, first published in 1928.

Abstracted out from this worship of the tech-savior are the collective efforts of the engineers, planners, technicians,

software developers, supply chain managers, and countless other individuals who turn raw material into finished product, often despite unstriped tigers, not because of them. It is only when our obsession with mythical figures ends, and we begin to apply ourselves to much bigger predicaments than Musk vs. Jobs, that we will be able to approach and implement the sustainable, technically sound solutions that are required to continue organized existence on the planet.

Responding to questions about his decision to declutter his factory after fanatically stuffing it with a horde of unnecessary robots, Musk offered another insight from his perceptive calculus: “Humans are underrated.” It would seem that some among us do not hold that distinction. Some are wildly overrated.