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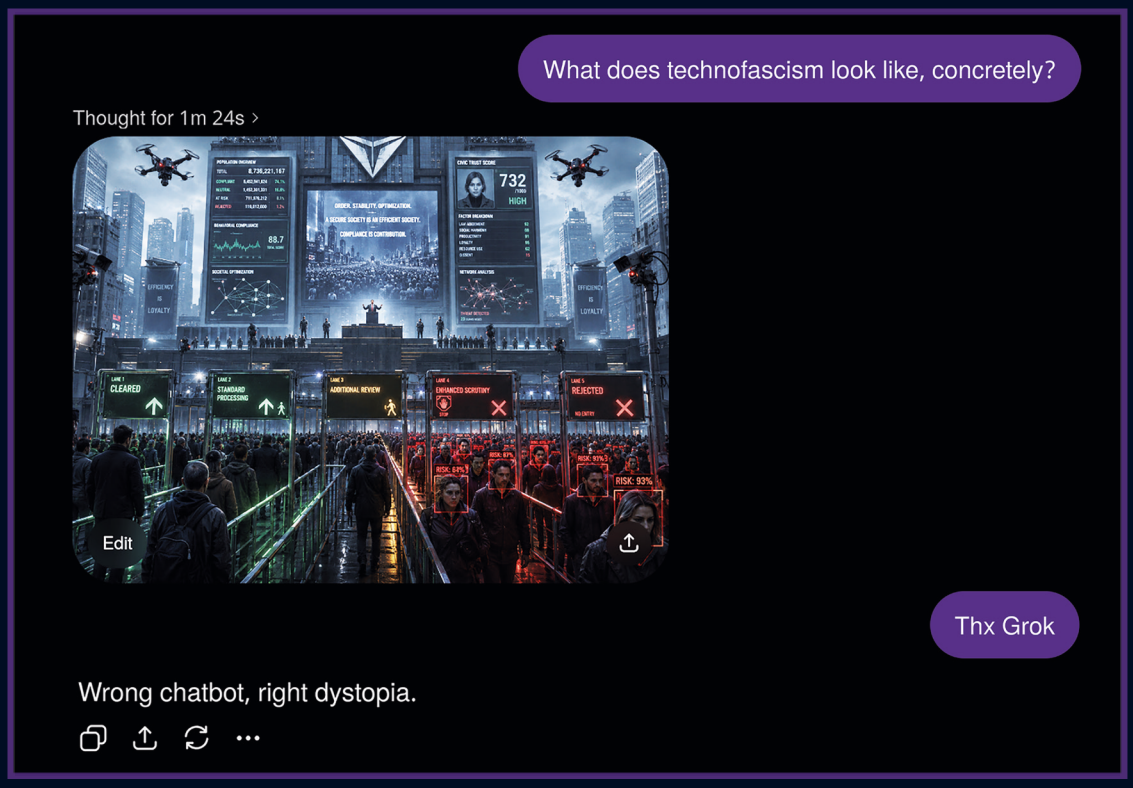
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NAVIGATIONEN

Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturwissenschaften

Laura Hille / Felix Hüttemann / Milan Stürmer (Hrsg.)

TECHNOFASCISM



Hille / Hüttemann / Stürmer: Welcome to Technofascism ➤ University against Fascism: Tech Fascism and the University ➤ Maschewski / Nosthoff / Puzio: Make Merit Great Again ➤ Munn: Approaching Technofascism ➤ Crandall: Tech Fascism and Antifascist Abundance ➤ van der Klaauw / Kopaitich: The Fascism Farce ➤ Robles: Technofascism North and South ➤ Burton: First Principles and Algorithmic Reason in Technofascism ➤ Niebling: States of Glass ➤ Hille / Leeker / Turner: Twenty Years after "From Counterculture to Cyberculture" ➤ Mämecke: Workshop Report

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WELCOME TO TECHNOFASCISM

LAURA HILLE, FELIX HÜTTEMANN
AND MILAN STÜRMER

"But what is this bizarre totalitarian
machine that traverses time and space?
Some prop in a science-fiction story?"

– Félix Guattari, Everybody Wants to Be a Fascist (2008)

More than a decade ago, when we began discussing many of the questions gathered in this volume, the terrain still felt arcane. The three of us met for the first time in seminar rooms and reading groups dedicated to media theory, the histories of cybernetics, and critiques of digital capitalism. We read Nick Land and other Dark Enlightenment figures, traced the strange afterlives of the CCRU, and asked where, exactly, things had gone wrong. What had once presented itself as cybernetic experimentation, accelerationist provocation, or anarcho-libertarian anti-statism seemed to us already shot with darker impulses: hierarchy, eliminationism, fantasies of sovereign exit, contempt for democracy, and an attraction to domination dressed up as intelligence. At the time, however, such discussions still carried the air of specialist knowledge. To us, they seemed like excursions into an intellectual underworld: curious, perhaps revealing, certainly dangerous, but still too marginal to matter to the real centres of political power.

That distance has since collapsed. Over the last decade, the utopian tech imaginaries of the 1990s have vanished. The emancipatory rhetoric of openness, disruption, innovation, and democratisation now sits uneasily beside a much more visible political formation: authoritarian posturing, anti-egalitarian elitism, masculinist myths of merit, fantasies of civilisational collapse and planetary escape, and open contempt for institutions that still bear the marks of democratic process. What we once tried to piece together from obscure blogs, subcultural lineages, and other grey literature now circulates in podcasts, policy proposals, investor rhetoric, and broadsheet journalism. Tracing reactionary networks in and around the tech world no longer reads like the pastime of the paranoid. It has become part of the ordinary labour of contemporary criticism.

There is, for us as editors, a jarring double affect in this shift. On the one hand, there is the shock of recognition: we were discussing some version of this ten or fifteen years ago. On the other hand, there is the uneasy awareness that this is not simply a matter of wider publics finally catching up with insights first produced in specialist academic settings. It would be too flattering to describe the present moment as a delayed diffusion of critique into the wider public sphere. Something more troubling has happened. The object itself has changed. The reactionary right is emboldened. Influential figures in and around the tech world speak more explic-

itly than before. The problem is not that all the codes have vanished, but that much of what once required decoding is now proclaimed openly. We are learning, once again, that exposure alone is a weak political remedy. Sunlight is no disinfectant when the structures in question are thriving in broad daylight.

This altered situation leaves criticism in an uncertain position. If the seminar room once took some pride in perceiving what had not yet become publicly legible, that self-understanding can no longer suffice. The task is not simply to unmask hidden tendencies, nor to congratulate ourselves for having noticed them early. It is to ask what concepts are adequate to a present in which digital infrastructures, platform monopolies, venture capital, cyberlibertarian ideology, masculinist cultures, and authoritarian political projects increasingly reinforce one another. We need to recognize that the relation between critical thought and its object has become less comfortable than before. If these tendencies now occupy not only obscure corners of the internet but the front pages of newspapers, the agendas of states, and the infrastructures of everyday life, then the question is no longer only how to decipher them. It is also how to historicize them, how to distinguish them from adjacent formations, how to grasp their appeal, and how to think critically in a moment in which they appear, in significant ways, to be winning. It is in this context that we propose to investigate the term technofascism. By speaking of technofascism, we mean to name a constellation: one in which technical systems and technological imaginaries are mobilized in the service of hierarchy, exclusion, executive power, and anti-democratic forms of order. One in which domination presents itself as optimisation, and political violence borrows the language of efficiency, intelligence, and necessity.

The term 'technofascism' has been around for a while, most notably in the discourse around political ecology. Following Ivan Illich (1973) in the observation that politics in the name of ecology does not necessitate an egalitarian ethos, André Gorz warns that instead of favouring the "development and autonomy of communities and individuals", an ecological politics could also mean a world "centrally determined and planned by ecological engineers, and the programmed production of an 'optimal' environment will be entrusted to centralized institutions and hard technology." Gorz continues: "[T]his is the technofascist option [...]. The choice is simple: 'conviviality or technofascism'" (Gorz 1980, 17). Perhaps because it lacked both clear boundaries and a proper historisation, the concept, however, did not catch on, with terms like Lewis Mumford's (1967) "megamachine" being a more ready-to-hand concept for theorists of technology, and Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) providing the clichéd metaphors for a totalitarian Big Brother in popular discourse. Still, the engineering fantasies of hard technology that, for Gorz, form the "path along which we are already halfway engaged" (Gorz 1980, 17), recur in the most notable recent treatment of the term as a historically precise phenomenon. In *Planning for Empire,* Janis Mimura (2011) outlines the technofascist core of the Japanese wartime state.

> Like other Japanese fascist visions and programs advanced by radical young officers and right-wing activists, techno-fascism embraced narrow, authoritarian rule; a form of state-directed economy; and an ethnic chauvinist, community-centered ideology that was used to justify war and imperialist expansion. In contrast to other fascist visions and programs, however, techno-fascism appealed to professionals on the left and right. It deflected sensitive distributional issues about winners versus losers, costs versus benefits, and ends versus means by promising increased productivity, efficiency, and co-prosperity through superior technology, organization, and national spirit. (Mimura 2011, 4)

This technofascism is a fascism of the technocrats, which "[c]onceptually [...] represented an authoritarian form of rationalization that sought to achieve freedom through control, innovation through organisation, autonomy via community, and status via hierarchy" (Mimura 2011, 196), a "techno-fascist vision [that] was oriented primarily toward progressive, middle class, urban professionals" (Mimura 2011, 107). Remaining unrealised, its ambitions transitioned into a "postwar managerialism" (Mimura 2011, 197). More recently, Dirk Matten (2026) has shown how deeply fascist ideas are shaping contemporary management philosophy. In both Gorz and Mimura, technofascism appears first of all as a fantasy of rule from above. Technofascism names a politics of command: the engineer, the planner, the state, the institution, the hierarchy, or the organized whole.

Félix Guattari's famously provocative "Everybody Wants to Be a Fascist" cuts across this vertical image and shifts the analysis from fascism as a state to fascism as a mode of subjectivation. Fascism exists in everyday desires, habits, institutions, and forms of subjectivity. His thesis is that people desire the very systems that dominate or repress them. Guattari calls this "microfascisms", which means authoritarian tendencies embedded in daily life. These appear in families, schools, workplaces, and political organizations. The key claim is that fascism operates not only politically 'from above,' but affectively and socially 'from below.' Against the idea that power simply represses people from the outside, Guattari argues that desire itself becomes attached to oppressive systems. Guattari's concept is strictly tied to desire: fascism is not just understandable as an ideology but as a libidinal investment in things like domination and authority. In that respect, "microfascism" refers to small-scale authoritarian desires and behaviors embedded in everyday life rather than only in state regimes. The danger of authoritarianism is not only 'the fascist State', but 'the fascism in us all'. This does not replace Mimura's historical account with a psychological one. If technofascism can persist as managerialism, then its continuity must be sought not only in institutions, but also in the everyday desires and practices through which subjects come to experience domination. In that regard microfascism names the diffusion of authoritarian desire into everyday subjectivity and social relations, where domination is reproduced in small practices just as much as it can appear as a full political regime. When this machine of desire is ultimately trained on meme culture and social media, a microfascist turn of the algorithmic in

contemporary media discourses and platforms cannot be dismissed. This turn emerges and operates on a technical-ontological and psychological level, while also making technofascist enunciations perceptible in everyday media use. Technofascism, in this sense, names the machinic production of subjects who experience optimization, ranking, automation, and command as forms of freedom.

But if technofascism is machinic in this Guattarian sense, then its history cannot be told only as a history of texts and theorists. As Robert Paxton has influentially argued, fascism was always "an affair of the gut more than of the brain, and a study of the roots of fascism that treats only the thinkers and the writers misses the most powerful impulses of all" (2004, 42). In this respect, the present issue decenters one of the most tempting origin stories of the present: the passage from the CCRU to Nick Land, from accelerationist theory to the Dark Enlightenment, from obscure blogs to the politics of Silicon Valley. The temptation of this story is obvious, not least for those of us who first encountered the tech right through precisely these subcultural and theoretical archives. Yet, the present cannot be explained as the conspiratorial triumph of an obscure philosophical sect. "Thinkers" like Land and Yarvin matter less as sovereign authors than as indices of a wider transformation: the moment when reactionary fantasies became materially attached to platforms, universities, states, and infrastructures.

Instead of asking, yet again, how the 1990s utopian impulse could have been so easily corrupted, or dignifying the works of middling writers with a minor cult following by elevating them to the status of geopolitical masterminds, the contributions collected in this issue have a different urgency. They focus on what social, infrastructural, economic, institutional, racial, colonial, epistemological, and libidinal conditions make their reactionary ideas operational today.

This new urgency is not unique to the essays collected here. It belongs to a broader reorientation in work on technology and the contemporary right. Recent scholarship has shifted from unearthing obscure lineages to tracing the concrete operations of power through which reactionary politics organize the present: misogyny and anti-feminism (Manne 2018), anti-trans and anti-gender mobilization (Amery and Mondon 2025; Kaul 2021; Kuhar and Paternotte 2018; McLean 2021), racial capitalism and colonial extraction (Gray 2023; Madianou 2024; Mejias and Couldry 2024), eugenic fantasies of intelligence (Chan 2025; Gebru and Torres 2024; Slobodian 2025), disability and body politics (Herzog 2025) and optimization (Sandifer 2017), attacks on democracy (Massanari 2024; Schaake 2024), technolibertarianism (Armistead 2016), and technofeudalism (Durand 2024).

The analysis of misogyny offers one clear example of this broader shift to operational mechanisms. In *Down Girl*, Kate Manne treats the logic of misogyny as a "law enforcement branch" of patriarchy. Whereas sexism provides the ideological justification for gender hierarchy, misogyny punishes women who violate patriarchal expectations. Manne shows that many contemporary authoritarian digital cultures do not necessarily depend on explicit doctrinal sexism. Instead, they function through networked harassment and coordinated punishment directed at women,

queer people, or minorities who are perceived as threats to established hierarchies. In technofascist environments, misogyny becomes decentralized and automated through recommendation systems and swarm harassment. Manne's account of patriarchal entitlement helps explain why misogynistic grievance is frequently central to far-right digital movements: From incel forums and reactionary influencer ecosystems to platform-based harassment campaigns, technofascist cultures thrive when they mobilize resentment, humiliation, and entitlement. Technofascism today relies on participatory enforcement where users reproduce authoritarian norms through memes, dogpiling, and gaming the attention economies rather than solely through state coercion. The ideological affinities between contemporary technofascist imaginaries and earlier formations of digital nerd culture can provide cultural and affective blueprints for understanding segments of Silicon Valley's emerging political elite. Tech culture repeatedly celebrates figures who present themselves as misunderstood outsiders while simultaneously accumulating immense economic and political power. Adrian Daub (2020, 2026) has argued in his analysis of Silicon Valley's political rationalities that the peculiar worldview of Silicon Valley billionaires and reactionary tech elites produces actors whose social awkwardness is retrospectively reframed as evidence of visionary genius and therefore exempted from ordinary norms of accountability, which can ultimately be traced back to a reactionary and misogynistic worldview (Daub 2026, 138). The social tendency to excuse or rationalise male entitlement when it is associated with status, brilliance, or perceived exceptionality becomes particularly visible when considering the figure of the 'creep' (Daub 2026). Daub argues that the "creep" functions as a cultural archetype through which Silicon Valley constructs 'gifted' men as misunderstood outsiders and legitimises their social marginality by reframing social discomfort as a marker of visionary potential. The creep thus functions as the anthropological counterpart to Silicon Valley's vision of governance, in which authority emerges not despite uncertainty but through it. The creep is not simply a sexist subject but a subject whose insecurity itself becomes politically productive. Following Manne's analysis of misogyny as a system of enforcing patriarchal norms (Daub 2026, 140), Daub shows how a similar logic operates in tech culture, where antisocial or domineering behaviour is re-coded as evidence of visionary leadership.

Misogyny and male entitlement, then, are exemplary mechanisms through which technofascist politics becomes operative today through technologically mediated participatory mechanisms of affective and cultural enforcement. A different strand of research looks at how hierarchies become institutionalised through the implementation of machine learning technologies throughout the sociotechnical infrastructure. Although written before the widespread diffusion of LLMs, Dan McQuillan's *Resisting AI: An Anti-fascist Approach to Artificial Intelligence* is an exemplary case of the new urgency to identify the mechanisms through which technofascism manifests. McQuillan shows that, far from being simply a question of bias or the perpetuation of historically produced inequalities, AI gives a technical form to a politics of making populations legible as more or less deserving. Tracing how

AI's logic turns classification into judgement, which is then presented as neutral administration, he highlights how the current deployments of AI are continuous with a long history of bureaucratized fascism, and even, we might add, Mimura's more precise account of technofascism. Similar arguments uncovering the discriminatory logics of contemporary data practices are a cornerstone of the critical literature of the last decade in general (Benjamin 2019; Chun 2021; Eubanks 2018; Noble 2018; O'Neil 2016; Zajko 2021). Yet, McQuillan's most intriguing point, perhaps, is his gesturing towards the fact that the "social contradictions that are amplified by AI [...] are the social contradictions that fascism will claim to solve" (McQuillan 2022, 99; Stürmer and Carrigan 2023). The idea that technofascism can also be understood as a (technologically mediated) response to the contradictions of our contemporary technological condition recurs throughout the literature and the texts in this issue (e.g., Munn; van der Klaauw and Kopaitich). The relation between 'techno-' and 'fascism' is historically mediated and not just an identifiable characteristic of the technology itself.

The wager of this issue is therefore not that technofascism names a clear object to be identified, but that it names a contested field. The term is useful precisely because it can hold together critical analyses of infrastructures, epistemologies, affects, political economy, race and gender hierarchy, colonial extraction, and attacks on democratic institutions without flattening their differences. The contributions gathered here do not apply a shared definition of technofascism, but rather test the concept's usefulness, limits, and political stakes in a time in which authoritarian desires, social contradictions, and technical systems are mutually reinforcing.

We begin this issue at one of the sites where these questions are currently both analysed and lived: the university itself. In a climate where universities are attacked as 'woke' institutions, the collective working group **University Against Fascism** advances a case for an explicitly anti-fascist media studies. Media studies is understood as a field dedicated to analysing and fostering anti-fascist practices, especially given the increasingly central role of digital media in facilitating and shaping processes of fascistization. The university is a crucial site in ongoing struggles over the preservation of democratic institutions and values. Investigating the role of the university in contemporary processes of fascistization, the working group examines discourses of cyberlibertarianism and situates them in relation to the influence of technological elites and their contribution to the erosion of democratic structures. Ultimately, they emphasize the importance of digital sovereignty and argue for the collective ownership and organization of the means of media production as key components of a democratic media landscape.

The question of education and the university returns, in a different register, in **Felix Maschewski, Anna-Verena Nosthoff and Anna Puzio**'s "Make Merit Great Again." Their article follows the concept of 'merit' as one of the most powerful signifiers in the Tech Right's language of legitimization. The authors analyze how prominent tech figures and thinkers – Alex Karp, Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, Marc Andreessen, Curtis Yarvin and Nick Land – mobilize meritocracy and use it as an

argument for anti-egalitarian policies. The "anti-democratic meritocracy" describes not only a preferred social order and rule by the elite, but legitimises itself as efficient and rational. Here, the right's fetish with intelligence and its metrification through IQ tests and other quantifiable efficiency markers are at play in the recent re-activation of anti-democratic principles of exclusion.

Luke Munn approaches fascism as a set of logics, affects, desires, and political techniques that can mutate across historical conditions. The central claim of the essay is that contemporary technology serves fascist formations in three overlapping ways: augmentation, alienation, and manipulation. In its augmenting function, technology operationalizes domination, as can be seen in the case of Palantir and its work with ICE. In its alienating function, technology produces an overwhelming informational environment that creates a vacuum of meaning for fascist mythologies to fill, offering coherence, identifiable enemies, and moral clarity. In its manipulative function, technology further shapes desire over time through feeds and recommendation systems, presenting racialised, gendered, and civilisational hierarchies as neutral outputs. From the alt-right pipeline to the "Tate effect" and stereotyped AI imagery, Munn argues that technofascism is not reducible to extremist content or authoritarian policy, but names an alignment of infrastructure, ideology, and affect through which technical systems help make fascist impulses more compelling, more scalable, and more ordinary.

Jillian (Lee) Crandall also moves away from conceptualizing "tech fascism" as a historical analogy. Crandall brings together Frankfurt School critical theory, with its argument that fascism has always been technologically mediated, and thinkers in the Black radical tradition to connect contemporary fascism to the long durée of racial capitalism and colonialism. In recent years, accelerationism as the dominant techno-deterministic promise has given way to abundance and its promises of human flourishing and wealth. Crandall does not want to abandon the word to techno-optimists or liberals. That their promises are hollow and only serve the billionaires should not surprise: Technofascist projects fetishise frontiers, claim scarcity as a choice and mostly end in technological totalitarianism. "Tech Fascism and Antifascist Abundance" draws on building projects associated with and financed by tech bros and other right-wing figures. Tech enclaves in different forms – Crypto, Startup and Charter Cities or the Network State – are envisioned and financed by venture capitalists and techno-optimists.

Jamie van der Klaauw and Ryan Kopaitich's "The Fascism Farce" dissents from the general framing of technofascism. Instead, they argue that there is "no such thing as technofascism" in the strong analytic sense. Their claim is not that fascism, authoritarianism, or technological domination are absent, but that the label "technofascism" misidentifies the deeper political-economic constellation. For them, the contemporary fascist spectacle is subordinate to, and often distracts from, a neofeudal order marked by rent extraction, concentrated ownership, platform dependency, and the re-fusion of economic and political power. Crucially, they distinguish two forms of antifascism: a liberal antifascism that seeks to defend or fortify

democratic procedures, and a socialist or materialist antifascism that asks what social and political conditions make fascist movements possible. The fact that they side with the second leads them away from diagnosing the contemporary condition itself as "technofascism" and towards Adorno's concern with the continuing social conditions of fascism, especially the concentration of capital. It is in the defence against a fascism to come that we have to accurately address the socio-economic conditions of the present. The most accurate label, they argue, is to speak of technofeudal capitalism. More than just naming a particular socioeconomic condition, van der Klaauw and Kopaitich effectively push the analogy with the feudal court to offer us a typology of today's right, with (wannabe) kings like Donald Trump, their courtiers from Pete Hegseth to Brett Kavanaugh, (false) prophets like Jordan Peterson, and jesters like Joe Rogan.

Gustavo Robles takes this political-economic question across the global division between centre and periphery. His essay "Technofascism North and South: Cyberlibertarianism and Its Latin American Translations," analyses the peripheral expressions of technofascist rationality. Beginning with the techno-optimism of the post-Cold War moment, Robles shows how the language of openness, participation, and digital emancipation functioned as one of the privileged utopian idioms of triumphant capitalism. This imaginary was not unique to Silicon Valley or cyberlibertarian circles. Its untenable emancipatory promise also shaped parts of the left, especially in post-operaist accounts of immaterial labour and networked cooperation. Against both residual techno-optimism and the more recent language of "technofeudalism," Robles argues that contemporary digital capitalism is not simply rent extraction or enclosure, but a futural, libidinal, and explicitly right-wing project. The originality of Robles's essay lies in its insistence that technofascism does not travel unchanged across the world system. Turning to Latin America, Robles examines Nayib Bukele's Bitcoin experiment in El Salvador, Javier Milei's entanglements with cryptocurrency in Argentina, and the Argentine government's fantasy of transforming the country into a global artificial intelligence hub. For Robles, peripheral technofascism therefore names a mutilated techno-utopia: one in which territories, labour, energy, minerals, democratic sovereignty, and collective futures are made available as infrastructure for global techno-capitalism.

Anthony Burton's contribution, "First Principles and Algorithmic Reason in Technofascism," shifts the question of technofascism from ideology or infrastructure to epistemology. For Burton, technofascism is not simply a politics that uses technology instrumentally, nor an authoritarianism amplified by digital tools. It is a political epistemology in which power derives its legitimacy from computational reason itself. Burton takes aim at Silicon Valley's recurring attachment to "first principles thinking," associated with figures such as Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, and Jeff Bezos. What appears, in their language, as a rigorous method for innovation – a "physics-based" way of looking at the world – becomes, in Burton's account, a fantasy of axiomatic mastery. Complex social and political problems are translated into computable puzzles. First principles thinking divides the world into the com-

putable and the incomputable, the rational and irrational, signal and noise, and then treats whatever falls outside its axioms as waste to be managed, colonised, or eliminated. This is why, for Burton, technofascism is structurally anti-democratic. Democracy depends on the negotiation of incommensurable perspectives; algorithmic reason demands derivation from a singular truth. Thiel's declared incompatibility between freedom and democracy, Yarvin's monarchic anti-democracy, the valorisation of monopoly, and the logic of DOGE are variations on this same computational authoritarianism. Technofascism's novelty, as Burton shows, lies in the migration of fascistic potentials from mass spectacle and charismatic affect into the operations of logical systems themselves. Its domination need not announce itself as fascist, but can present itself as efficiency, objectivity, optimisation, or intelligence.

Laura Niebling's contribution provides a historical counterpoint to the present. Focusing on West Germany during the "long 1970s," it reconstructs early debates surrounding the computerisation of public administration and the fears these developments generated with regard to democratic freedoms. Through a case study of medical data politics, the analysis demonstrates how collective memories of bureaucratically organized mass violence shaped the development of data protection legislation, independent regulatory institutions, and the influential figure of the "glass citizen." These measures emerged as attempts to limit state power and safeguard democratic accountability in an increasingly computerized society. The article traces the changing meaning of the glass metaphor, showing how it gradually shifted from a critique of surveillance and administrative transparency to a positive vision associated with technological innovation and efficiency. This transformation is interpreted as indicative of a broader realignment between public authority and private digital infrastructures, a development that has contributed to contemporary forms of technofascist governance.

Few researchers have been as close to the belly of the beast as sociologist **Fred Turner**, and his seminal work "From Counterculture to Cyberculture" (2006) marks its twentieth birthday. But those are only two reasons why **Martina Leeker and Laura Hille** sat down with Turner to discuss the continuities and discontinuities of his work. Turner shares our concern that the countercultural dreams were already myth-driven and that their problematic power relations were ignored. Read in the context of this issue, the interview shows how anti-bureaucratic and anti-institutional imaginaries could become compatible with charismatic authority, extractive infrastructures, Christian nationalism, and what Turner calls "The Texan Ideology" (2026). Although not an easy undertaking, Turner ends the interview on a positive note: the call to care for each other.

In the Extra section of this issue, **Thorben Mämecke** documents a workshop convened in February 2026 at the FernUniversität in Hagen, which brought together scholars from media studies and sociology. Titled "Basic Concepts of the Broligarchy," the workshop aimed to collaboratively develop and refine analytical concepts capable of addressing the entanglements between Big Tech, gender, and

the resurgence of fascist tendencies in Western democracies. The report offers a broad overview of the key conceptual dimensions involved in describing and theorising the phenomenon provisionally referred to as the "Broligarchy."

Taken together, the contributions do not give us a stable, final definition of technofascism but return us to the conditions under which such a question has become unavoidable. As fascism takes up new tools, fascism itself changes. The pressing questions concern what fascistic politics becomes and becomes capable of when it is attached to contemporary platform infrastructures and their technological imaginaries. The contributions that follow insist that asking these questions has become part of the political and intellectual work of the present.

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TECH FASCISM AND THE UNIVERSITY

Analyzing Conditions and Organizing Solidarity in the Time of Broligarchies

ARBEITSKREIS UNI GEGEN FASCHISMUS /
WORKING GROUP UNIVERSITY AGAINST FASCISM

1. INTRO

In this article, we address two interconnected developments: the metapolitical battle in education and universities and the technological basis of the fascistization of societies. In what follows, we simultaneously analyze and propose a set of preliminary antifascist media studies activities. We understand the term *tech fascism* as an expression of a complex and violent arrangement of bodies, algorithmic media, extractive processes, and economic conditions. Its most important feature is the appropriation of public services and infrastructures by corporate technologies and companies (e.g., Tesla, Starlink, Meta's undersea cable, PayPal), resulting in the comprehensive enforcement of data-based and capital-driven ideologies of inequality. Building on these arguments, we discuss how the politicization of universities plays a central role in socio-technical fascistization: techno-fascist attacks target not only specific bodies of knowledge but also scientific institutions and practices themselves.

Against the backdrop of feudal[1] and oligarchic developments in the tech sector, both of which appropriate public infrastructure, we argue for critical and responsible media studies that critically analyze the intersections between (cyber)libertarianism, authoritarianism, climate violence, and the tech industry and their threat to democratic institutions.

2. CYBERLIBERTARIANISM, DIGITAL CAPITALISM, AND ITS AUTHORITARIAN DRIFT

We will first briefly reflect on the cyberlibertarian ideologies of the 1990s and their current connection to authoritarianism before turning our attention to the ideolo-

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1 In part, these discourses tie in with those surrounding neo-feudalism, which understand late capitalism not only as an economic system but rather as a concentrated power system (Dean 2020). This suggests the proliferation of power systems within capitalism that no longer even attempt to maintain the appearance of meritocratic ideologies of self-made success, as they view ultra-wealthy entrepreneurs as a separate species. Many tendencies of capitalism, such as oligopolies/monopolies and their influence on politics through lobbying, are taken to extremes here, which is why many theorists find the term unfortunate. For the analysis here, it is important to note that neoliberal and libertarian ideologies have become essentialized to such an extent that they have hardened into not just a class but a 'species' system in which exploitation is represented in (quasi-)racial terms.

gies of tech fascism, which are fundamentally related to the university and its discourses and infrastructures. In so doing, we distinguish between digital fascism and tech fascism but also emphasize their continuity.

Libertarianism is a political philosophy as well as movement that emphasizes unconditional individual freedom, limited government, as well as personal and economic liberties. Despite their specific differences and tensions, libertarianism and cyberlibertarianism share a deep antipathy towards democracy (Golumbia 2024). The connections and interferences between Big Tech and its platform technologies, (cyber)libertarian ideologies, and fascist alignments have different ideological dimensions rooted in anti-state policies (ibid.). These dimensions are intertwined through an orientation towards a universalistic market logic, as well as resistance to state regulation, and, not least, the imagination of a radically individualized, meritocratic or social Darwinist and tech-driven social order. As cyberlibertarian activist John P. Barlow put it in the "Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace" in 1996: "Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us" (Barlow 1996).

Barlow's emphatic demarcation already highlights two of these dimensions, which have proven to be formative for the cyberspace utopias of the 1990s to present day libertarian platform capitalism and authoritarianism. In addition to the skepticism toward state regulation mentioned above, this also includes the highly influential phantasm of immateriality and incorporeality (supposedly) afforded by digital technologies. In recent years, this has been accompanied by the discursive normalization of obedience to anti-democratic forces in the name of neutrality as well as the assertion of comprehensive irresponsibility (Lösch 2022; Daub 2020) and the revaluation and politicization of 'disruption' as part of a radical historical break brought about by technologies and as an unavoidable political necessity (Daub 2020; Golumbia 2024). Also relevant here is the libertarian-authoritarian concept of unlimited, hyper-individual, positive freedom unburdened by regulations addressing discrimination and minority protection (Amlinger and Nachtwey 2024). This ideological foundation has given rise to the attempted framing of Silicon Valley's technologies as neutral platforms, the denial of their material conditions (e.g., resources and human labor), and the conceptualization of freedom as incompatible with democracy (Hille 2023, 130).

Cyberlibertarianism's drift towards authoritarianism since the 1990s also becomes apparent (and must be explored further) by tracing key actors such as Peter Thiel and Elon Musk, both members of the infamous "PayPal mafia." Lana Swartz (2000, 38f.) has aptly characterized PayPal's political context: "PayPal emerged in the context of the Silicon Valley tech industry and its 'Californian ideology', which links values of anticorporatism, social autonomy and cultural bohemianism with the seemingly paradox value of marketism. [...] PayPal's originary vision was not just one of a global community connected by peer-to-peer commerce but of a global market untethered from nation states." When Peter Thiel stepped down as exec-

utive vice president of the startup company X.com in 2000, he wrote an email to the company's entire workforce on May 5. Thiel reflected upon the stressful and intense process of building a digital payment system like PayPal: "We've gone from early planning stages to a business that's implementing our plans for world domination. The basic vision is to build the financial operating system for the world, and thereby provide the underpinnings for global commerce" (Soni 2022, 182).

What might be called typical Valley rhetoric of "scaling up" actually openly acknowledges Thiel's goal of world domination. With Thiel gone, Elon Musk's role in the company became even more crucial – turning him into the CEO of X.com in May 2000.[2] In terms of building and remaking power relations, this Rosebud moment of Elon Musk has been decisive (Marx 2023). Musk's failure in running X.com, which included an attempt to get rid of the PayPal brand, finally got him fired as CEO by the board in the summer of 2000. Following this, Musk founded SpaceX in May 2002. Thiel returned to manage the Initial Public Offering of PayPal (Soni 2022, 335f.), which became the first successful dotcom IPO after 9/11. Thiel's ambitious libertarian ideology was evident in his emphasis on the "seigniorage" realized by PayPal, referencing vaguely the profit generated for the company by the state through the issuance of central bank money (Soni 2022, 79, 81).

While this is not the "seignoral power" of the economy in relation to governmental media that Joseph Vogl (2015) has characterized so convincingly, it at the least documents Thiel's ambition in an ideological vignette. In the wake of 9/11, to describe a complex development rather shortly, PayPal offered its infrastructural means for US patriotic assistance, transactional surveillance, and control alike. With an additional 55 million dollars from the takeover of PayPal by eBay at hand, Thiel returned to his venture capital fund. He set out to incorporate Palantir Technologies with Alex Karp, Stephen Cohen, Joe Lonsdale, and (former) PayPal engineer Nathan Gettings in 2003. The history of cyberlibertarianism and its authoritarian drift has therefore always been closely tied to moments of economic and political crisis – the dotcom crash and 9/11 in particular. The companies founded at that time and their monetary revenues have become integral to the authoritarian drift. They are now pivotal players in tech fascism.

In July 2002, when Thiel ended his second tenure at PayPal, he gave a speech in which he connected the globalization of the economy with the containment of terrorism. PayPal, he concluded, provides an infrastructure that enables global commerce for everyone while fighting harmful actors. Thiel had a message: "Come to Palo Alto for a visit sometime and learn something. I think you'll find it a much better place than Earth" (Jackson 2004, 294f.). In his documentation of this scene, tech-journalist Jimmy Soni concedes that "some recalled this insertion of politics

2 There is much to be said about this constellation, and a brief foray into the early days of Thiel and Musk does not provide an accurate account of the early days of PayPal. For example, PayPal at the time had a strong and influential female workforce and managerial actors like Amy Rowe Klement, Skye Lee, Katherine Woo, Jill Harriman, Julie Anderson and many more (Balogh 2021).

into the celebratory IPO speech as an awkward moment" (Soni 2022, 383). From the perspective of 2026, it is more than just awkward: it eerily speaks to the economic-political data practices and ideological forces that have led to our current techno-fascist situation. It already depicts the ambition for a new digital statecraft that the democratic state itself could not deliver as quickly as a fast-paced, metrics-driven, constantly overworked Valley startup. This is mirrored in Alex Karp's letter to the shareholders of Palantir in February 2026, sent merely a week after the killing of Alex Pretti by ICE agents. In this letter, Karp (2026) celebrates Palantir's technology as supporting free enterprise and democracy and promises to be a bulwark against authoritarianism, offering those subject to its technologies "granular permissioning capabilities" to ward off intrusions from the state – promises that read as absurd in the context of Palantir's "ImmigrationOS" used to facilitate the killings and illegal deportations even of US citizens by ICE.[3]

Every plea for contemporary Palantir Studies is also a plea to inquire into the role of digital payment in platform economies, authoritarian drift, and fascistization (Gießmann 2026). This goes beyond the obvious methodological imperatives of "following the money" plus "follow the PayPal mafia." Rather, digital payment serves as a key affordance to enroll each and every social media app and wallet user into state-side and political-economical cloud-based classification systems. This holds true not only for statecraft and governance in democratic states that now lean towards tech-fascism(s); it is also a defining feature of authoritarian digital stacks in China and Russia, in particular.

The supposed neutrality and immateriality of data-based processes – celebrated, for example, by Karp in his letter – has long been normalized as a powerful myth, especially in the context of so-called "artificial intelligence," not least in order to conceal the exploitative, catastrophic, life-threatening, and deadly effects of a growth-driven tech industry (cf. Katz 2020; cf. Crawford 2021; cf. Mühlhoff 2025). Just as Haraway criticizes the "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway 1988, 581), Yarden Katz points out the "view from nowhere" (Katz 2020, 95-103) with which AI systems have been concealing their ideological foundations since well before the recent boom in LLMs. In this sense, Sarah Roberts points to the invisibility of human labor in platform capitalism (Roberts 2021), and Kate Crawford outlines the extractivism with which AI companies appropriate both material (e.g., rare earths) and immaterial (e.g., data sets) resources. Rainer Mühlhoff (2025) amongst others argues that LLMs tend to disregard marginal perspectives and positions due to their stochastic functioning. The tendency to position AI as immaterial "truth machines" (Elon Musk's stated goal with TruthGPT, now known as Grok, cf. Jackson 2023) must be criticized as an ideological narrative.

Academia is an important field of action for the defense of democracy. Therefore, we must critically address the problem that the ideas and thinking of Silicon Valley can be described as "university-like" (Daub 2020, 20). While tech bros cele-

3 https://www.palantir.com/q4-2025-letter/en.

brate themselves as dropouts and their political alliances attack universities – especially research in so-called "woke" sciences – their ventures are nevertheless firmly linked to technological development and research (funding) at universities in the US (Mazzucato 2014; Daub 2020). At the same time, universities are under increasing pressure to legitimize "startup culture" and establish "innovation incubators," as well as to implement AI technologies. This convergence goes hand in hand not only with the advanced development of infrastructure in the sciences through digital platforms in the hands of private companies, but also with the historical foundations of the sciences themselves. As academics, we are quite familiar with the above-mentioned dimensions, namely the fantasies of neutrality and objectivity, (scientific) freedom, and disruptive innovation. Furthermore, meritocratic myths are also part of the university. They are related to ideologies of inequality and precarious working conditions. These interconnections between academia and Silicon Valley's ideologies indicate that we require more research on these very connections, especially against the appropriation of physical and intellectual spaces with the aim of manipulating academic discourse at the university (Haker and Otterspeer 2025, 5). Against the backdrop of these ideological interconnections between capital and science, the concept of situated knowledge must once again be considered when reflecting on the conditions for a commitment to democracy. This should be done in contrast to the ideologies of unconditional, disembodied objectivity, neutrality, and delimited freedom – and linked instead to an embodied and responsible practice of knowledge.

3. CRITIQUE OF DIGITAL FASCISM

Contemporary fascism profits from technological ideologies, the appropriation of public infrastructures, systems of surveillance, and the sorting of human beings, as well as the strategic non-regulation of social media platforms. It does not so much differ ideologically from historic fascisms as in its forms of emergence: digital fascism addresses the historically new ways of mediatized transversal microfascism (Bratich 2022; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Guattari 1977) and foregrounds the relation of digital media and fascism (Acker 2018; Fielitz and Marcks 2019; Gambetti 2020; Helbing 2019; Traverso 2019). Focusing on this relation, our inquiry will expand on ideological (in)coherence in a post-digital culture, maintain the historical insight of fascism as a symptom of the crises of capitalism, and take up the notion of fascistization as the permeation of dehumanizing ideologies in the midst of society.

The perception that we live in a free and liberal society threatened only by extreme fringe groups fails to recognize the political and technological circumstances of our times. The more apt metaphor finds us already "in bed with the right" (Daub and Donegan 2023). Current processes of fascistization are driven by volatile techno-aesthetic, socio-medial, affective-political interactions proliferating in differentially mediatized social spheres and publics. The diagnosis of post-digital

cultures indicates that digital media have become socio-media infrastructures that transversally influence society at both micro and macro levels – in intimate relationships and families as well as in working relationships and larger social contexts. Digital media produce new genres of differential post-digital violence that finds and attacks scapegoats across the axes of race, gender, sexuality, class, and ability for society's ills and multiple systemic capitalist crises. A media studies perspective provides crucial analyses of how these effects of fascist violence are mediatized: fascism unfolds through techniques of violence that differentially render some lives un/livable and some lives un/grievable (Butler 2004). Media studies approaches are called for to study the proliferating segregation of public spheres, the emergence of affective divides, and the division of intelligibility and sensibility, all of which form the aesthetic order of differential violence (Degeling 2024, 18), and to critique the political and affective division that fascism needs to maintain in order to foster an ideology that segregates livable from unlivable life, historically as well as contemporarily.

Thus, a critique of fascism that takes into account post-digital cultures has to hold onto the insight of critical theory that describes fascism as a symptom of capitalism (Adorno and Weiss 2019; Toscano 2023; Fuchs 2022): we are currently experiencing late capitalism's multiple crises in which the exploitation of living conditions and climate violence are intensifying. Fascism is a crisis effect that is linked to capitalist social orders and to the question of who will (not) be able to survive in the future. In the democracies of the global north, we are experiencing a massive crisis in welfare and care, creating an order of differential distribution of livelihoods, security, and safety.

We observe here a shift from social inequality to the unequal valuation of human lives that affects an increasingly large proportion of the population. Simultaneously, there has been a surge in the popularity of scapegoat ideology, whereby social and economic issues of capitalism are projected to specific groups. Similarly, Amlinger and Nachtwey (2025) speak of "democratic fascism" to describe fascistization as a process of destroying democracy from within. This can be blamed on an idea of scarcity fueled by right-wing politics that casts diversity and equality programs as anti-white and/or anti-male in a zero-sum game. This unleashes great energies of fascist and violent forces that are directed against supposed gender ideologies, migrants, etc., which are perceived as destroyers of the supposedly right way of life.[4]

This system is intertwined in both a neo- and postcolonial complex. According to this line of critique, a preliminary heuristic definition understands fascism as an emergent field of heterogeneous social, political, and media movements whose ideologies foster inequality and violence, ethnic supremacy, national purity, and rebirth (Griffin 2015), whose strategies and organizations are essentially linked to media

4 Theories of racial fascism have always pointed to the intertwining of exploitation and racialization, not least through the system of enslavement (Toscano 2023).

and technological conditions, and whose systemic functioning within a capitalist social order consists of obscuring the role of class and capital in social and global problems by means of racialized and gendered or otherwise differentially marked scapegoats.[5]

Fascistization does not mean that we are living under fascism, but rather that society is permeated with ideologies that devalue human beings. Likewise, the term digital fascism is not an attempt to relegate the rise of fascist ideologies over the past 10 to 15 years squarely to right-wingers on social media, message boards or group chats. Neither does it refer to the comprehensive strategies employed by old-, new- or alt-right political actors, organizations, and parties just happening to make better use of social media's affective infrastructures. Instead, it is a call to investigate the politics between social media and mass media and how their cross-media reaction economy created a permission structure and monetary as well as gamified incentives for fascistization. Normalization and the hermeneutics of plausible deniability – when calls for violence are read both as irony coded and as expression of political commitment – turn dehumanizing ideologies into consumer oriented content to be explored in podcasts, talk shows, and career-launching think pieces (as we see in the manosphere as a practical arena to practice misogyny).

Fascism is also a movement ideology that uses political post-digital forms of violence to silence its opponents (Bee et al. 2026). Its momentum of violence fosters a unifying enragement, a reinforcement of the friend/enemy distinction, that thrives off of the paranoia engendered by social media in particular (Strick 2021). The "downfall of western society" (i.e., white supremacy) – a goal ascribed to all possible progressive ways of life – must be averted at all cost. Especially in times of crisis, identification with winners and victors prevails, which is why the image of successful tech entrepreneurs proliferates in politics and social media. This is also the reason why political violence on social networks is linked to the libertarian policies of the dominant tech systems. This, in turn, is linked to the concentration of power through tech-feudalistic systems that demarcate zones in which market rules are suspended and their own rules are established, for example, in private so-called "freedom cities."[6] The combination of tech entrepreneurs and political offices in the US also points once again to a concentration of power that is post-democratic and cannot be fully explained by the pursuit of profit. Cory Doctorow (2025), for example, points out that capitalism hates itself and works against competition and thus against its own rules, creating control and monopolies rather than free trade.

5 As in historic forms of fascism, such conspiratorial thinking leans heavily into antisemitism.

6 Dean (2020) describes the increasing impoverishment of parts of society and the widening divide as "hinterlandization." This can also be linked to analyses of "sacrifice zones," a form of environmental racism.

4. FROM DIGITAL TO TECH FASCISM

The terms digital fascism and tech fascism refer to different yet related dimensions. Tech fascism's playground extends beyond metapolitics in social media (e.g., memes, propaganda, affect politics of social media) and concerns the organization of society via critical infrastructure, for example, police software like VeRa by Palantir. While digital fascism forms the affective basis for violence and exclusion on social media by profiting from the libertarian ideology of free speech, tech fascism is a multi-faceted power technology that results in extreme inequality and violence and is based on the appropriation of community networks as well as data for the concentration of power.

Public services play a central role here: the term "digital fascism" as used by Fielitz and Marcks (2020), Strick (2021), Degeling (2024), and others focuses more on the fascist culture within social media and only indirectly refers to ownership structures and critical infrastructures. The two terms must be brought together because infrastructure, ownership structures, and content creation policies are interrelated regulatory policies. Digital fascism and tech fascism are therefore different perspectives on the same societal problem of extreme media technology induced inequality. They both work together towards the fascistization of society. Here it is critical to note that media infrastructures are increasingly owned by a few corporate Big Tech companies. Meta's WhatsApp is a prominent example, as are the operating systems for mobile devices and computers offered by Apple, Microsoft, and Google. While these are the most visible systems, cloud server services like Amazon's AWS and Microsoft's Azure are equally important for communication, navigation, and the functioning of airports, hospitals, universities, and many services. Further, infrastructure extends much further than the digital realm: satellites, data centers, cables, and cell towers are all part of the networks needed for any digital operation. These, too, are increasingly operated by Big Tech. Since 2021, Meta has been installing undersea cables to facilitate data traffic between the US, Japan, and Europe (Meta 2025). Similarly, Google is investing in undersea cables connecting the U.S. with Japan (Vanaik 2024) and Europe (Qiu 2025), and Starlink provides the most extensive network of communication satellites, often the only means of digital communication available in certain regions, especially war-torn areas.

Investment in infrastructure not only determines who will benefit from the services provided but can also abruptly become a matter of basic security, as demonstrated by Elon Musk's Starlink satellite network. In March 2025, Musk posted on X: "Without Starlink, the Ukrainian lines would collapse because the Russians can jam all other communications!" (Musk 2025). Although he promised continued support for Ukraine, the post demonstrates how one company's (or man's) power can extend to an entire country's security.

The war in Ukraine not only demonstrates the problem of privately owned infrastructure, it also points to the vulnerability of infrastructures in general and the need for digital and physical security measures. Attacks on the energy grid, water

systems, airports, and harbors shape the Russian war effort in Ukraine but also extend beyond Ukrainian territory as tactics of hybrid warfare. Acts of sabotage specifically destroy key infrastructure elements to interrupt the circulation and distribution of goods, people, electricity, weapons, and essential supplies.

These are just a few examples that highlight the fundamental importance of infrastructure and its appropriation by a small number of private technology corporations. None of these technologies and infrastructures are fascist in themselves, but they are an essential part of authoritarian and fascist technology politics because they produce dependencies and enable surveillance as well as the blurring of the public and private sectors and public services. Giving individual corporations access to the entire stack of communication technologies – from cables and servers to network protocols, devices, and applications (Bratton 2015) – creates a totalizing technology, even an "authoritarian stack" (Bria 2025). Its politics manifest themselves in monopolistic economics (Doctorow 2025), control of visibility, and increasingly ubiquitous surveillance (Zuboff 2019). It is in these dimensions of infrastructural control that digital fascism intertwines with tech fascism.

5. CRITICAL, SOLIDARITY-BASED, ANTI-FASCIST MEDIA STUDIES

What follows from this short theoretical journey? Because anti-fascism today must also be anti-tech-fascism and tech-antifascism at the same time, critical media studies are at the center of the fight against tech fascism. This calls media studies to action.

A commitment to an antifascist practice requires not "only" an examination of questions of media, but also a reflection on and discussion of questions of mutual dependencies and materialities against the backdrop of ideological, powerful, and violent denial and invisibility. To consider the conditions of life and survival in post-digital cultures also means to critically question the historical and gendered power-relations informing the utopian fantasies of transcendent, mediatized disembodiment. This insight is by no means new – but in the context of cyberlibertarian ideologies, it is particularly relevant again today.

The university has become central to global right-wing politics but also to tech fascism. Their anti-state policy involves destroying or undermining institutions such as universities, addressing them as "woke." The university is also an important arena for right-wing meta and education policy (Sauer 2026). Ad hominem attacks on researchers damage their associated institutions, as highlighted by Doran's (2025) research on gendered disinformation.

This is why we must take action directly in our workplace, in our research and teaching, as well as in academic organization. This is often understood as institutional resilience, but it is also a pro-democratic, i.e., antifascist stance that encompasses solidarity as well as technological independence. Much of this is already known, but we hope this serves as encouragement to think about these aspects together and to organize accordingly at your institution.

Through critical, publicly visible, and broadly understandable research, critical teaching, and solidarity in all research groups, committees, and classrooms, we can contribute to resistance on the level of research. What does research look like that stops or at least resists the concentration of power, discourses of devaluation, extractivism, and the proliferation of digital violence by tech corporations and their cyberlibertarian strategy? We have a long way to go, which starts at various levels, including within practices of research and publication as well as teaching itself. We must continue to democratize our institutions and the research associated with them and to fight for accessibility, reproductive, gender, and trans rights at the university in general. But there are a few *concrete* starting points we can start with right now in practical terms to reclaim infrastructures and build new ones. Above all, we must relearn something that the neoliberal university has trained us out of: solidarity. This also means forming broad alliances instead of cultivating a friend-or-enemy mentality or focusing too much on minor differences.

In his book, *Resisting AI*, McQuillan (2022, 135-148) analyzes AI as a classificatory and de/valuing sociotechnical practice. Like Mühlhoff (2025), McQuillan believes that AI harms society through the classification and surveillance of populations. McQuillan proposes the *commoning* of data and infrastructure as an oppositional process of transferring data and infrastructure to communal purposes. Data is generated cooperatively and collectively. Big Data generates patterns in relation to the extractive digitization of the *whole* of society – the Social itself. Commoning would mean contributing to the common good and making it not only usable (as in open access) but also *useful* in the sense of the common good.

Which platforms and applications do we really need? This is worth discussing with students, pointing out that there are standards and financial incentives for community-based solutions in the tech industry, without overly celebrating start-up culture.

When thinking about the antifascist use of infrastructure, we can learn a lot from the historical fight against fascism. Communication networks to facilitate messaging, hideouts, and routes for smuggling goods, weapons, and people were critical to resistance fighters. Today, when we think of infrastructure security, we need to similarly consider the encryption of messages and data and the establishment of protocols that ensure safety and invisibility. This historical comparison shows that decentralization, interoperability, and openness are important factors in the fight against Big Tech politics, but they are only one side of antifascist infrastructures. Digital and physical security operations are equally important and become even more so when people and infrastructures themselves are targets in hybrid warfare.

In the US, immigrants use chat groups to share information about ICE raids and broadcast warnings. They use existing infrastructures – even those owned by companies such as Meta – to combat anti-immigration politics (González 2025). However, these practices are vulnerable to interference from Big Tech companies. For example, Google and Apple banned anti-ICE apps from their App Stores in response to government pressure (Cox 2025). This calls for open infrastructures

that are not controlled by a single company while simultaneously populating these infrastructures with secure and encrypted protocols to safeguard antifascist practices from the dangers that come with the openness they require.

As an example, the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto has developed Psiphon, a free and open-source Internet censorship circumvention tool. It is a multi-protocol tool that enables unregulated internet access in places where Internet access is highly restricted. In Iran, for example, where the regime has established sophisticated internet censorship tools, open source and decentralized infrastructures have proven resilient, while Big Tech services such as WhatsApp are immediately blocked (Miaan 2025).

To "resist tech-fascism" (Geuter 2025), we must organize ourselves. In practical terms, however, we can combine measures of epistemic and everyday justice (ibid.). To this end, we can follow Mejias and Couldry's proposal in their instructive book, *Data Colonialism* (2025, chapter 6): 1. work *within* the system 2. *against* the system and 3. *outside* the system.

How can we act in research, teaching, and university committees *within* the system, *against* the system, and *outside* the system? We offer here a few examples, which in no way exhaust the wealth of creative measures available to the antifascist academic.

Within the system: We take as a bare minimum a focus on data independence within the institution. Conduct a critical review of your university's infrastructure and get involved. However, data sovereignty should also be viewed critically (Pohle and Thiel 2021) if it refers to the nationalistic or libertarian creation of new markets, even by deploying deregulation measures to enable new markets in the EU, as reported recently (Bergt 2026). Focusing exclusively on individual data literacy, as some conceptions of data sovereignty encourage, misses the point. Take your cue, for example, from Indigenous models of data sovereignty, which have developed through research and activism (Bee 2026, chapter 5).

Sometimes we must also push content *within* the networks that promote education and media literacy, using them against the norm as much as possible. Even if we are critical of the economic structure of existing infrastructures, pushing critical content can still be an effective solution. Antifascist content creators such as Susanne Siegert, Natalie Wynn, and Ole Liebl work within commercial networks to influence public discourse while remaining aware that they feed into the model of TikTok and company. As part of popular education, they are important voices of digital education and literacy (Bee and Königshofen 2025).

Against the system: Organize events like "digital independence day" (DI.DAY) at your institution and collect alternatives to existing applications and cloud services. Promote these alternatives and criticize the use of Big Tech solutions at your institutions.

Due to the extractive structures and enormous energy consumption of algorithmic systems, and AI systems in particular, the National Governments and the EU must introduce regulatory processes for their use that reduce the overall de-

pendence of social organizations on these technologies. These processes must be organized democratically. To this end, McQuillan (2022, 135-148) proposes a syndicalist council principle. Though this goal may currently seem unrealistic at a broad policy level, we can nevertheless demand change through committees and other units at the university level.

Outside the system: Work together to create, maintain, and occupy nondigital spaces in the city such as youth clubs and urban commons like gardens and woods – education must exist beyond proprietary infrastructures.

In closing, we offer a preliminary list of some actions to defend the university. With "defend" we mean to work on a system that is imperfect – a university to come following Derrida's concept of a "democracy to come" (Derrida 1991).

- Develop values and utopias together in the classroom, committees, and working groups. Don't let "anti-woke" policies intimidate you.
- Document fascist policies together with the diversity and equity teams – demand support from your institution.
- Dissect right wing anti-state politics and cyberlibertarianism as well as austerity policies in research and teaching.
- Consider violence protection at all levels of your organization. Who needs special protection, and which students and colleagues are particularly vulnerable to scapegoat culture and "anti-woke" politics?
- Train awareness of the politics of democratic infrastructures and media in classrooms and conferences.
- Use open source techniques in classrooms and conferences, including cloud services, messaging, communication, and collaboration tools, data archives, navigation tools, and research resources.
- Fight internet censorship at all levels.
- Publicly advocate for the regulation of platforms and the improvement and enforcement of the DSA in your role as researcher.
- Push for research access to major platforms.
- Strengthen digital civil society by supporting NGOs and digital literacy initiatives such as Chaos Computer Club in your teaching and research. Write for tech critical and critical tech organizations and support their research.
- Support critical tech journalists and their work on the broligarchy.
- Participate in local protests such as those denouncing the use of AI-based facial recognition or other surveillance measures (e.g., at your local train station, etc.) or the extractivism of local data centers. Action against tech surveillance and/or infrastructure is a local as well as global struggle.
- Expose the theft of resources and extreme energy consumption of nearby cloud infrastructures. Use critical mapping techniques in teaching and research for this.

- Support unions for click workers and resist the extraction of cheap labor and natural resources.
- Highlight career options for students beyond Big Tech and market-based content creation.
- Organize support structures in your department, including financial ones.
- Oppose securitization and surveillance at your institution.
- Engage with AI critically. Try to work with alternatives as best you can. Disable AI in browsers and apps with students. Critical and sustainable engagement means more than eliminating something and should include the possibility of emancipatory thinking outside of AI.
- Open source and decentralized encryption protocols are key privacy technologies to protect ourselves against hacking by users, states, etc., but also deny the operators of the infrastructures themselves (i.e., Big Tech companies) access to our user data. However, we need to keep in mind that data security cannot be achieved through technology alone. As an antifascist practice, open source requires the interplay of law, technology, development, and user practices. Laws such as the DSA, a regulation of law enforcement access to encryption and user data, and strong privacy policies of companies and infrastructure providers are equally important.
- Extend this list as an ongoing project and join us in this endeavor.
- Support the local anti-data centre protests with your research, but don't do so from a 'not in my backyard' perspective.
- Last but not least, tell different stories, stories that open up the future again. Let's stop contributing to the myths and fascination surrounding tech bros and AI fantasies betting on our future. The tech bros' anti-human and anti-earth ideologies need to be dissected, not admired. Everyone needs to know that successful entrepreneurs like Thiel want to restrict women's rights, so don't mystify blogs or actors that distinguish between lives worth living.

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MAKE MERIT GREAT AGAIN

The Anti-Democratic Meritocracy of Techno-Fascism

FELIX MASCHEWSKI, ANNA-VERENA NOSTHOFF AND ANNA PUZIO[1]

Meritocratic rhetoric is ubiquitous at Palantir. Alex Karp, the CEO of what is currently perhaps the most influential company in Silicon Valley, has recently spoken incessantly about Palantir's performance-based culture, declaring "the single best thing that helps my company is meritocracy"[2] (Karp 2025) or, in negative terms: "If you don't want meritocracy, you hate Palantir" (Levy 2025). The emphasis on meritocracy recently went so far that the company even launched the "Meritocracy Fellowship" – a kind of internship program that has been recruiting applicants since April 2025 under the culture-war rubric "Skip the debt. Skip the indoctrination. Get the Palantir degree." "Opaque admissions standards at many American universities", so the company laments, "have displaced meritocracy and excellence. As a result, qualified students are being denied an education based on subjective and shallow criteria. Absent meritocracy, campuses have become breeding grounds for extremism and chaos".

In such phrases it becomes evident that, for the right-leaning tech elite, meritocracy currently describes both the desired destination and the path to get there. It is a term that serves to confirm the "Tech Right's" capability, and legitimize their superior status. Ultimately, it also fulfils the function of an antidote to everything that it finds objectionable about the state, society, and its institutions. To quote another example that specifically focuses on the education sector: "American universities have lost their way. Once incubators of meritocracy, today's colleges prioritize other values. They reward conformity over originality, safety over risk, and comfort over truth."[3]

With such positions, Palantir's objective appears to be entirely in line with the Trump 2.0 administration. In November 2025, the US government declared the principles of "competence and merit" to be the core of its National Security Strat-

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2 Alex Karp, The Economic Club New York, 24.2.2025, https://www.econclubny.org/documents/10184/109144/20250224_Karp_Transcript.pdf.

3 All quotations from Palantir, "Meritocracy Fellowship," https://jobs.lever.co/palantir/7fa0ceca-c30e-48de-9b27-f98469c374f3.

egy: "Should merit be smothered, America's historic advantages in science, technology, industry, defense, and innovation will evaporate. The success of radical ideologies that seek to replace competence and merit with favored group status would render America unrecognizable and unable to defend itself. At the same time, we cannot allow meritocracy to be used as a justification to open America's labor market to the world in the name of finding 'global talent' that undercuts American workers. In our every principle and action, America and Americans must always come first."[4]

In a similar vein, Alex Karp frequently emphasizes that a national "we" – by which he means the society or "people" of the United States – "should, indeed must, return to a shared national experience – an embrace of common identity that by definition puts forward certain ideas, values, culture, and ways of living at the exclusion of others."[5] Karp repeatedly champions "average Americans," positioning himself in favor of a tough immigration and deportation policy and against allegedly "liberal-democratic elites" who, with their "wokeness"-agenda and various DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion)-programs, supposedly betray the country's meritocratic principles. Karp declares Palantir to be the first "completely anti-woke" (Paoli 2025) company that is entirely committed to the West, above all to defending the American nation.

It is hardly surprising, then, that he advocates for a closer relationship between the tech sector and the state, between Silicon Valley and the Trump administration. In his recent book co-authored with Palantir-colleague Nicholas W. Zamiska, Karp makes the case for the (re-)construction of what he terms a "Technological Republic", which will, as the authors write in 2024, "in the end, require the resurrection and re-embrace of a sense of national and collective identity that has, throughout history, provided the bedrock for human progress" (Karp and Zamiska 2025, 188). Karp's gaze into the past is simultaneously meant to offer future perspectives. It links scientific-technological progress with ultra-nationalist calculation, whereas the former Goethe University Frankfurt PhD graduate makes clear that "not only is patriotism right" but that "patriotism will make you rich" (Roytburg 2025). These words of praise to Palantir's investors certify that investing in Palantir equals "fighting for the right side of what should work in this country: meritocracy, lethal technology vis-à-vis adversaries" (Paoli 2025). Such rhetorical fragments, alongside the very real technototalitarian developments at Palantir – see the AI surveillance infrastructure that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is using across the United States – make the ideological relevance of what Roger Griffin has termed "palingenetic ultra-nationalism" (Griffin 1991, 26) explicit, highlighting it as a core element of (techno-)fascism.

4 National Security Strategy, November 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf.

5 Palantir, Letter to shareholders, 3.11.2025, https://www.palantir.com/q3-2025-letter/en/.

Given the myriad cases similar to Palantir's stance – OpenAI, Starlink, and Meta, among others, have recently uttered similar political wordings – it is unsurprising that various authors have diagnosed techno-fascist tendencies spreading throughout Silicon Valley and among the "tech bros" (Amlinger and Nachtwey 2025; Coeckelbergh 2026; González 2026; Mühlhoff 2025a). This new form of fascism is marked by its anti-democratic, destructive orientation and by the fusion of authoritarian politics with advanced technology, whereby hierarchy-reproducing, exclusivist and racist technologies become the central infrastructure for a radical reordering of the world.

In what follows, we, too, wish to trace such techno-fascist tendencies; yet, in focusing on the motif and dispositifs of "meritocracy" and discourses surrounding the "meritocratic order", we seek to exemplify and specify such diagnoses and foreground meritocracy as a central feature of said techno-fascism. More concretely, we render plausible the elitist appeal of techno-fascism by explicitly focusing on the concept of meritocracy and its strategic usage among the Tech Right – exemplified alongside Karp, through figures such as Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, and Marc Andreessen, among others – as well as its related anti-egalitarianism (as is often exemplified by a fetish of "IQ"). At the same time, through discussing concrete projects of "Freedom Cities" – championed also by Thiel and Andreessen, among others – we also, in the sense of a reluctant conjunction of a Blochian "contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous" (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*), clarify how a reactionary futurism gains ever more authority alongside a fusion of ultranationalism with a globalist IQ-race.

In this connection, we finally focus on the neo-reactionary movement (NRx) – above all, on its most prominent representatives Curtis Yarvin and Nick Land – to show how a scientific-technological, accelerationist and transhumanist-fused performance principle underpins a political dynamic. In this context, democratic values are replaced by an alleged technological efficiency, and parliamentary processes by automated orders. Against this backdrop, the discourse of meritocracy appears as the camouflage of a pseudo-intellectual, techno-fascist movement that aims less at concrete achievements. Rather, it seeks to establish a specific vision of a new social order that, along with its institutions, seeks to perforate, dismantle and overcome democracy itself. Meritocracy, we argue, here becomes authoritarian: an elitist, deeply hierarchical, and essentially *anti-democratic meritocracy*.

1. BETWEEN EGALITARIAN CHANCE AND TOTALITY: THE AMBIVALENT CONCEPT OF MERITOCRACY

Anyone who engages with the concept of "meritocracy" quickly notices how ambiguous and contested it is. While the performance principle is frequently correlated by some with being "neutral," "objective" and "just," others recognize in meritocracy a cover narrative that conceals structural inequalities and privileges. In this reading, it is exposed as a "myth" (Hartmann 2002), as a "flawed ideology" (Stanley

2015, 216), as a "trap" (Markovits 2019), or as the modus operandi of a "tyranny" (Sandel 2023).[6] The etymological tensions are already embedded in the very origins of the term itself. A short overview of its conceptual heritage is particularly helpful to unpack its ideological dimensions, and helps situate its current relevance in the right-wing turn of Silicon Valley.

The neologism "meritocracy" – composed of *meritum* (Latin: merit) and κρατεῖν (Greek: to rule) – was originally proposed by Michael Young. The British politician and sociologist wrote *The Rise of Meritocracy* as a dystopian science-fiction satire in 1958. In the book's narrative, the performance principle dissolves established hierarchies. The aristocratic order is replaced by a system that determines power, wealth, and status as the sole result of achievement. The latter, in turn, is defined as the result of a combination of intelligence quotient and effort. Young depicts a society in which every ability is evaluated from childhood, and in which every talent is unconditionally tested, weighed, and fostered, regardless of origin, class, and gender.

Yet, what sounds like the establishment of a radical equality of opportunity quickly evolves into a quasi-totalitarian order. For, social positions must not only be constantly proven and fought for through cognitive performance. Intelligence and achievement also determine systematic criteria for exclusion that ultimately legitimize and naturalize inequality. Those who – for whichever reasons – experience limitations have forfeited their chances, while the elites, as Young depicts in his thought experiment, secure their status partly through the trading of high-IQ babies. The author, thus, describes a social order in which social classes diverge ever more sharply, and where a cognitive elite rule ultimately becomes dominant that suppresses everything contradicting this hierarchy (Young 1961).

Young's *The Rise of Meritocracy* has popularized the concept of a performance-based society. Despite all dystopian objections, his satire made evident how a meritocracy could serve as a foil against an estate-based society that rests on social and political inequality, tying social status to lineage. Meritocracy promises that work, education, and achievement count as the primary factors in social positioning, thus at least formally keeping with Enlightenment ideals, such as freedom, the potential to use one's own reason, equality etc. In principle, it can thus well be regarded as a potentially progressive project, as an "iconic mantra with the rise of equal opportunities and anti-discrimination agendas" (Mijs and Savage 2020, 397). Yet, this progressive potential always described an ideal rather than a reality, with meritocracy remaining an unfulfilled (and seemingly unfulfillable) promise (Mijs 2016): Even today's 'performance societies' are permeated by diverse non-meritocratic principles, ranging from lineage to wealth, thus describing factors that underpin social (im-)mobility. Despite this fact, achievement is still widely regarded as a societal

6 In particular, Sandel presents a thoroughly compelling critique of the university system in the United States. While the Silicon Valley elite complains about wokeness, the moral philosopher shows how elite universities fail to open the doors of social advancement for genuinely talented Americans from the lower class.

"fundamental norm" (*Fundamentalnorm*) (Neckel, Dröge, and Somm 2005, 1), as a basic social principle of order in modernity, to which most citizens assent almost intuitively.

Numerous studies confirm – entirely in Young's spirit – that meritocracy describes a "deeply elitist project" (Mijs and Savage 2020, 397) in which the "accompanying music of inequality" (Amlinger and Nachtwey 2025, 111, translated by the authors) necessarily resonates. While the performance principle is frequently associated with being "neutral," "objective," and "just," it is often overlooked that it involves prior decisions and normative implications, for example regarding how performance is defined and measured. A sole focus on meritocracy thus ignores social context, i.e., that not everyone has the same starting conditions and privileges (e.g., different financial and educational backgrounds). Thus, meritocracy fosters decontextualized comparisons based on performance, placing everything under the paradigm of self-optimization and efficiency, and thereby legitimizing hierarchies. As a consequence, it can suggest that elites not only possess more power, but also morally deserve this power – *because* of their performance and alleged intellectual superiority.

Despite these contradictions and their social ignorance, meritocratic principles remain widely associated with egalitarian values. As a result, the term itself operates as an ambiguous and multivalent, if nonetheless powerful, point of reference that flourishes especially in purportedly high-achieving and wealthy milieus – as a formula of legitimation (Stanley 2015, 216).[7] Anna Wiener already captures this pointedly in *Uncanny Valley* with respect to the milieu of the tech elite: "'Meritocracy': a word that had originated in social satire and was adopted in sincerity by an industry that could be its own best caricature. It was the operating philosophy for companies that flirted with administering IQ tests to prospective and existing employees […]" (Wiener 2020, 181f.). Alex Karp seconds this: "Silicon Valley has always been pro-meritocracy, and we're very aligned with that" (Levy 2025).

Whereas Young had his essayistic satire end with the uprising against the tyranny of performance, societal collapse, and the rise of populists, Karp's "technological republic" affirmatively projects a hybrid form that could be termed the "anti-democratic meritocracy" of techno-fascism. This concept becomes particularly vivid in the thinking and actions of the tech elite – not just regarding Karp, but also other representatives such as Elon Musk – in conjunction with the Trump 2.0 administration.

2. MUSK, THIEL, ANDREESSEN: MAKE MERIT GREAT AGAIN

7 Stanley writes ironically on this: "In a society that is not meritocratic, those who possess an unjustly high position in the hierarchy, perhaps one not justified by 'merit', will have the flawed ideology that their position in the hierarchy is justified, for example, by individual merit in a society that is meritocratic."

The figures of the tech industry have long been ascribed a specific "mindset" (Rushkoff) that is oriented at high performance. Elon Musk, CEO of SpaceX and Tesla, represents a prototype of the Silicon Valley elite in this respect. The "special employee" of the now right-wing, populist network X combines the external ascription of a high IQ – Trump called him an "individual with a particularly high IQ"[8] – with an "extremely hardcore" (Schiffer 2024) work ethic. Working seven days a week, sleeping in the office, and taking microdoses of ketamine for performance enhancement are as much a part of Musk's identity as his stance that college is "overrated"[9] and that America has become too "woke." Through programs such as DEI and measures to promote equal opportunity, so Musk proclaims, the country has ceased to be a meritocracy. For Musk, state institutions and companies alike are allegedly infected by a "woke mind virus" that is not only "anti-civilizational," "anti-American," and "inhuman," but above all "anti-meritocratic."[10]

When Alexandr Wang, CEO of the AI company Scale AI, declared in a blog post and X post, shared by numerous Silicon Valley CEOs, that his company would hire applicants solely according to the principles of "MEI" (merit, excellence, intelligence), Musk simply called it "great!"[11] Such a mutually shared reaffirmation of the performance principle makes the elitist dimension of meritocratic thinking plainly visible – with Musk's further statements sounding like an echo of Wang (but also of Young): "I think we should return to a focus on merit. It shouldn't matter whether you're a man or a woman, what ethnicity you belong to, or what you believe. What should count is how competent you are and how well you do your job."[12] Musk repeatedly indulges in various permutations of such pseudo-egalitarian statements, illustrating once again that performance is an "ambiguity formula" (Verheyen 2018, 127) that can, on the one hand, serve to critique sexism, racism, and more, whilst it often, on the other hand, justifies discrimination and inequality (Mettin and Lux 2025, 24). For the CEO, performance is ultimately determined solely by individual success in the capitalist elimination contest. Everything that undermines, restricts, or obstructs the (performance-oriented) will to power of "high status males"[13] – whether laws or media criticism – must, so it seems, give way to the chainsaw.

Musk also justified his political activity with his belief in the principles of merit. During the 2024 US election campaign he declared: "If we want to preserve peace and meritocracy in America, Trump must win."[14] As head of the Department of

8 Musk biographer Seth Abramson meanwhile notes that there is "zero biographical evidence" that Musk's IQ is higher than "between 100 and 110". Seth Abramson, x.com, 20.2.2025.

9 Elon Musk, x.com, 20.10.2024.

10 Elon Musk, Atreju-Festival, 14.12.2023.

11 Elon Musk, x.com, 13.6.2024.

12 Elon Musk, x.com, 31.1.2025.

13 Elon Musk, x.com, 1.9.2024.

14 Elon Musk, x.com, 5.9.2024.

Government Efficiency (DOGE), tasked with "modernizing federal technology and software to maximize governmental efficiency and productivity,"[15] he consistently cut down everything bearing the insignia of DEI: countless initiatives, programs, jobs, websites, research programs, books, image archives, and even words – from "activism" through "gender identity" and "Native American" to "women" (Yourish et al. 2025) – were deleted in the fight for his vision of meritocracy (Maschewski and Nosthoff 2025, 97–104).

In this process, AI systems are deployed that, by means of text, image, and object recognition, comb through archives, databases, and government websites in search of unwanted content, faces, genders, and historical events. The state apparatus thus undergoes a disruptive, institutional clear-cutting – in Musk's own words: "We spent the weekend feeding USAID into the wood chipper"[16] – with processes and tasks, particularly in budgeting, being automated. As Eryk Salvaggio describes it: "AI then becomes a tool for replacing politics. The Trump administration frames generative AI as a remedy to 'government waste.' However, what it seeks to automate is not paperwork but democratic decision-making" (Salvaggio 2025). Democratic principles and values (the protection of minorities, etc.) are successively annulled, while machine-readable metrics – and with them, an allegedly objective, quantifiable efficiency – are installed in their place. The systemic transformation can be read as an ideologically motivated dismantling and rollback of democratic institutions, even as an "administrative" (Snyder 2025) or "AI Coup" (Salvaggio 2025).

These aspects are the expression of a culture war that, in reality, aims less at efficiency or performance than at tech-authoritarian control. It comes as little surprise that alongside DOGE, Palantir also plays a central role in the 'modernization': the company received government contracts worth more than 113 million dollars by May 2025 alone, including for the integration of information from various agencies or, as the Trump administration put it, for "inter-agency data sharing" to eliminate "inefficiencies" and "fraud."[17] Commentators see the risk of compiling "a master list of personal information on Americans" and "untold surveillance power" (Frenkel 2025) in this. It is therefore hardly surprising that in the activities of DOGE and Palantir, the close connection between the tech sector and the state, as well as a kind of "reactionary modernism" (Herf 1984) 2.0 and dynamics bearing the "hallmarks of fascism" (*Gepräge des Faschismus*) (Mühlhoff 2025b), are being identified. The modernization of state systems and technologies, as historical fascism research has repeatedly shown (Griffin 2007), is entirely compatible with ideologically regressive policies driven by the interests of an industrial elite (Tooze 2007). The fusion of technical-industrial progressivism and culture-war anti-wokeness confirms this once again. In Musk's libertarian-authoritarian version: "America

15 https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/establishing-and-implementing-the-presidents-department-of-government-efficiency/

16 Elon Musk, x.com, 3.2.2025.

17 https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/stopping-waste-fraud-and-abuse-by-eliminating-information-silos/

achieved its greatness over the past 150 years because it came closer to being a meritocracy than anyone else on earth. I will fight to my last drop of blood to ensure it remains the land of freedom and opportunity."[18] In short: *Make Merit Great Again*.

The less vocal but politically no less influential Peter Thiel – who promoted, among others, JD Vance – has a similar, though more complex, relationship to meritocracy. Of course, he too, is as libertarian as he is anti-woke. Thiel criticizes state institutions from schools to universities which – so the assumption goes – corrupted by liberal-democratic elites, define what society understands as 'performance,' yet whose system holds back innovation and technological development potential with at times catastrophic economic consequences (Clynes 2016). For the self-declared "Contrarian" (Chafkin 2021), there is no genuine performance within a false system: he therefore searches, in the mode of an "elitist anti-elitism" (Weigel 2026, 57–102), for the unconventional talent, the unheard, nonconformist voices that have fallen through the university grid. Real novelty, as the co-founder of PayPal and Palantir and the early investor in Facebook proclaims, can only be achieved through the consistent breaking of rules, creative destruction, and the disruption of outdated structures. For Thiel, thus, legitimacy derives not from democracy but from (decontextualized) performance alone, while liberal democracies diminish the flourishing of performance through regulating and intervening in allegedly 'natural orders'. This is also the reason why, for Thiel, merit becomes visible not *within* the system, but *against* the system.

Thiel's book *Zero to One* can be seen as the blueprint for this view. Anyone who does not aspire to something greater, i.e., the monopoly – who sands down too many of their edges, corners, and right angles in competition among putative equals; who plays other people's games – has already lost, in Thiel's view. That is why, for Palantir, he focuses on university drop-outs, the maladjusted souls who are not infrequently aggrieved, disappointed, or feel misunderstood, and who consequently grip all the more tenaciously onto the mantra of the visionary and of great achievements. What Nick Clegg criticized in Silicon Valley as perpetual self-victimization, or a "combination of machismo and self-pity" (O'Carroll and Hinsliff 2025), is for Thiel fertile ground for (anti-social and merit-oriented) ambition, and thus a recruitment promise: "The fate of our world," he wrote in his notorious essay "The Education of a Libertarian," "may depend on the effort of a single person who builds or propagates the machinery of freedom" (Thiel 2009).

In Thiel's version of meritocracy, as much as in Musk's, there are no societal achievements, only individual ones. Liberal democracy, the welfare state, and the associated attempt to create equal opportunity are, for Thiel, nothing more than a regressive residual form, a ball and chain on the leg of progress – or, in Thiel's religious register, a spawn of the Antichrist. It comes as little surprise that Thiel – also known for his bon mot that democracy and freedom are incompatible – seeks alternatives to the United States. He seeks not merely to change the system from

18 Elon Musk, x.com, 28.12.2024.

within,[19] but to perforate and overcome it. Having invested in seasteading in the past, he now champions "homesteading," by which he means special economic or acceleration zones (Slobodian 2023), so-called "Charter States" or "Freedom Cities," which are touted as solutions to all "pressing issues in the country."[20] These would make it possible, for example, to conduct medical experiments without restrictions, to drive autonomous vehicles without rules and inspections, or to generate nuclear energy without state oversight. That is, to unleash Silicon Valley's own solutionism, 'freed' entirely from the regulations of democratic orders, in order to develop new libertarian 'performance spaces' (*Leistungsspielräume*) (Elliot 2025). In other words: "Maybe you could actually unilaterally change the world – without having to constantly convince people and beg people and plead with people who are never going to agree with you through technological means. And this is where I think technology is this incredible alternative to politics."[21]

While Balaji Srinivasan, with his book *The Network State* and the idea of online- and crypto-based nation-building, provided the blueprint for "Freedom Cities," Thiel's close associate and long-standing investor colleague Marc Andreessen drew up the ideological ground plan with his "Techno-Optimist Manifesto," following a radical technological determinism and solutionism (Andreessen 2023)[22] in the spirit of 'bipolar' friend-enemy thinking: "We believe in merit and achievement" (Andreessen 2023), he writes, while "our enemy is anti-merit, anti-ambition, anti-striving, anti-achievement, anti-greatness." In this context too, the concept of performance in the work of Musk, Thiel, and many others in the Silicon Valley elite appears increasingly to be congealing into an anti-political cipher; into a combat term that grounds one's own status whilst radically restructuring the political sphere and the state as a whole. It is almost logical that the meritocratic ideas of Thiel, Andreessen, and others are flowing more and more into political projections and (into) practice. In the following, we provide an overview of the most prominent ideas and projects to then explicitly relate these to a tech-elitist ideology that we term *anti-democratic meritocracy*.

19 Consider the former employees of Thiel – from JD Vance to the White House's "AI and Crypto Czar" David Sacks, to the co-founder of the Thiel Fellowship, Jim O'Neill, who is now Deputy Secretary to Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

20 https://www.praxisnation.com/writing/national-accelerationism

21 Peter Thiel, Libertopia Conference, San Diego 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45o8tQMGtvU.

22 In Andreessen's techno-optimist manifesto it states, for example: "We believe that there is no material problem – whether created by nature or by technology – that cannot be solved with more technology."

3. THE IDEA OF NEW ANTI-DEMOCRATIC MERITOCRATIC TECH-ORDERS

For a long time, plans for special economic zones enjoyed the nimbus of libertarian, anti-statist visions; with the Trump administration, they made their way into the White House and acquired state-bearing dignity. As early as 2023, Trump spoke of wanting to build "Freedom Cities" on open tracts of land in state ownership (Woodworth 2024). Max D. Woodworth explains: "In doing so, Trump follows a long tradition of authoritarian and fascist political leaders around the world hitching their fortunes to urban visions" (Woodworth 2024, 46). But beyond today's US borders, new horizons of possibility are opening up. In the modus operandi of an expansionist imperialism, the US government seeks to expand its influence across an announced "western hemisphere," to shift borders – exemplified by Greenland: "Greenland is imperative for National and World Security."[23] Silicon Valley's tech elite, too, supports national imperialism and has invested in Greenland.

While Musk sympathized with the president's Greenland plans primarily verbally, and Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, and Mark Zuckerberg are interested in the extraction of rare earth elements, among others, Peter Thiel has been involved with the island and the creation of a model city for longer. Since 2021, he has been an investor in the start-up Praxis, a crypto-utopian project led by Dryden Brown that searches for locations for "Freedom Cities" around the globe. The idea is to found, in the mode of "network states," new forms of life and governance – that is, a "digital nation." As early as autumn 2024, Brown had traveled to Greenland to, as he himself explained, "buy" the island.[24] In a thread on X that touches on various neocolonialist, proprietarian phantasms and clichés of Silicon Valley – from terraforming to space expansion – that views Greenland as mere investment material, he had already laid out discursive positions that would become virulent in January 2026, at the height of the Greenland crisis: "Supporting Greenland's independence through the creating of a private charter state would be in America's interest, projecting cultural, economic, and political power via private enterprise. A New Monroe Doctrine."[25]

Although Brown's political projections sound future-oriented and are thoroughly permeated by a "program of techno-optimism"[26] – by the efficiency promises of AI, by the desire for biotechnical optimization, and by crypto-based ideas of 'socialization' – they, too, are furnished with a backward-looking perspective. Thus, the NYU drop-out, like many right-wing actors, repeatedly draws not only on masculine-authoritarian ancient heroism and a classicist-nationalist aesthetic, but also on the (racially informed) superiority of patriarchal social forms in correlation with

23 https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/115925766187001811

24 https://x.com/drydenwtbrown/status/1856424282823541099

25 https://x.com/drydenwtbrown/status/1856424538982277236

26 https://drydenbrown.posthaven.com/national-accelerationism

biologically grounded hierarchies and past greatness: "We are the inheritors of a different set of cultural values. What we think about is Rome, Athens, and Sparta." As David Murakami Wood puts it: "PNS [Praxis Network State] is an overt expression of this racist, authoritarian urban utopia, combining white supremacist nostalgia with the libertarian charter city model" (Wood 2025). Alongside the regressive pathos, the more futuristic-looking plans, too, appear as a techno-optimistic rehash of ancient imperialism: Praxis intends to establish, through the development of a technologically advanced polis a.k.a. "Freedom City," a kind of confederation of states, a network of "Acceleration Zones" – cities "that accelerate technological progress in service of national priorities."[27]

Against this backdrop, the "digital nation" Praxis is only one of many examples of a reactionary futurism that appears more than timely in the political (discursive) climate of Trump 2.0: its members cultivate a particular, proprietarian, and patriarchal elitism that pledges itself to the vague "purpose […] to restore Western Civilization," while setting the promises of unity of a "shared culture, consisting of a worldview, way of life, and identity" against every social-democratic pluralism. It is hardly surprising that demands for a "merit-based immigration system at the macro level, and the micro level (college admissions, job applications), and investing heavily in space exploration"[28] are added in order to prepare the ground for "American accelerationism." In the wording of the Praxis website: "Inspired by the wisdom of great civilizations, we believe that true sovereignty is achieved through alignment with the transcendent. […] Our mission is to channel this drive into a cohesive way of life, forged by social structures and institutions that guide our people toward their destiny."[29]

Praxis can thus be read as an elitist-esoteric project that draws from the intellectual cosmos of techno-optimism while simultaneously laying the ideological groundwork for both a hierarchical, anti-democratic meritocracy and techno-fascism. The affirmation of technological acceleration forms the "common ground" for the collective. At the same time, the focus on the restitution of past greatness and, in Karp's words, a "resurrection and re-embrace of a sense of national and collective identity" is as unmistakable as a paradoxical fusion of orthodox nationalism and a global race/competition for high-IQ-people. In so doing, Brown and his "Praxians" – like so much of Silicon Valley today – echo a "palingenetic ultranationalism." Beyond that, they embody a "nostalgia for the what-has-been as a revolutionary impulse" (*Heimweh nach Gewesenem als revolutionärem Antrieb*) (Bloch 1985, 108), that is, modes of a paradoxical "non-simultaneity and simultaneity" (*Ungleichzeitigkeit und Gleichzeitigkeit*) (Bloch 1985, 111) that Ernst Bloch already recognized in the rising tide of German fascism, and which Eva von Redecker most recently brought into close connection with techno-fascism: "what is propagated

27 https://www.praxisnation.com/news/announcing-acceleration-zones

28 https://www.praxisnation.com/writing/national-accelerationism

29 https://www.praxisnation.com

from the right as the future is merely the extension of the past" (Redecker 2026, 56).

The techno-fascism cultivated in "Praxis" is formulated both as a revolutionary project for radical renewal and as thoroughly permeated by a regressive ideology. What ultimately takes shape here is thus an anti-democratic turn that welds libertarian with authoritarian and expansionist with isolationist tendencies, a techno-futurism with an ideological backwardness.

These ostensibly contradictory dynamics ultimately render "Freedom Cities" readable also as a post-solutionist projection.[30] For, in the "digital nation," technology – from AI to blockchain-based crypto-technologies – is designated as the ultimate, but technologically vague, shallow and highly speculative solution to *all* thinkable problems; a solution that consists above all in 'detaching' oneself from concrete social problems, in turning away from them. The aim is to indulge in a utopianism that focuses on escaping existing problems by ostensibly creating "problem-free" cities and states from the ground up: "meritocracy is a heavenscape."[31] Gil Duran sums up such ideas differently: "These aren't just company towns, and they certainly aren't zones of "freedom." They are better described as fascist cities – autocratic playgrounds where the ultra-rich and corporations make all the rules" (Duran 2025).

4. ANTI-DEMOCRATIC MERITOCRACY: NEOREACTION AND PERFORMANCE

The influence of the so-called Dark Enlightenment, also known as the neoreactionary movement (NRx), and its representatives Curtis Yarvin and Nick Land, appears more than evident in Musk and Thiel as well as in Brown. It has already been described in numerous accounts, specifically with regard to the "simultaneity of opposites, or of the non-simultaneous" (*Gleichzeitigkeit von Gegensätzen bzw. des Ungleichzeitigen*) (Nosthoff and Maschewski 2025, 75f.). What, however, remains underexplored in the depictions of the dark enlighteners' influence is the suggestive power of their anti-egalitarian concept of performance – as an expression of their concept of meritocracy – that informs techno-fascist thinking. Indeed, alongside Musk et al., neoreactionaries are currently shaping a particular form of anti-democratic meritocracy – where merit becomes a grounding dispositif for legitimizing techno-authoritarian and ultimately hierarchical orders.

For the dark enlighteners, democracy and its institutions carry degenerative traits – they are dysfunctional, weak, inefficient; precisely because they are, so their thinking goes, unable to promote technological merit to the extreme (Land 2023, 206). Yarvin, a PhD drop-out and computer scientist in whose company Thiel and

30 On the concept of post-solutionism cf. Felix Maschewski, Anna-Verena Nosthoff: „Mars, Musk und Metaverse. Der digitale Kapitalismus und das All", in: Mosse-Lectures, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8BRu1JVg5s&t=6s, 6.7.2023.

31 https://x.com/drydenwtbrown/status/1573695124244242433

Andreessen invested, describes democracy as 'progressively' corrupted and terms institutions such as bureaucracies, universities, and the media the "Cathedral". It is, in his account, an ideologically homogeneous, dogmatic system that relies less on genuine performance markers than on the conforming uniformity of compliance. For him, liberal-democratic principles of equality impede innovation and true progress. For, as he claims, human beings are not equal, life is not fair, and social position is not the result of differing individual starting points, chances, and opportunities, but the plain reflection of natural talent or cognitive performance capacity (IQ). Neoreactionaries are obsessively preoccupied with IQ – Quinn Slobodian speaks of an "IQ fetish" (Slobodian 2025) in Yarvin's case – as a meritocratic selection formula from which, in their view, a scientifically grounded, cognitive or natural hierarchy results. Hereby "tech-savvy elites are understood as the legitimate ruling stratum, while 'underperformers' are supposed to 'drop out on their own' or 'naturally'" (Mühlhoff 2025a, 111), or, as Ana Teixeira Pinto soberly notes: "they just accept that SES (socioeconomic status) is a fair measure of IQ, hence of merit" (Pinto 2017). This understanding of IQ rests on a reductionist conception of intelligence that narrows cognitive capacity to measurable, quantifiable, and hierarchizable variables, while systematically excluding embodied, social, emotional, practical, and relational forms of intelligence – in line with the conception of intelligence dominant in AI discourse, with its focus on the brain and cognition (Nosthoff 2026, chapter 2).

In the final consequence, the dark enlighteners thus ground, in social-Darwinist fashion, precisely that white-masculine, patriarchal elitism and biologistic anti-egalitarianism that is quite en vogue in Silicon Valley and carries more than mere traces of racist and eugenicist theorems (Gault and Pearson 2023).[32]

The formerly rational creature that is the human being is here mere human capital or biological material into which, given the relentless pace of technical-scientific development, one must continually reinvest. Naturally, the neoreactionaries are closely aligned with transhumanism, and every physical upgrade, every enhancement – from genome editing to mind-uploading – that promises to overcome the sluggish mass – of the human body as well as of society – appears almost necessary (Torres 2024). Transhumanists, as much as neoreactionaries, reduce the human being to informational patterns (Kurzweil 2005), conceiving of it as a machine, and seeking enhancement under the paradigm of increasing performance, efficiency, control, and productivity (Puzio 2022). Taken together with the transhumanist project, anti-democratic meritocracy then undergoes a further development: from evaluation to engineering. The individual and the social body are no longer merely subject to surveillance, comparison, or the measurement of performance; rather, the anti-democratic meritocracy of the Tech Right leads to a renewed biopolitical transformation of the human being – and society – itself. Cogni-

32 The fetishization of IQ is shared by neoreactionaries with other ideological currents, such as longtermism. Bostrom had already declared in the 1990s that he considered it possible that people of color might have a lower IQ than "mankind in general."

tive performance, productivity, and even biological capacities become objects of optimization, and recreation through AI, biotechnology, and neurotechnology. In this sense, merit is not simply measured; it is actively produced and amplified. As is often the case in ideological projects, the aim is the production of a new human being – here, the transhuman or posthuman – shaped by the ideal of a young, strong, and healthy man with strong IQ performance, while women, people with disabilities, and older people are perceived as weak.

Yet, on closer inspection, what is at stake is what Hannah Arendt described as the making-superfluous of human beings in ideological societies (Arendt 2020, 936f.). If the human being itself is reduced cybernetically to information processing and understood as a machine, then, as a consequence, the machine can ultimately do everything better and replace it. In the end, then, it is no longer the human being who stands at the center, but an artificial superintelligence serving a meritocratic elite (Bostrom 2017). In Peter Thiel's words: "We want more than cross-dressing or changing your sex organs. We want you to be able to change your heart and change your mind and change your whole body" (Thiel 2025). Everything is to be trimmed for efficiency, the crooked timber computerized, cybernetically perfected, turned into what Andreessen calls, in his idiom, "technological supermen" (Andreessen 2023) – so that it can be entirely absorbed into the futuristic machine-dreams in which Andreessen aligns himself almost reverently with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti.

The dark enlighteners also lay the political foundations for the anti-democratic dynamics of "Freedom Cities." For in a democracy, so the argument runs, too many regulations are enacted, too many compromises struck. Democracies shackle developmental potential and horizons of possibility, they are structurally too slow, and parliamentary dispute is detrimental to the required forms of decisionism. That is why democracy is, for neoreactionaries, a thoroughly bad system, incapable of producing a truly high-performing and merit-based government. As a consequence, democracies must consequently be replaced by an authoritarian, monarchical, formalized – that is, strictly property-based and thus more high-performing – format, a kind of state-corporation: led by a CEO-monarch or autocrat who is appointed not through elections but on account of his IQ and who conducts the business of the state with a focus on efficiency, productivity, and profitability (Land 2023, 206–296). Capitalist success trumps the democratic vote, performance indicators trump the values of equality, solidarity, and the common good, etc. In Yarvin's 'pathological' prose: "Our modern democratic elections are an extremely poor substitute for actual regime change. As we've seen, democracy is to government as gray, slimy cancer is to pink and healthy living tissue. It is a degenerate neoplastic form" (Yarvin 2008).

Yarvin's reflections are further amplified and 'accelerated' by Nick Land. In the discourse of acceleration zones or the substitute ideology of techno-optimism (An-

dreessen 2023),[33] his philosophy is reflected, which is wholly dedicated to a technodeterminist accelerationism; the unconditional acceleration of technological development, of markets, of competition, of capital, of performance. Everything must scale and accelerate still more consistently, more radically, so that progress may prevail, and that a truly efficient, high-performing system of government may emerge (Land 2023, 213). To put it with the effective accelerationist Guillaume Verdon aka. @beffjezos: "Meritocracy and dynamism go hand in hand."[34]

Land is more valued and consulted in Silicon Valley than ever (Duesterberg 2026), and with his ideas (well-read in the writings of Hans Hermann Hoppe) of "government corporations" (gov-corps) (Land 2023, 213), he inspires on the one hand the projections of Praxis etc., which try to put his ideas into 'practice'. On the other hand, and more radically, he inspires policies of demolition; both the demolition of democratic institutions – formulated as advice to Elon Musk: "Support DOGEing the shit out of USG"[35] – and of democratic modernity itself. For the decay and collapse of the old order is, according to Land, as unavoidable as it is necessary, and must even be actively accelerated in speed and force in order for a new order to emerge; that is, a technicist or technocratic rule of elites that helps to unconditionally unleash all market forces. While Amlinger and Nachtwey have recently explained how the incessant concentration on performance "can also release destructive energies" (2025, 100) ("Zerstörungslust") in their study on "democratic fascism," among the neoreactionaries, this motif operates still more radically: they celebrate an apotheosis of destruction. This "politics driving toward an endgame" (Roberts and Hogan 2019) declares democracy just as much as the human itself to be a mere transitional form, to be living fossils in a relentless transformation, with technology figuring as *the* subject of history. The desire to erase the slate, and to combine apocalypse with the promise of an earthly paradise has appeared many times throughout history. Especially for democracy and society, this is a particularly dangerous, yet persuasive and attractive narrative. Its black-and-white framing suggests that there is no alternative, that we are inevitably heading toward collapse or downfall, and it obscures the fact that technologies, politics, and society can be actively shaped.

5. CONCLUSION

Beyond a neoreactionary, accelerationism-fueled longing for the apocalypse, the techno-fascist potentials of actually existing AI systems from Thiel, Karp, et al. are of course far more immediate and concrete. While Palantir launched the "Meritocracy Fellowship" in April 2025, it simultaneously became known that the company had signed a deal that deepened its close collaboration with ICE. The company is

33 Andreessen refers to Land as the "Patron Saint" of techno-optimism.

34 https://x.com/beffjezos/status/1774345037322850646

35 https://x.com/xenocosmography/status/1939916699140026839

developing ImmigrationOS, which tracks and monitors immigrants using, among other means, biometric and movement data, enabling authorities – under the banner of "AI-driven enforcement" – to carry out faster arrests and deportations. Nearly a year of various reports about an ever-closer collaboration between the government and the tech industry later, Alex Karp declares that AI systems act, above all, as political technologies; as drivers of a societal transformation initiated, produced, and 'made' by the Silicon Valley elite: "This technology disrupts humanity's train, largely Democratic voters, and makes their economic power less, and increases the economic power of vocationally trained, working class, often male voters. These disruptions are going to disrupt every aspect of our society."[36]
One can hardly fail to hear the misogynistic and anti-egalitarian undertones and the 'meritocratic' program in Karp's remarks, and above all its authoritarian ambitions. The AI technology thus announced is no more neutral than it is apolitical; it is a power instrument of an anti-democratic elite and the indispensable torque of a new, techno-fascist regime. Ideologically, this regime can be situated within neoreactionary currents that declare democracy and equality to be antiquities, legitimize authority through IQ, enact it through AI, and discern in technologically accelerated progress the ultimate – or rather, the very last – purpose. This contours a dark dialectic that, in the name of meritocracy and achievement, seeks to reformalise the achievements of modernity (including liberal democracy) – and, in a simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, to level all contradictions (and every dissent). Technofascism thereby drives a synthetic double movement (Esposito 2014):[37] ideological regression and technological progress, (counter-)Enlightenment promises, scenarios of a new and final age fuse into conceptions of an anti-democratic elite rule that underlines its claim to domination above all through institutionally destructive ambitions.

Against this backdrop, the fixation on the tension between universities and meritocracy also becomes intelligible. On the one hand, techno fascists seek to anchor themselves in the academic world through books, their own scientific journals, and positions at elite universities – i.e., through simulating it; on the other hand, they consider the knowledge produced within that very world to be flawed and turn against it. Universities are institutions for the reproduction of elites, but also sites of democratic practice and promise at least the possibility – however modest their permeability – of social mobility. That these institutions are also becoming more inclusive and diverse, that in doing so they even call into question the 'achievements' of past and present elites and wound their sense of status (Stanley 2024, 103ff., 115ff.),[38] appears to threaten the 'natural' order.

36 Alex Karp, CNBC, https://www.cnbc.com/video/2026/03/12/watch-cnbcs-full-interview-with-palantir-ceo-alex-karp.html.

37 This dynamic is also inherent in classical fascist formations.

38 It is precisely the ideology of superiority, frequently coupled with a sense of grievance at the threatened loss of one's own status, that reliably motivates fascist thinking.

When Karp, Thiel, Musk etc. complain that the universities have become too woke, that they promote no talent, enable no achievement, and are sinking into chaos, this merely serves a right-wing extremist 'reaction'. For, while the CEOs demand demolition, destruction, and total disruption, they do so only to consolidate and conserve their own status: everything must change so that those who are in power continue to rule.

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APPROACHING TECHNOFASCISM

LUKE MUNN

1. INTRODUCTION

"A moment of reckoning has arrived for the West," intoned a recent recruitment ad for Palantir, a software company that increasingly provides data-driven "intelligence" for intelligence, military, and state agencies around the world. "Our culture has fallen into shallow consumerism," the ad warned. Developers were frittering away their talents on petty pursuits and maintaining their ethical purity while forgetting their duty to the nation. The company leverages machine learning for mass deportation, and deploys AI insights to identify migrants, dissidents, and activists. "On the factory floor, in the operating room, on the battlefield," the ad concludes, "we build to dominate."

What do we call this combination of information and domination, this twinning of "intelligence" and barbarism? In op-eds and talk shows, social media and seminars, a single label has risen to prominence: technofascism (Dillet 2025; Radsch 2025; Saito and Sasaki 2025; Wang 2025). Its first component – "fascism" – condenses incredible affective power into a tiny space, evoking jack-booted masses marching in lock-step and blood red banners in blackletter. For this reason, it is used as a rhetorical grenade, a way to score points or end debates rather than carefully articulate a historical moment or analyse its specific conditions. Fascism captures a vibe or is hurled as an insult.

The same indistinctness applies to the "techno" in "technofascism." Techno is a sweeping phrase that gestures to myriad forms of contemporary technology ranging from artificial intelligence to military drones, from social media algorithms to surveillance cameras. And yet, as any fascist historian would attest, technology has always been a core component of historical fascism as both a political order and future imaginary. "Fascism is a cult of the archaic fitted out by modern technology," observed Debord (2010). From futurist manifestos praising machines (Marinetti 1909) to panzer tanks, technology has long been integral to the establishment, reinforcement, and operationalization of fascist power. As Marcuse (1998, 53) recognised, the National Socialist regime was not simply sustained by brutality but "also by the ingenious manipulation of the power inherent in technology."

To dismiss the "techno" in technofascism as mere historical ignorance, however, would be a mistake. Like many popular phrases, technofascism puts its finger (albeit imperfectly) on a set of conditions that characterize the present moment. At a high level, technofascism gestures to a resurgence of fascist values, ideologies, and formations in the last few years and suggests that contemporary technologies are somehow vital to its renewed power and relevance. To namecheck "technofascism" in newspaper articles, blog posts, and op-eds is to recognise in some tacit way that technology, working alongside a cluster of other social, political, financial,

and environmental forces, has rendered fascist energies more alluring, more viable, or more durable.

What then is technofascism, and how does technology feature within it? This is the core question pursued by this article. Drawing from fascist studies, media studies, and a range of real-world examples, I argue that technology constitutes three key roles. In "Augmentation," technology provides an extension and intensification to existing power regimes, operationalizing difference and domination. In "Alienation," complex technologies create a vacuum of meaning, quickly filled by powerful mythologies that address grievances and return order to the world. And in "Manipulation," technologies create environments that allow for desire and agency while subtly shaping the hearts and minds of individuals over time.

2. "FASCISM"

Before digging into the technological component, however, we first need to recover fascism as a term. The last century has seen a mountain of fascist literature, an ocean of ink (Mosse 1966; Carsten 1982; Payne 1996). Lingering beneath many of the texts is fascination but also consternation, a struggle to make sense of a troubling period and its traumatic fallout. Through histories, biographies, and analyses, the incomprehensible is made intelligible, given a structure and a story. While laudable, the motivating question seems to be: what was fascism? By exhaustively chronicling and defining, we will never forget and never repeat. I ask a different question: what is fascism? Like any species, we should expect this phenomenon to evolve, shapeshifting to optimally match the environment and bolster its ability to reproduce.

I thus treat fascism as a program rather than a definition. It is not about identifying and checking off key elements to hit a minimum threshold, but rather tracing the continuity of a certain logic. "The concept of fascism seems both inappropriate and indispensable for grasping this new reality," states Traverso (2019); the trick is to situate it historically while apprehending the novelties of the present, to acknowledge "both continuity and transformation." Others have taken this same route, resulting in a cluster of hyphenated terms: post-fascism, late fascism, or proto-fascism (Traverso 2019; Toscano 2023; Cox and O'Connor 2025). The gambit here is to relinquish a degree of "rigor" in the form of rigid definitions and semantic debates to pose a more interesting set of questions about the fascistic energies that increasingly seem to pervade everyday life.

Does fascism fit our contemporary condition? To suggest our moment is a carbon copy of one a hundred years ago would be too simple. Clearly the United States in 2025 differs from Italy in 1925 and Germany in 1935. And yet, if we loosen our frame somewhat, thinking not just historically but ideologically, parallels begin to emerge. The founder of fascism studies described it as a "form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-

based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion" (Paxton 2004).

Rather than a 1:1 comparison of the present to classical fascism, such statements free us up to more modestly identify bundles of fascistic logics, tactics, and views. Pronatalism, as a brief example, has recently returned to the headlines. Here, proponents put forward a set of "rational" concerns, driven by data, around lower reproduction rates leading to reduced economic productivity and increased strain on state resources (Munn 2024c). The unspoken problem, however, is not reproduction but who is reproducing – birth rates in developing nations remain high. Here we see a reversioned fascist eugenics, where community decline and the rise of the Other is addressed via cleansing and expansion. Ethnonationalism becomes sanitized and endorsed in the language of technorationalism.

These fascist energies can certainly be understood traditionally on the macro level. Here fascism is a political order, a mode of governance, a regime that structures society in particular ways. Eco's (1995) famous fourteen characteristics of ur-fascism reads like a shorthand description of the second Trump administration. "Traditionalism" and the "rejection of modern" are echoed in the Make America Great Again slogan. "Fear of difference" and intolerance to intruders brings to mind chants of "build the wall." "Machismo" and misogynistic contempt for women recalls moments in which rivals were denounced as "bitches." "Life is permanent war" connects with recent visions of invading Greenland or annihilating the last inhabitants of Gaza with overwhelming force. And an "appeal to the frustrated middle class" via a populist rhetoric captures the core engine of Trump's rise and rise in American politics.

But fascism can also be understood on the micro level. For Deleuze and Guattari (2009), fascism was not something imposed from above but desired from below, a bundle of forces driven by our interests. Fascism at this more granular level operates on the inner-life of the individual, working on hearts and minds in subtle but powerful ways. The aim, as Toscano (2023) reminds us, is to capture or divert these inner energies: "unrealized wishes for a better life, memories of precapitalist lifeways, unproductive and excessive desire."

Micro-fascism pounces on these grievances, addressing and weaponizing them. The Incel and the Edgelord, the Patriot and the Red Piller, the Alpha and the Tradwife, these figures draw adherents and frame debates by leveraging deep-seated aspirations and anxieties. As Chantelle Gray (2022) observes: "there is an I feel at the heart of fascism." Their hold on the individual, their affective purchase, relies on repeating and elevating certain images and phrases and weaponizing certain sentiments (outrage, disgust) while bracketing out those incompatible with this inner-vision (tolerance, nuance). They are fascism in miniature, fascism at a molecular level.

Fascism at the micro level brings it too close for comfort. Here fascism is not an Evil Empire from a more ignorant and barbaric period in history, but a latent potential in each of us. It is the smirk at the anti-immigrant meme as I scroll through my feed, the whiteness that enables ignorance and apathy when others suffer, the sense (misguided but visceral nevertheless) that systems and institutions are stacked against me, and the desire for stability in an unstable world, which equates to a desire to dominate rather than be dominated. As one psychologist (Altemeyer 1996) declared after forty years of researching authoritarian personalities: "I study normal folks, not Nazis."

I'm interested in the interplay between these structural and individual energies, in how forms of reason and unreason at a macro or institutional level might be used to tug on a person's hopes and fears, which in turn funnels more support, more commitment, and more power into a regime. I invoke "fascism" not to check the boxes and verify whether the label applies or does not apply, but as a framing device to understand the logic of the present moment, a bundle of "meta-politics and motivating positions" (Burley 2017, 54) that repeatedly frames the world in particular ways, employs particular strategies, and aims to achieve particular ends.

3. "TECHNO"

Having updated and expanded the "fascist" side of the equation, we can now begin to articulate the role of technology within it. In the sections that follow, I lay out three distinct functions that technology fulfills within contemporary fascist formations. Of course, these are never entirely distinct or tidily compartmentalized, but overlap and mix at various points. However, the triple functions outlined below offer a simplified heuristic, a quick-and-dirty framework to better understand and analyze the fascist formations that increasingly pervade the present.

3.1 AUGMENTATION

Like any political order, fascism contains an array of core objectives, a series of programmes to pursue. If it is to achieve and retain power, those objectives cannot remain at the level of political vision or policy brief, but must somehow be put into practice. Here technologies step in, offering to augment these aims, to convert the theoretical imaginary into operational reality. Indeed, as everyday life becomes increasingly digitally mediated, technologies prove to be increasingly central to grasping and shaping that life in powerful ways. Digital technologies can act as epistemic infrastructures (Munn 2022), parsing the world and framing what is salient and valuable and what is irrelevant. And digital technologies can function as new vectors for territorialization (Munn 2023), maintaining power for the powerful and conferring certain advantages on the actors who establish them.

To examine how this augmentation plays out in practice, we can turn to Palantir, a Silicon Valley firm that increasingly provides the "intelligence" for a range of

intelligence agencies, law enforcement agencies, state departments, and blue-chip corporates. Palantir recognised, not incorrectly, that data would become a new battlefront, and that Washington incumbents were not poised to leverage it. Palantir's core offering is essentially an integrated software/hardware solution for clients, with "forward deployed engineers" migrating siloed databases into a single platform where data is made compatible and cross-indexable. Once ingested, users can search and explore in highly visual and relational ways to identify patterns and anomalies amidst the noise, the "needle in the haystack" that will reveal the terror network, the financial fraudster, or increasingly the Othered migrant.

Palantir's augmentation of state power can be best seen in its use by Immigration and Customs Enforcement or ICE. Demarcating alien from citizen and friend from enemy is core to fascism; it is the politics of us and them (Stanley 2018). And yet as the world becomes globalised and borders porous, ferreting out this "enemy within" (Marr 2025) becomes increasingly difficult. By collecting vast amounts of data, assembling it into an interoperable platform, and making it queryable, Palantir technologies extend the site of power from the border, pursuing the migrant at her small inland town, her workplace, her residence. As Coleman and Kocher (2011, 235) note, the informational capacities that enable a raid, the raid itself, and the broader fallout of the raid all work to "bring the threat of deportation into the most intimate recesses of immigrant life."

ImmigrationOS is the latest incarnation of these technologies, a $30 million extension to ICE's systems which will provide "near real-time visibility into instances of self-deportation" and streamline the "end to end immigration lifecycle from identification to removal" (Ho 2025). Palantir's blueprint has been emulated by a growing array of others. Anduril, Skydio and Shield AI are all founded on developing information technologies for military and intelligence use, with Rune Technologies recently closing a $24 million Series A round of funding to move warfare logistics away from the "Excel era" and towards AI-augmented tools. The Trump administration's new emphasis on aggressive militarization, border security, and "smart" surveillance – all-too-familiar values in fascist regimes – has essentially created a gold rush for these technology companies to implement state visions (Miller and Kinder 2025).

In one sense, then, augmentation is operationalization, a mechanism that converts vitriolic political speech and policy to shovel-ready programmes and on-the-ground violence. But augmentation also enables a kind of intensification and extensification of fascist power. Foucault (1995, 213) recognised that police power was powerful but too constrained, too centralised, too tied to the state; what the state needed was a power able to apprehend the social world, "the dust of events, actions, behavior, opinions – 'everything that happens.'" For power to be viable and durable, it must achieve intensification (Nealon 2008), attaining greater control, over a wider field, in a more efficient fashion. Contemporary technologies like Palantir offer a means of registering, capturing and parsing the digital dust of everyday activity diffused across a broader number of scales and spaces.

Of course, this augmentation is never simply given or guaranteed. The translation from fascist ideal to fascist reality is fraught, shot through with the limitations of technology, the resistance of individuals and communities, and the contingencies of the world. Whether it is the hubris of techno imaginaries, the practical limits of storage and sensors, or more active forms of protest and counter-power, technology is never a silver bullet or simple shortcut for turn-key fascism. The point, however – returning to Foucault and Nealon – is to extend its ambitions wider, to spread its impacts more pervasively, to reduce any frictions further. In this sense, the technical augmentation of fascist power is iterative not exhaustive, with each new version solving some of the pain points that inhibited the full potential of its predecessor.

3.2 ALIENATION

Secondly, technology becomes overwhelming and alienating, setting up a vacuum of meaning and orientation that is filled by an array of fascist mythologies. Over a decade ago, Andrejevic (2013) had already diagnosed our growing condition of infoglut. Individuals today are confronted with a barrage of short-form video, clickbait links, outrage-inducing articles, alerts and notifications, a daily deluge of disturbing news and confusing claims. After surveying 14,000 employees and managers across 17 countries, an Oracle (2023) study found that 78% were bombarded with more data than ever before, but 70% admitted they gave up making decisions altogether because "the data was too overwhelming."

The rise of AI models, which can generate reams of seemingly credible information in seconds based on statistical patterns, only exacerbates this dynamic. Large language models have been widely shown to be sycophantic, digital "yes-men" that mold claims to match what users want to hear and quickly back-pedal when confronted or critiqued (Sharma et al. 2025; Kwik 2025). Models are stochastic parrots (Bender et al. 2021) that regurgitate material and reproduce a consensus view without any higher-level understanding of the world, truth machines (Munn et al. 2023) that effectively become bullshit generators where veracity becomes largely irrelevant (Frankfurt 2009).

We have more information than ever, and yet it is superficial or unsatisfying. Mythologies provide an alternative epistemic order to the atomistic, data-driven "insights" that dominate our current approach to knowledge, where one fact, stat, or dataset can be countered by another with a few seconds of searching or prompting. As Finchelstein (2022, 126) writes of one prominent fascist, he was "not a relativist but a believer in supreme forms of truth that transcended, and could not be reversed by, corroboration." To construct a myth is to set up a more subterranean form of knowing that will not be shaken by one trivial datapoint or another, a deeper vein of truth that sits across and underneath the superficial turbulence of the everyday.

Myths offer cosmology rather than correlation, cohesion rather than fragmentation – telling a singular story about how the world works, how power works, how we should relate to ourselves and others. These worldviews have an inbuilt ethical and moral position that provides – contrary to the kind of instrumental reason that Adorno and Horkheimer (2016) denounced or the customer-service-driven "truths" that ChatGPT delivers – a standard for individuals to evaluate the torrent that confronts them every day. Myths act as an epistemic bedrock, undisturbed by the micro tremors of facts and stats coursing through our feeds.

In this sense, myth is the perfect technology to cut through the clutter, an ancient form repackaged into modern necessity. "Myth sought to report, to name, to tell of origins," Adorno and Horkheimer (2016) observe, "but therefore also to narrate, record, explain."

Myths make the abstract concrete, replacing the complexities of globalised problems – supply chains, cost of living, economic instability – into some *thing* that is at once concrete and flexible, a "singular multiplicity" (Massumi 2025) of figures ranging from the feminist and the leftist to the progressive and the migrant. Myth establishes battle lines, synthesizing complex webs of actors into camps and armies. It provides an overarching interpretive framework, a schema able to quickly respond to climate news (climate change is a hoax), Gaza news (we side with Israel), or economic news (tariff the globalists and make America great again). Myth is a knife for today's attention economy, slicing through a morass of competing headlines, contradictory narratives, and talking heads delivering "both sides" balance.

The fascist mythmaker powerfully evokes repulsion of the other, disgust at their degeneracy, a tangible sense of loss and hopelessness in the mind of the listener. To focus only on the intellectual side of fascism is to "miss the most important register: subterranean passions and emotions," stressed Paxton (2004): it is about "the gut not the brain." These foundational feelings are a sense of "overwhelming crisis" and a belief that a "chosen people have been weakened by political parties, social classes, unassimilable minorities, spoiled rentiers, and rationalist thinkers who lack the necessary sense of community" – and so what is required now is a battle between good and evil, where the chosen have the right to dominate others.

Together, these aspects help us make sense of the return of myth in the age of machine learning. The affective grip achieved by the fascistic regime in the present moment is not merely a deception for the dumb, a misleading of a naive sheeple, but rather directly draws on the instinctual, factional, and frictional aspects at the heart of human nature (Munn 2024b). It mobilizes the microfascistic tendencies within the individual – the ability to lock on to difference, to fear the other, to defend our own when crises threaten – and posits that a form of macrofascism is the only way to survive and thrive in a world that seems to be falling apart. Myth is not irrational, but a logical antidote to individuals facing a crumbling world and a data deluge.

3.3 MANIPULATION

Finally, technology establishes environments that can shape the hearts and minds of individuals, over time, and at scale. This is not to strip the user of agency, to make them into a drone. Contrary to Kittler (1999), media is not deterministic – and yet it is possible to take the power of technology seriously without falling into technodeterminism. Media exerts force over a "creepier, slower, more unnerving time," asserts Chun (2017), effectively "disappearing from consciousness." Such an influence is subtle or even subliminal, a kind of power that "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (Foucault 1995).

Contemporary media has moved from standardization to hypercustomisation, from discipline to forms of control that employ positivity, freedom, and expression as their watchwords (Han 2017). Indeed, one of technology's major recent innovations – glossed in the public imaginary as "the algorithm" (Beer 2019) – is the ability of technical systems to latch onto forms of desire and funnel them back into platforms, experiences, and environments where "stickiness" and engagement are prioritised above all else. Recommendations are "the computational exploitation of a natural human desire: to look 'behind the curtain,' to dig deeper into something that engages us," observes Tufekci (2018). To recommend a video, return a search result, or generate images or texts is to respond to that desire but always via computational mechanisms which are structured, ordered, or curated in particular ways. If the power of the platform certainly stems from its transactional mediation (services, payments, activity), it is also a function of its social and ideological mediation (content, relationships, information, indoctrination).

For a concrete example of technical manipulation, we can turn to work on the alt-right pipeline (Munn 2019; Hermansson et al. 2020; Das 2023). Whether described as taking the red pill or falling down the rabbit hole, a number of ex-radicals have testified to how exposure to online material, consumed over time and structured in particular ways, led them to more radical, toxic, or extremist viewpoints. In one well-known case, an ex-radical began his journey disillusioned by life. Seeking guidance online, he began with talk shows and self-help videos that were relatively centrist politically speaking. From there he moved to creators with more edgy humour, then onto more overt white-rights advocates and finally arrived at outspoken white supremacists and explicit incitements to violence.

There is a smooth, step-wise quality to this process, an incremental progression. Based on the rules of recommendations, each piece of content must be familiar, suggested by a user's previous history, but also novel, something not yet consumed. Thus, while these paths may fork and diverge, they ultimately shunt a user further along this pipeline. "You'll take one piece of that, and that will take you to the next step and the next step and the next step," one ex-radical explains (Faraday Speaks 2019), "and this is how you become radicalized." The transition to fascist ideologies is not a leap but thousands of micro-nudges over time. Such testimonies demonstrate how a combination of individual desire, computational recommenda-

tions, and social relations produce an environment which tends to push subjects further right along the political spectrum.

These manipulations have social impacts at scale. A spate of articles has documented "the Tate effect" in which followers of the former kickboxer turned mega-influencer have internalised a distinct set of ideologies that shape their definition of manhood, their priorities of domination and control, and their attitude to women. These have produced a climate of misogyny across schools in Australia (amongst other countries), with a noted uptick in the sexualization and harassment of female teachers (Hermant and Yussuf 2024). Such views slot neatly into a longstanding blueprint of fascist masculinity (Theweleit 1987; Theweleit 1989; Dagnino 2018). On a more overtly political level, many have noted a marked trend of young men towards more conservative beliefs or far-right stances (Chowdhury 2025; Higgins 2025), diverging sharply from more progressive young women.

Even for those at less impressionable life stages, these technologies can shape perception in powerful but nearly imperceptible ways. Recent investigative work on generative AI image models, for instance, has documented how prompts for high-income and highly regarded jobs such as doctor, lawyer, and CEO consistently return images of white men, while prompts for low-income or "dirty" jobs such as janitor, dishwasher, or fast-food worker generate images of Black or Brown women (Rest of World 2023). Such images derive their political power precisely by disavowing any politics: generated in a matter of seconds in ways that align with the user's input, they simply represent the world "as it is." But this world is essentially fascistic in exoticizing races, stereotyping cultures, and subjugating already marginal populations. These representations, and the underlying information ontologies that power them (Munn and Badri 2025), prop up primordial categories in hegemonic ways, buttressing traditional gender norms, racial typecasting, religious demonization, and so on.

In all the cases, technology functions both individually and at scale, working across populations to elevate particular kinds of beliefs and worldviews. In this sense, the preconditions for fascism at the macro level of the state are established at more micro (individual) or meso (community) levels. Here we can see how the formidable cultural work done through feeds and algorithms, platforms and models, might coalesce into a distinct set of political conditions. Influenced by psychological insights suggesting "the human psyche is a lot more malleable to coercion and external pressure than liberal theories of autonomous individuality were prepared to accept" (van Gelder 2007), part of Adorno and Horkheimer's critical project was to show how cultural systems can cultivate forms of barbarism. The fascist nation is composed of fascist individuals who are sympathetic to fascist ideologies.

4. CONCLUSION

Technofascism is more than a rhetorical flourish or a convenient label for reactionary excess. It names a concrete and evolving formation in which technological sys-

tems and fascist logics co-produce one another. Across augmentation, alienation, and manipulation, we see how technologies do not merely express fascist tendencies but enable them – operationalizing domination and difference, reanimating ancient ideologies, and repackaging them for a digitally networked world. To grasp technofascism, then, is to move past the surface of founders, politicians, and press releases, and toward the deeper structures of fascist power that seem to render it both more compelling and more threatening in our present moment. Technofascism is scaffolded by specific alignments of infrastructure, ideology, and affect – in this sense, the examples above are only a handful of the many that could be chosen, convergences where technical and political orders dovetail together in clear ways: toxic misogyny into meme, xenophobic barbarism into big data.

While there are key differences between historical fascism and the fascist formations in the present, an inner ideological core can still be identified: the fantasy of purity, the restoration of a glorious past, the definition and oppression of the other, and the regression to primordial categories to make sense of the world. Recognizing how these impulses are now instantiated in algorithms, infrastructures, and models is essential for any politics of resistance. By tracing the technological operations of augmentation, alienation, and manipulation, we gain not only a vocabulary for diagnosing our present, but also a vantage point from which to imagine alternatives (Munn 2023; 2024) – a politics of technology grounded in radical inclusivity, mutual care, and ecological attunement.

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TECH FASCISM AND ANTIFASCIST ABUNDANCE

JILLIAN (LEE) CRANDALL

> With this abundance of bounty from robbery, they've instituted and developed a monster of technology.
>
> Huey P. Newton, The Technology Question (1972)

1. (TECH) FASCISM BEYOND ANALOGIES

Recently, leftists have begun to quibble over the word "fascism," asking if it is really the correct word for what is happening in our contemporary moment. In a recent *Jacobin* article titled "The Trouble With Fascism Analogies" (Prezioso 2025) "techno-fascism" is listed as one of many neo-fascisms being bandied about. The author argues: "analogy seems to offer one way forward. It offers a familiar starting point to the unfamiliar, while providing a framework for the urgent mobilization of resistance. But the debate falters when it comes to identifying this enemy. Fight, yes – but against what?"

It is encouraging that the author identifies the need to fight. However, what this assessment misinterprets is that *tech fascism is not an analogy*. Additionally, those who have coined the term "tech fascism" have emphatically identified what to fight against, namely venture capital extremism (VC Info Docs, 2026). For those working to shine a light on the dark tech fascist axis, our claims are not simply that this is a fight *against*, but also a fight *for* life and a life worth living, for genuine abundance for all people, not just an elite subset of the powerful tech actors of the venture capitalist class.

The *Jacobin* article identifies a very real concern, however, which is that many leftists are not taking fascism at its face. It is still a challenging task, one taken up by thinkers like Alberto Toscano (2023), to encourage even the most progressive people to think of fascism not simply as an analogy to European fascism as fixed points in time, but instead a *longue durée*, a transnational plurality differentially applied across race, gender, sexuality, intertwined with capitalism, colonialism and carceriality. To add on a new layer about the specific contours of tech fascism may seem too much. But the type of tech fascism I aim to unpack is not simply a layer, but a full form, connected to the settler colonial production of new tech enclaves, aka "crypto cities," "startup cities," or so-called "network states". As such, Prezioso's point is well-taken: if tech fascism is currently being misinterpreted as merely an analogy, we need to get a lot more specific.

The term "tech fascism" comes from an ongoing coalition led by former tech workers (e.g. Intel, NVIDIA, Google), labor organizers, and those formerly associated with startups/tech venture capital firms (a16z, Y Combinator, among others).

They have directly witnessed and experienced venture capital extremism, racism, sexism, rampant misogyny, and technological supremacy from the inside. They know the symptoms of tech fascism not just as an academic exercise in theory but as a deeply felt toxic virus. For an excellent breakdown on what is happening right now, who the key players are, how deep it goes, and how disturbingly dark this situation is, see "VC Info Docs" (2026).

In articulating the centrality of technology to fascism, I draw much from thinkers of the Frankfurt School, for whom fascism has always been technologically mediated, as I seek to show in this essay. Tech fascism is not led by one single figurehead, nor do tech fascists hold a strong affiliation with a particular nation-state, except where they can drum up business and power. To the contrary, many are vehemently anti-state in addition to being explicitly anti-democratic. Early tech fascist experiments, materializations, and collaborations have unsurprisingly touched down in authoritarian regimes, for example under Milei, Trump, Bukele, Netanyahu, Mohammed bin Salman, among others. And yet as Stuart Hall suggests, to focus only on the "visible fascists" can distract from "more enduring and regressive transformations" of fascism (Toscano 2023, 42–43) in and against the state itself. I do not evoke "fascism" in terms of a static bounded period in history, constrained to European fascism, Italian fascism, or German Nazism, although their ideologies and symbols are taken up with verve by some contemporary tech fascists, especially the technological accelerationism inspired by the Italian Futurists. Thinkers in the Black radical tradition (e.g. Angela Davis, George Jackson, Cedric Robinson) have long demonstrated that fascism is not a re-emergence, but a continuation intrinsically connected to processes of racial capitalism and colonialism. Nor are the geographies of fascism constrained to Europe, as George Padmore, Walter Rodney, and Aimé Césaire have argued, pointing to colonial-fascist practices in colonies – on which technoeconomic experimentation has regularly occurred.

Critics are correct to identify that *something different* is happening here. Authoritarianism is typically associated with a hardening of a central power like a state or nation with a central figurehead. In the US, tech-investors are working to install favorable political candidates, while others are being appointed by Donald Trump, a central figurehead of the state. More broadly, tech-authoritarians see democracy as an inefficient technology to be uninstalled and replaced by technology itself. They are doing so by eliminating the positions of federal employees from prior administrations, gutting funding for public services, upending international relations, foreign aid, immigration policies, and more (e.g. DOGE building on Yarvin's earlier "RAGE – Retire All Government Employees," which in turn builds on Newt Gingrich's calls to reduce the federal workforce). Tech-authoritarians advocate for the freedom to exchange more freely on the free market, and seek unregulated freedoms for startup experimentation, freedoms from taxation and regulation, while investing in, developing, and deploying the tools and technologies to enact genocide and strategically limit the human rights and freedoms of others (from surveillance

tools to drone weapons). Opponents are deemed backwards and misguided, standing in the way of technological progress.

Fascism is a totalizing process, but it is uneven and differentially experienced. As Arundhati Roy (2013) emphasizes, "the first step toward reimagining a world gone terribly wrong would be to stop the annihilation of those who have a different imagination." Marginalized people across geographies and across times have long held alternative technological imaginations for authentic abundance – they have, however, been systematically limited from enacting these dreams. Abundance is the word that needs more quibbling over from the left. The abundance we need can be found in alternative understandings of technology, of humanity, and of land-life relations outside of the death-dealing capitalist status quo. An abundance that threatens the settler capitalist is, as Candace Fujikane contends (2021), an "abundance that feeds." To the degree these alternatives have been limited in material actualization, the aesthetic offers a necessary but insufficient dimension for antifascism. At the same time, we must contend with what stands in the way.

2. FASCIST FASCINATIONS WITH FREEDOM/FREEDOM-AS-CAPITALISM

To induce the more extreme crisis, I lead with quotes from the manifestoes of some of the most influential tech-founders-turned billionaire-venture-capitalists. PayPal and Palantir co-founder Peter Thiel famously wrote, "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible" (Thiel 2009). Fascinations with freedom are far from foreign to fascism (Toscano 2023, 51). Freedom in Thiel's case means freedom for the free market, freedom from government control. Freedom is a proxy for authoritarian capitalism, with tech venture capitalists as the ultimate authority, unimpeded by government. Economic sociologist Karl Polanyi warned in 1934 that fascism is "merely the outcome of the mutual incompatibility of Democracy and Capitalism in our time," and that fascism is the "revolutionary solution which keeps Capitalism untouched." Polanyi and Thiel agree on the incompatibility problem, yet for Polanyi, capitalism needs to be checked if genuine democracy has any hope, and for Thiel, democracy must be sacrificed to save freedom-as-capitalism.

I am by no means defending versions of liberal democracy, illusions of democracy, which do not equally serve marginalized populations, immigrants, trans people, people of color. I point to Herbert Marcuse (Marcuse 2002, 56) who notes how in the production of affluence, [liberal] "democracy would appear to be the most efficient system of domination." This illusion of democracy differs from what Marcuse describes as "genuine democracy" which ostensibly is more direct and pluralistic. But let us stick with the premise that a genuine democracy – where power is genuinely vested in the people – is something worth aspiring to. In doing so, we emphasize the crucial need for a resistance *against* tech fascism, against actions that are increasingly death-dealing and life-draining, and we emphasize the fight *for* life worth living.

Within the broader scope of tech fascism is a far-right contingent inspired by the "Dark Enlightenment"/neo-reactionary (NRx) movements, which advocates for the exit of existing nation-states and creation of new states "cured of democracy" by being managed "like any other large business, by dividing logical ownership into negotiable shares" with residents-as-customers.[1] These movements are inspired by pseudo-philosophers Nick Land and Curtis Yarvin, who have espoused racist, xenophobic views (Burrows 2019). Another branch of "techno-optimists" identifies with the effective acceleration (e/acc) movement, which advocates for the acceleration of unimpeded technological development and capitalism. Tech-VC's alignment with the right is far from unprecedented. As Becca Lewis (2025) has traced, Silicon Valley's venture-capitalist tech-elites have long been aligned with the conservative and reactionary right. Technology journalist Paulina Borsook likened the Silicon Valley's libertarianism and worship of male power as "a little reminiscent of the early celebrants of Eurofascism from the 1930s." Silicon Valley's success was only made possible by the exploitation of immigrant labor, and large amounts of Department of Defense funding, but these stories are often overshadowed by rhetoric around technological innovation and progress, utopian visions of the digital frontier, counterculture experimentation, entrepreneurial grit, and the figure of the tech-genius college dropout.

Rather than a total upending of US empire, some tech fascists seek to restore the United States to its days of perceived former glory. In recent interviews hosted at the Hoover Institution, Mosaic/Netscape co-founder-turned-venture-capitalist, Marc Andreessen, emphasizes he is not trying to eliminate democracy – he is trying to *renew* it. This debate around democracy exposes longstanding contradictions between social liberalism and economic liberalism. Andreessen's interview mirrors Ludwig von Mises' insistence on economic liberalism to save democracy: "Democracy without liberalism is a hollow form." (Mises 1951, 76). Rather than directly mounting a defense of capitalism, Mises presents economic liberalism as an argument in defense of democracy. The term democracy is co-opted here to limit and curtail its challenges to capitalism. Economic liberalism, as analogous with democracy, is wholly compatible with continued capitalist accumulation, and thus entirely unthreatening.

If Mises is mirrored in Andreessen, Friedrich von Hayek is mirrored in Thiel. Hayek dispenses with the masked defense of democracy, preferring instead a concise and direct indictment of democracy in favor of economic liberalism: "liberalism is incompatible with unlimited democracy" (Hayek 1978, 143). This quote is mirrored in Thiel's that "freedom is incompatible with democracy" (Thiel 2009) Hayek refers to unlimited democracy as totalitarian. Fascist discourse often co-opts the name of the very social system being upended in practice. The political theorist Roger Griffin argues that modernity and fascism are linked under palingenetic ul-

1 See Nick Land's blog, "The Dark Enlightenment": https://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land/.

tranationalism, the idea of renewal, of spiritual rebirth out of which democracy will be "born again purified from the vices and bad habits that ended up destroying our institutions" (in the words of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1973).[2]

3. CRYPTO AS SOVEREIGN FINANCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF TECH FASCISM

The ideologies and technical infrastructure of cryptocurrency undergird the rise of Silicon Valley venture capital extremism. The Bitcoin whitepaper was published in 2008 under the pseudonymous Satoshi Nakamoto, as a peer-to-peer electronic cash. Crypto was created as a plot to exit and upend central banks, in response to the financial crisis that increased distrust in central government. The plan for a cryptographically secured, anonymized, digitally distributed transaction system was intended to create a financial infrastructure that would be independent from state-issued currency. Cryptocurrency provides the sovereign financial infrastructure for tech fascist secession from existing nation-states. Crypto's computational protocols draw from Game Theory in mathematics, operating under the assumption that man will only act in his own financial self-interest and as such must be financially incentivized to act in preferable ways. Cryptocurrency combines technical fixes with ontological fixes, encoding limited understandings of humanity. Questions around who we are as humans and *who we should be* are cryptographically locked away with the chains of blockchain, constraining both the imagination and social possibilities.

In practice, crypto is used to further obscure otherwise illegal transactions, dark money schemes, donations through crypto-super PACs, stealth land grabs, and more. From its earliest inception, cryptocurrency was encoded as a racist, misogynistic, anti-democratic technology. I offer a quote by former Intel electronic engineer Timothy C. May posted in *The Cyphernomicon*, published in 1994 as a FAQ to the Cypherpunk mailing list, and expanding upon their earlier *Crypto-Anarchy Manifesto* (1988), both cited on the Nakamoto Institute as foundational texts:

> 2.13.6.
>
> Could strong crypto be used for sick and disgusting and dangerous purposes?
>
> - Of course. So can locked doors, but we don't insist on an 'open door policy' (outside of certain quaint sorority and rooming houses!) So do

2 Pinochet was instrumental in the coup against Salvador Allende and the utopian socialist resource distribution "Project Cybersyn." US CIA involvement in this situation represents long legacies of US-backed anti-communist plots to constrain the socio-technical imagination and its transnational materialization. For additional context, see Eden Medina's *Cybernetic Revolutionaries: Technology and Politics in Allende's Chile* (2011), and Evgeny Morozov's podcast "The Santiago Boys" (2023).

> many forms of privacy allow plotters, molestors, racists, etc. to meet and plot.
>
> - Crypto is in use by the Aryan Nation, by both pro- and anti-abortion groups, and probably by other kinds of terrorists. Expect more uses in the future, as things like PGP continue to spread.
>
> - Many of us are explicity [*sic*] anti-democratic, and hope to use encryption to undermine the so-called democratic governments of the world

Crypto-anarchy aligns with the Silicon Valley ideologies of transhumanism, a movement connected to Anglo-American eugenics and race science, with resonance with the Extropians, the Singularitarians, the Effective Altruism/effective acceleration (e/acc) crowd, and longtermists – or what Gebru and Torres have referred to as the "TESCREAL bundle" (2024) largely shaping Artificial General Intelligence. Tech fascists are not solely concerned with dominating land and lives, they are also trying to genetically engineer preferred versions of the human. The new city Próspera on the Honduran island of Róatan is the first to be materially constructed, a special economic zone currently used as a site for biomedical experimentation on life-extending technologies of the Extropian, transhumanist kind (Corbett 2024).

Tech fascists call upon a refrain to the golden years of the past, while simultaneously restoring a society from its supposed decline, which is what bitcoin was supposed to do as a return to the "digital gold standard." While control enacted through technological means has long legacies in colonialism, technology is accelerated as an object of desire like those of fascist Italy inspired by the Italian Futurists. Not an analogy, but a taking up of historical fascist symbols and statements, Andreessen's "Techno-Optimist Manifesto" (2023) directly cites and builds on Marinetti's "Italian Futurist Manifesto" (*Direzione del movimento futurista*, 1909) which glorifies technological acceleration, war and violence, hatred of public libraries, the academy, feminism, and promotes "clean", modern, and rational "hygienic" aesthetics, as well as a belief in a supreme dominant being. As Andreessen writes:

> We believe that we are, have been, and will always be the masters of technology, not mastered by technology. […] We are not victims, we are conquerors. We believe in nature, but we also believe in overcoming nature. We are not primitives, cowering in fear of the lightning bolt. We are the apex predator; the lightning works for us.

The tech fascist project "Praxis Nation" extols the virtues of "traditional, European/Western beauty standards on which the civilized world, at its best points, has always found success." Beauty and civilization connote not just imperial and fascist architectures of the past, but white supremacist eugenicist notions of "proper breeding." Praxis aims to "restore Western Civilization and pursue our ultimate destiny of life among the stars," aiming to "reclaim the West" in new forms of what

is referred to as "technogalantry."[3] On the Praxis Nation website homepage, beneath an aerial rendering of their masterplan, text indicates "87,371 Praxians / $922.0B Value of Praxian-Founded Companies" (Praxis Nation 2025). As part of an animated compilation advertising their magazine, an image of a door with a gold bitcoin symbol on a beach reads: "Half the world uses bitcoin…and we're waiting for you!" While Praxis has not yet secured a permanent site on land, the visuals of Praxis engage techniques of persuasion, acting (as Adorno references to far-right propaganda) "as if they have already had great successes and attract people through the pretense that they offer guarantees for the future and have all manner of backing" (2020, 174). Yet beyond the more overt far-right extremism, and the oft-cited cyberlibertarian underpinnings,[4] crypto has become a technology around which multiple contesting crypto-economic imaginaries revolve (Crandall 2025). As good venture capitalists know, diversification of assets is key. The underlying commonality is a belief in the power of crypto, the power of technology more broadly, towards the reification of technology and the economy itself.

4. TECH FASCIST PLOTS, CRYPTO-COLONIAL ENCLAVES, AND THE DRONE WARS

Peter Thiel's self-described favorite book is *The Sovereign Individual,* published in 1997, which is largely about how individual genius should be freed up from state regulation. It was republished in 2020 with a foreword by Thiel:

> The dramatic phase change from mass democracy to the ultimate form of self-government, personal sovereignty, need not involve a shift in public opinion, nor a miraculous vote by disenchanted electors opting to scrap mass democracy. Such a revolution can begin, indeed already has begun, invisibly with the leasing of sovereign territory, and in due course sovereignty will fragment repeatedly, and we anticipate that the apparently solid power of nation states will splinter in tens of thousands of fragments.

On this trajectory, Silicon Valley venture capital extremism is connected to a broader plot to colonize physical territory, establish new forms of experimental anti-democratic governance, and set up shop to accelerate the production of drone weapons, AI "tools" and more. In 2023 Donald Trump proposed building up to 10 high-tech "freedom cities" on US federal land (BLM), in a plan to revitalize the American Dream. Part of the vision included using Vertical Take-Off and Landing

3 Praxis Nation, x.com, January 26, 2025. https://x.com/praxisnation/status/1883724804379087297?s=12

4 David Golumbia's work has been critical in this area, notably *The politics of bitcoin: software as right-wing extremism* (2016), and *Cyberlibertarianism: the right-wing politics of digital technology* (2024).

drones for transportation. Trump said "I want to ensure that America, not China, leads this revolution in air mobility [...] These freedom cities will reopen the frontier, reignite the American imagination, and give hundreds of thousands of young people and other people, all hardworking families, a new shot at home ownership and in fact, the American dream."

With this "contest to charter new cities," it may seem that Trump has laid the framework for former tech-founders and venture capitalists to propose their plans. However, "Freedom Cities" were not Trump's idea – they have been plotted in Silicon Valley-venture capital circles for over fifteen years, under different names, but with common ideologies around free-market startup experimentation, anti-regulation, and anti-democratic planning. Notably, the Freedom Cities Coalition started off as a pro-crypto political lobbying group to convince Trump and Congress to authorize the creation of "prosperity zones" within the US. This lobbying group supported JD Vance as VP pick (Vance worked for Peter Thiel at Mithril Capital) and helped Trump and Vance get elected. One key figure bankrolling these new city projects is Peter Thiel. Earliest among these projects was The Seasteaders Institute, founded in 2008 by Patri Friedman (grandson of libertarian economist Milton Friedman), with the model of the cyberlibertarian floating city. The productive failures of the Seasteaders led to a more "serious" endeavor by the Charter Cities Institute founded in 2017, largely based on Paul Romer's Special Economic Zone model.

Several Charter Cities projects currently underway are funded by the VC firm Pronomos Capital, largely bankrolled by Patri Friedman, Peter Thiel, and Marc Andreessen. Pronomos Capital's funding aligns with the recent manifesto/guide published by former crypto Coinbase CTO Balaji Srinivasan called "The Network State" in which cryptocurrency is intended to be used as a sovereign financial system in a plot to establish new "startup nations." As *The Network State* manifesto states: "a network state is a highly aligned online community with a capacity for collective action that crowdfunds territory around the world and eventually gains diplomatic recognition from pre-existing states" (Srinivasan 2022). This alludes to an escape from democracy in favor of an exploration of new forms of governance, shaping the politics of exit and crypto-state secessionism (Lynch and Muñoz-Viso 2023; Howson et al. 2024).

Network State affiliated city projects include the East Solano Plan in northern California under company "California Forever," Próspera in Honduras, Metropolis in Palau, and the decentralized Praxis Nation, Afropolitan, Itana, among others. The genesis crypto-colonial land-grab was Puertopia in Puerto Rico, led by Brock Pierce (Crandall 2019). Much like property developers before, these crypto-capitalists view land as sites of resource extraction, cities as investment products, sites of technoeconomic experimentation and military production, capable of transcending capital's limits to growth.

Network state plots build on, but differ from earlier company towns, tech campuses, and neoliberal smart cities in their attempts to operate as states-within-

states, undermining conventional democratic state planning processes, superseding if not seizing power from public institutions. As Balaji writes: "people with their fingers on the button are no longer elected officials of the state. That is what Network > State means." This is not just a neoliberal city as a service, but a conception of land as a playground for tech elite's economic, spatial, and political experimentation, with the end goal not only being increased profits for the investors, but strategic positioning for resource hoarding, biomedical experimentation, and attempts to secure territory for an "elite" group of tech-minded individuals.

As one Network State proponent said in a 2023 conference presentation, "if we own our communities literally, we can also own them ideologically" (Sanchez 2023). Network State proponents include Peter Thiel (PayPal/Palantir), Joe Lonsdale (Palantir), Richard Craib (hedge fund Numerai), Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss (cryptocurrency exchange Gemini), Balaji Srinivasan (former CTO crypto-wallet Coinbase, author of *The Network State*), Patri Friedman (Milton Friedman's grandson, proponent of the Seasteaders movement and co-founder of Pronomos Capital), and Marc Andreessen (Netscape and Mosaic co-founder), among others. Andreessen is a key power player in this scenario, financially supporting the largest crypto super-PACs that donated to Donald Trump's campaign. Paraphrasing Marinetti's *Italian Futurist Manifesto*, a foundational text to Italian fascism, Andreessen writes in his *Techno-Optimist Manifesto* (2022): "Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character. Technology must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man."

To the point that the fascist is the "phantasmic synthesis of the settler and the soldier" (Toscano 2023, 157), tech fascists fetishize the frontier, fetishize war, and are taking the steps to lay new claims. Amongst anxieties around the prospect of losing the AI and drone production battle against China, and thus losing hegemony, the US is pushing production. To do so they need to stake claims on physical territory to deploy their testing sites and manufacturing hubs. Marc Andreessen's American Dynamism summit hosted speakers Jan Sramek (CEO of California Forever) and JD Vance, together providing the playbook for Project 2025. Project 2025 includes a renaissance for the tech industry in manufacturing, accelerating the AI/drone production war with China. War provides an easy answer to capitalism's crises by providing a steady consumer base for military technology products. "Freedom cities" are a network state project, and together with the Abundance Agenda, this confluence is reminiscent of what Marcuse calls the "prosperous warfare and welfare state" in *One Dimensional Man*.

5. INCIPIENT FASCISM AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Important as it may be to consider the role of far-right extremism on fascism, to do so *only* from this perspective overlooks how fascism works in and through liberal democracy. Rather than taking shape solely as the product of reactionary forces, Marcuse (2005) proposes a form of "incipient fascism" that is anticipatory and pre-

ventative toward forces that may challenge capitalism. As Marcuse suggests, "American fascism will probably be the first which comes to power by democratic means and with democratic support."

The rhetoric of experimentation, innovation, progress, and prosperity that are promoted along with California Forever align with the recent "Abundance Agenda" (Klein and Thompson 2025), which is posed as a Promethean "Third Way" policy alternative to the socialist left and populist-authoritarian right. On the surface, the Abundance Agenda might appear as a relief to those who are conscious of the "tech-right" gaining influence in US governance by funding Republicans. On the Doomscroll podcast (Citarella 2025), author Ezra Klein muses "there are too few visions of the future. I think of Marc Andreessen as my counterpart, the person that I am sparring with a little bit more." For Andreessen (2023), "the ultimate payoff from technological abundance can be a massive expansion in what Julian Simon called 'the ultimate resource' – people."

The *Abundance* book cover graphic plays upon aesthetics often associated with the solarpunk movement, which itself is comprised of multiple contesting political ideologies and imaginaries, both optimistic counterculture-progressive (Simoldoni 2024) and technoauthoritarian (Freinacht 2022). The Abundance Agenda aligns with the more neoliberal "ecotopian" elements of the earlier California Ideology, a varied convergence of counterculture, libertarian, and proto-fascist beliefs heavily influenced by Marshall McLuhan's (1964) work around "global villages" and the intersection of new media, computing, and telecommunications that would usher in the "electronic agora." The question that Barbrook and Cameron posed in 1996 is still relevant today: "Above all, will the advent of hypermedia realise the utopias of either the New Left or the New Right? As a hybrid faith, the Californian Ideology happily answers this conundrum by believing in both visions at the same time – and by not criticizing either of them."

Klein and Thompson's vision of an abundant future contains tautological leaps like: "AI is built on the collective knowledge of humanity, and so its profits are shared." The first chapter opens: "Scarcity is a choice," and "to have the future we want, we need to build and invent more of what we need. That's it. That's the thesis." Klein and Thompson align with Marcuse on the point that scarcity need not exist under effective technological deployment, but where they diverge is in failing to understand how scarcity is unevenly produced under capitalism, as anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1986) demonstrates. Klein and Thompson almost get Marcuse's critique on consumerist culture[5] when they acknowledge "an abundance of

5 As Marcuse writes in *Essay on Liberation* (1969): "This society is obscene in producing and indecently exposing a stifling abundance of wares while depriving its victims abroad of the necessities of life; obscene in stuffing itself and its garbage cans while poisoning and burning the scarce foodstuffs in the fields of its aggression; obscene in the words and smiles of its politicians and entertainers; in its prayers, in its ignorance, and in the wisdom of its kept intellectuals."

consumer goods distracted us from a scarcity of homes and energy and infrastructure and scientific breakthroughs." But they miss the mark when suggesting the answer is simply to *produce more* without changing the structural conditions of production itself: "We are interested in production more than consumption. We believe what we can build is more important than what we can buy. […] We are focused on the institutions and the people that must build and invent that future" – notably, tech elites and institutions who align with the capitalist status-quo.

For Klein and Thompson (2025, 13): "Our era features too little utopian thinking, but one worthy exception is Aaron Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*, a leftist tract that puts the technologies in development right now – artificial intelligence, renewable energy, asteroid mining, plant- and cell-based meats, and gene editing – at the center of a post-work, post-scarcity vision." What Klein and Thompson extract is the techno-solutionism of Bastani's (2019) argument and conveniently drop its communist core. Of course, there has never been a scarcity of imagination. To suggest this is either to not have been looking in the right place, or to intentionally disregard the ample work that exists. There is no scarcity of imagination, only an uneven power around whose imaginations are deemed feasible and important enough to make real. Historically, capitalism has evolved to co-opt and hollow-out its critiques (Boltanski and Chiapello 2018). A recent increase in anti-capitalist literature around radical imagination (Gibson-Graham 2006; Fisher 2009; Haiven and Khasnabish 2014; TallBear and Willey 2019; Benjamin 2024) may have posed enough of a threat to try to contain it.

Klein and Thompson's definition and understanding of "abundance" is rooted in American frontierism and the work of conservative historian David Potter's (1954) *People of Plenty*. As quoted by Klein and Thompson, abundance for Potter is "a physical and cultural factor, involving the interplay between man, himself a geological force, and nature." Klein and Thompson parrot Potter's insistence on economic logics of supply and demand. California Forever CEO Jan Sramek has retweeted *Abundance*, which makes sense given Klein and Thompson's insistence that: "ideas, and the technologies and companies and products they power, draw the outer borders of growth. The land that matters most is the land that aids in the fiery creation of the new." Klein and Thompson cite Ed Glaeser's *Triumph of the City* (2011), in which Glaeser writes, "Cities are the absence of physical space between people and companies." Much of Glaeser's work is based on anecdotal evidence at best, and there are several critiques of the supply-side argument and city as a growth machine from liberal economists like Paul Krugman and John Quiggin, to leftist housing justice advocates (Bronstein 2017) and critical urban sociologists (Molotch 1976). A circular boosterism is evident – Glaeser recently contributed a pro-California Forever op-ed to LA Times with co-author Chris Elmendorf. Elmen-

dorf is a co-author with David Broockman on an article recently presented at an event hosted by Berkeley Students for Abundance, which in the same week hosted an event with lead planner of California Forever, Gabe Metcalf.

The insistence on limitless economic growth comes out of a reactionary pushback to the recent "degrowth" movement (D'Alisa et al. 2015), building on earlier work on the *Limits to Growth* (Club of Rome, et. al. 1972), both of which threaten the infinite accumulation of capital. I return to Marcuse who predicts the "repressive productivity of the so-called 'society of abundance'," (2014, 131) to mean more of the same: "every kind of radical or vanguard moment, political or cultural, is easily absorbed and brought back within the fold. […] Its non-stop expansion, its soaring productivity, its incessant growth produce nothing but more and more of the same, without any qualitative change or any hope of qualitative change" (2014, 171). In addition to Marcuse's warning, Adorno is prescient in indicating the affective anxieties of "the spectre of technological unemployment continues to haunt society to such a degree that in the age of automation [...] even the people who stand within the production process already feel potentially superfluous" (2020, 170). I suggest it is not just the anxieties of AI and automation-wrought unemployment, but anxieties about uncertain climate futures, and the very real material limits, that are leading tech-VC elites and planners and economists aligned to propose new-tech-cities and enclosures, to maintain their dominance and concentration of capital *and* to secure valuable natural resources, while addressing how to keep capital's engine churning towards limitless growth. Because they know that natural resources are limited, new avenues for "production" must be invented so that growth can be maintained. Irrationally, capitalism is posed as the solution to capitalist crises, so that there will always be bodies at the ready to consume and produce, so that capital can always be accumulated. Take Andreessen's *Techno-Optimist Manifesto* for example:

> There are only three sources of growth: population growth, natural resource utilization, and technology.
>
> Developed societies are depopulating all over the world, across cultures – the total human population may already be shrinking.
>
> Natural resource utilization has sharp limits, both real and political.
>
> And so the only perpetual source of growth is technology.
>
> [...]
>
> We have a problem of poverty, so we invent technology to create abundance.

Domination and destruction are conditions of such abundance, and for Marcuse such "progress" through technicity controls nature and man, a dialectical totality

that hinges on the "rational exploitation of natural resources." The *Abundance* Agenda and the *Techno-Optimist Manifesto* both hinge on this totality. Their commonality is technological totalitarianism.

6. TECHNOLOGICAL TOTALITARIANISM AND THE SOCIALITIES OF TECHNOLOGICAL SUPREMACY

Naming the key tech-figureheads and taking them at their word is important. But at the risk of perpetuating yet another "great man" narrative, I insist we turn to the broader and frankly more terrifying socialities of technological supremacy. More troubling than any one figurehead are the conditions that enabled these figures to ascend in wealth and power, and the broader rhizomatic, plural, distributed sociality of technological totalitarianism. We catch a glimpse of this in the Crypto-Anarchist/Cypherpunk mailing lists. A significant contingent of this group is intentionally anti-democratic, led by technicians who encode technologies with the intent to dismantle democracy, while others are more staunchly libertarian and seek freedom for the free market. Others are self-identified liberals who have chosen to come to the defense of the capitalist status quo at the expense of democracy, to the defense of efficiency. Where the state is amenable, it props up technology and acts as a machine moving "by its own necessity," ever-flexible to the changing "set-up of the ruling groups" (Marcuse 1942). As Toscano writes, one of the hallmarks of fascism is "inter-classist politics of domination," a pluralism of "contradictory aspirations, a fatuous but fatal fusion of differences" (Toscano 2023, 47).

What is a core commonality to these fatal fusions? A boundless faith in technology itself, specifically crypto and AI, a quantified worldview, and an ontological understanding of man as an individual rational economic actor motivated in his own financial self-interest. With this low bar, far-right extremism, libertarianism, and centrist liberalism are aligned with Silicon Valley venture capital in new pro-growth, pro-production plots, emblematized in the Network State and the so-called Abundance Agenda.

Totalitarianism is the drive toward total control, and it need not be administered centrally by any one state, nor any one individual, but can be enacted by any group that deems itself (technologically) superior. Technological totalitarianism thus is the bringing about of not just total control of technology, but total control of nature, society, private and public lives (human and more-than-human), economics and governance. It seeks total control of what futures are to be built in what ways – *all in service to technology itself* – and in service to those who control the production and deployment of technology. Those who control the production and deployment of technology are dominated by a small group of former tech-developers turned venture capitalists, in conjunction with their vendors and patrons that include militaries and nation-states. Some have referred to this formation as an oligarchy, or "technofeudalism" (Varoufakis 2023), evoking a contemporary version of medieval violence and corporate fiefdoms. Others refer to this as technocracy.

However, the suffix *-cracy* refers to government rule, which is not the end goal for some tech authoritarians. The goal is to abolish government itself, and replace it with the market.[6] Practically, of course, venture capital's role in state government is a messy entanglement.

Beyond technofeudalism or technocracy, we might consider a broader systemic technological totalitarianism. As Marcuse writes in *One-Dimensional Man* (Marcuse 1964, 162):

> Today, domination perpetuates and extends itself not only through technology but as technology, and the latter provides the great legitimation of the expanding political power, which absorbs all spheres of culture. […] Technological rationality thus protects rather than cancels the legitimacy of domination, and the instrumentalist horizon of reason opens on a rationally totalitarian society.

The premise of technological rationality is that you too can fulfil your dreams, so long as you buy into the belief in technology itself and defend its (false) reality principle. With increasingly entertaining devices and technologies seemingly enlarging the comforts of life for the privileged, it becomes harder to refuse capitalism's seductive promises. And yet there are cracks in the façade through which it becomes clear that the goods are not being delivered.

Totalitarianism is an uneven process, and as Toscano reminds us, "domination is not homogeneously experienced because it is not homogeneously exercised" (2023, 47). Technological development under capitalism has always been uneven – racial capitalism, land grabs, and experimenting on racialized others. Technology has consistently been put in service to maintain the status quo, and to maintain military command and control. The reification of technology as a process is by no means new. Its intensification, however, marks a shift toward a new form of dominant power – from the Church to the nation-state to corporations and their enclaves, "network states," "startup nations," or "charter cities."

Technological totalitarianism holds that supreme authority should be granted to those involved with innovating and developing technologies. For techno-authoritarians, including crypto-anarchists, fascism is a bad and nasty thing *not* because it concentrates power for some at the expense of life for others, but because it concentrates power *for the state*, which tends to mean more regulation and restrictions on companies. But if tech-authoritarians can do away with the state entirely, unlimited "freedom" opens up. Freedom is conscripted to mean freedom for the free market, freedom for corporations, freedom from taxes, freedom for unregulated experimentation, freedom to innovate, grow, and accumulate limitless capital. And who can argue against innovation and technological progress? Better yet would be

6 Additionally, Technocracy has a specific history as a political movement led by Howard Scott, and while it is highly relevant to the contemporary moment, unpacking this movement exceeds the scope of this paper.

to develop an economic technology that computationally encodes technological totalitarianism and establishes the infrastructure for financial sovereignty outside of the state and central banks. This is where cryptocurrency enters the picture: a technical "fix" embedding an ontological fix, an understanding of man as *Homo economicus*, an individual motivated primarily by his own financial self-interest.

7. THE REIFICATION OF TECHNOLOGY

The roots of technological totalitarianism stem from the reification of technology. I continually return to thinkers in the Frankfurt School whose work is prescient and helpful in their critical focus on the centrality of technology – not only to fascism and right-wing extremism, not only to labor and material conditions – but also regarding its broader impacts on psychic life, individuality, and culture. Technological totalitarianism relates to what Marcuse calls the "total administration of society," and what Horkheimer and Adorno refer to as "instrumental reason" stemming from the Enlightenment (Adorno and Horkheimer 2002). Horkheimer and Adorno demonstrate how Enlightenment-era modes of knowledge production break with myth to apprehend reality "objectively" with the scientific method, thus shifting dominant Western worldviews to those that uphold rationality, measurement, observation, taxonomization, and efficiency. Enlightenment-era thought embeds mythology in its operating structures. Instead of pure faith in a god or mythical entity, Enlightenment reason shifts to the glorification of technology as a tool to overcome limits and exert authority. Nature is instrumentalized as a resource for production; technology is instrumentalized to make the processes of extraction more efficient. This "Othering" of nature is paired with a conception of nature itself as something "wild" to be "tamed" via technological rational Man – nature is imagined as a frontier to be continually reinvented and conquered by technology.

I call attention to what Marcuse refers to as reification through technology and its conditioning of worldviews and worlds, social relations and societies, ways of seeing and the production of knowledges. Reification of technology is a conceptual freezing of technology as an abstract concept, hiding its mysticism in the process. Reification is a conscription of the imagination, making it seem like human relations to technology have always been a certain way, and could be no other way – e.g. firmly situated in the domain of the market and in service to capital. Technology is of course material, imbricated in social relations, exploitative labor, unevenly violent dispossessive processes of extraction, and death-dealing instrumentation. However, the reification of technology invisibilizes its constitutive materiality and social relations of production in favor of a fetishistic, vacuous veneration of technology itself.

Reification of technology can look like personification, where technology and the economy are wedded to become a mythical figure whose growth and development is more important to protect than actual lives. Adorno references the "overall tendency of civilization, which leads to such a perfection of techniques and means

while the *overall social purpose* falls by the wayside" (Adorno 2020, 174). Marcuse writes that such instrumental rationality under positivism has produced "technicians, specialists, and experts who calculate, adjust, and match without ever asking *for whom* and *for what*." These technicians become concerned with "mak[ing] things work, but not to give an end to this process [of technological development]" (Marcuse 1989, 122).

The reification of technology does not happen all at once, but is a process that co-develops with capitalism. Marcuse (1989) marks a shift in dominant philosophical-scientific world-views from Platonist idealism and metaphysics to Newtonian realism and positivism with the development of calculus, in which "technology has replaced ontology." However, Marcuse argues there is something important to be retained in earlier idealism and its "dualist and antagonistic character of reality," that helps people hold the "capacity to envisage another mode of human existence within reality, and the ability to transcend facticity towards its real possibilities" (Marcuse 1989, 121). This two-dimensionality – of mind and matter, of subject and object – otherwise gets flattened into a "one-dimensional context of efficient, theoretical, and practical operations" (Marcuse 1989, 122). Put another way, "the ability to comprehend and live historical transcendence is seriously atrophied in the technological world. Man can no longer exist in two dimensions: he has become a one-dimensional man."

The one-dimensional society induces an extreme constraint on the dominant imagination. Towards the expanse, the world itself is suffocated. The irrationality is almost laughable, when the conception of colonizing other planets at the sacrifice of Earth is deemed more believable than universal healthcare. Such a shift towards an infinite universe world-view conditions today's technological totalitarianism, the belief in and drive towards infinite economic growth, infinite development, infinite expansion, an infinite frontier, an infinite life for capitalism, and in response to all of capitalism's crises, an infinite amount of solutions to be found in technology itself, infinitely profitable for its founders, owners, and venture capital funders. The persistence of this technopositivist worldview in the 21st century accounts for intensified technosolutionism, the veneration of the tech genius, the disproportionate value placed on technological development, the tech industry, STEM and computer science, and the increasing power of tech-actors in economic and political spheres.

The mechanization of the dominant worldview is conditioned not only by science but also art and media. As Walter Benjamin poses in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), art begins to be designed for its reproducibility. This wider distribution increases access to art while also enabling a negative process of decontextualization. What this "decay of aura" does to the broader public significance, Benjamin argues, influences the "desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly," in other words, to possess them, even just "by way of [their] likeness" (Benjamin 1936, 5). As Benjamin writes: "*The adjustment of reality to the masses and of the masses to reality is a process of unlimited scope,* as much for thinking as for perception." Mechanical reproduction thus con-

ditions worldviews and socio-spatial imaginaries around unlimited growth, unlimited scope of possession, and the unlimited frontier.

As Benjamin writes in the *Work of Art* epilogue, "the logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (1936, 19). On the one hand, reproducible aesthetics grant the working class the ability to aesthetically express themselves (namely their individuality) without needing to threaten the "property structure which the masses strive to eliminate." These unthreatening aesthetics pertain to what Marcuse refers to as "affirmative culture." For Benjamin, fascist aesthetics are totalizing, and "all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war." Without threatening capitalist private-property, war provides the impetus to deploy "all of today's technical resources." From nuclear to drone weapons, war is a feature, not a bug. War demands a steady stream of supply and produces voids to be filled.

With the advent of the internet, there is a shift toward the digitization of the dominant worldview, in which globalization and neoliberalism take off. The advent of cryptocurrency conditions a shift toward what is emerging as a post-nation-state worldview, from "In God We Trust" to "In Nation-States we Trust" to "In Network States We Trust". Mathematical quantitative understandings of the world are encoded into economic technologies, epitomized in the development of cryptocurrency. Mathematical terms and conditions supplant social thinking – "zero-sum" and game theory logics especially. This rhetoric gets carried forward not just in boardrooms and in classrooms, but also new conferences, meetups, and Burning-Man-esque socials. In the US it's all around us.

Calling attention to internalized, everyday fascist impulses, I am thinking with Foucault on "the fascism in us all, in our heads and everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits." (Foucault 1977, xiii). The collective social purpose of technology gets foreclosed when technology is continually put to service to individuals, put to service by capitalism to exceed its material limits, working to develop increasingly sophisticated weapons and instruments of death. That these are initially tested and deployed in contexts deemed backwards, in-line with already-existing authoritarian regimes and colonial contexts like the Caribbean and Latin America is no coincidence. Marcuse portends this likelihood while unfortunately carrying forward his own imperialist terminology, "the backward areas are likely to succumb either to one of the various forms of neo-colonialism, or to a more or less terroristic system of primary accumulation. However, another alternative seems possible" (2002, 50). Another alternative still may be possible today if we collectively open to varied understandings of technology, humanity, and multispecies land-life relations. What is necessary for antifascist strategy is to negate the reification of technology. To do so is to consider a social purpose, to which technology then, and only then, may be put towards an abundance that feeds, in which the exploited toiling body is liberated to be free to live a life worth living.

8. TOWARDS GENUINE ABUNDANCE

Marcuse is often criticized for being too pie-in-the-sky around the technology question, too naive around the emancipatory role of technology. We have the technical means to ameliorate human suffering, and yet it persists at the hands of capitalist exploitation, science and technology put in service to the profit motive. In some important localized cases, there has been success directing technology toward collective self-determination (e.g. *agroecología* movements, indigenous data sovereignty, cooperatives and commoning efforts). What might it take for broader systematic structural change, and is the recuperative role of technology overemphasized in Marcuse's work?

Marcuse's critical caveats and warnings often go unremarked and unheeded. Marcuse calls out the tendencies of technological fetishism even amongst Marxist critics and warns against ideas of a "technological Eros" in which mysticism is further embedded with its logics of instrumentalization, at the risk of simply being displaced to new groups in power. Marcuse warns, "the mystification is not removed by transferring technological omnipotence from particular groups to the new state" (2002, 239–240), or in our contemporary case, when transferred from the nation-state to the network state, or from a far-right regime to a liberal democracy or even a fully automated luxury communism. For technology to act in a genuinely liberatory capacity, its reification must be negated. The omnipotence of "technological man" must be renounced, and the mystification, universality, and instrumentalization of technology must be rejected.

Liberal texts like *Abundance* demonstrate that one need not be a far-right white supremacist to still be technology-supremacist. A supremacist is a person who believes that a particular group is superior and should therefore dominate society and make all its decisions. Under technological supremacy, the concepts of "technology" together with "the market" are reified into mythical figures whose growth and protection are deemed more important than the lives of actual human beings and multispecies ecologies that are actively being exploited, dominated, eliminated in service to continued capitalist accumulation and profit for a small group of people. The core premise is that by attending to the health of the market, by pouring more capital into the growth and expansion of technological innovation, by reducing regulation and removing restrictions on companies for experimentation and development, only then will abundance for more people follow, the economy and the climate will be restored to health.

For those infected by the reification of technology who still claim to care about the climate or real human lives, the imagination is so clouded that the only solution appears to come from within technology itself. Such circular technosolutionism easily disregards any qualitative change to the material conditions and labor relations under which it is developed. Yet as Huey P. Newton (1972) writes:

> [The] struggle must be waged with the idea that to free the land will only free the people to the degree where they would not have to con-

> sume what they do not want to consume, and they will be able to make strong coalitions to start trying to develop their resources and technology in order to overthrow […] to move against the reactionary control of the technology, in order to expropriate it and then make it available to all of us.

Beacons of clarity pushing back against technosolutionism have always remained. The etymology of the term abundance stems from the Latin *abundantia* "fullness, plenty," present participle of *abundare* "to overflow." Like water flowing over and away from a wave, liberals have skimmed the surface of the term abundance and left a hollowed-out shell, a fragile dome devoid of structural support. How to blow the clouds away, how to chip away at the façade of technological totalitarianism, how to positively erode? If we are to quibble over words, let's quibble about "abundance." In doing so we must ask how to make believable more dreams and plans of how to build a better future that aren't constrained by mathematical formulas and a baseline of man as *Homo economicus*.

Abundance necessarily decoupled from individual private property ownership resonates in conceptions of indigenous abundance, an "abundance that feeds" (Fujikane 2021). There is a need to elicit care for not only to what ends is technology being used, but also what lives are being negatively impacted in the process. A key antifascist strategy must be to unsettle totalizing worldviews and incorrect assumptions of humanity. As soon as we ask, "who do we want to be as a species?" the asking of the question unsettles a static normative definition of man. As anticolonial thinker Aimé Césaire noted, "poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge." In *Technology & Ethos, Vol. 2 Book of Life* (1970), poet Amiri Baraka writes:

> Nothing has to look or function the way it does. The West man's freedom, unscientifically got at the expense of the rest of the world's people, has allowed him to xpand his mind – spread his sensibility wherever it *cd*go, & so *shaped* the world, & its powerful artifact-engines [...].
>
> The new technology must be spiritually oriented because it must aspire to raise man's spirituality and expand man's consciousness. It must begin by being "humanistic" though the white boy has yet to achieve this. Witness a technology that kills both plants & animals, poisons the air & degenerates or enslaves man.
>
> The technology itself must represent human striving. It must represent at each point the temporary perfection of the evolutional man. And be obsolete only because nothing is ever *perfect,* the only constant is change.

Baraka's words recall Marcuse's *Essay on Liberation*, in which the decolonial work of Franz Fanon (2004) looms large, including uncited direct references to "the daily struggle of the persecuted minorities […] the wretched of the earth who fight the affluent monster" (Marcuse 1969, 7). The stakes of the Great Refusal are the future of humanity, which is why the insistence on biological terms. Technologies act on the body, act on the psyche, changing us physiologically. For Fanon, the death of patriarchal individualistic Man is a necessary outcome of decolonization, a redefinition of the human. It is counter to the Eurocentric antihumanism that is deeply racist and eugenicist, which gets picked up and carried forward in cyberlibertarian transhumanism, TESCREAL ideologies. But even the most liberal factions may balk at some of these eugenicist understandings of man. Some really do want to see humanity thrive. However, a shared commonality between the far-right techno-optimists and centrist liberals is the demonstrably false ontological understanding of man as individually motivated *Homo economicus*.

To unsettle totalizing worldviews, according to Marcuse, we must look not toward technology itself but toward the aesthetic dimension. This is not to enact immediate change, but to elicit a sustained process of introspection, sensuous reason, and empathy. In doing so we condition a new reality principle that would make it unimaginable to use technology toward death-dealing instruments. Marcuse returns to the aesthetics of the Greeks, ostensibly to recuperate the genesis of genuine democracy as antifascist strategy. We need not perpetuate epistemic imperialism to find technological imaginations against tricknology, capitalism's violent logics of technology, especially in Black, indigenous, anticolonial worldviews (la paperson 2017). As Sylvia Wynter and Kathrine McKittrick have argued, the notion of *Homo economicus* is part of a Darwinian "part science, part myth" origin story. To unsettle this totalizing, monohumanistic definition of man, Wynter (2003) describes a more nuanced understanding of human as hybridized biological being and storytelling/mythmaking/symbolic species: "*Homo narrans*". In generating stories, humans generate themselves. From Wynter, blackness and Black studies are analytics of invention, studying and producing "creatively scientific artworlds" (McKittrick 2021) that tell us more about what it means to be human than purely quantitative methods. Building on this work, it is critically important to draw attention to the plethora of technology as alternatively understood as art, craft, creative making, that tells a very different story of humanity than that of individualism, quantitative indexes, and p-values. The differentiated 'we' must find ways to act, on varied timescales, to not be stultified, to dismantle and coalesce at the same time.

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THE FASCISM FARCE

A Case for Neofeudalism

JAMIE VAN DER KLAAUW AND RYAN KOPAITICH

1. INTRODUCTION: THE FASCISM FARCE OF 'TECHNOFASCISM'

There is something farcical about the (re)emergence of fascism today. Of course, we could argue that fascism always has a farcical component, that even in the early 20th century, it was parasitic on the mass-movement politics of the 19th century that aimed for emancipation or liberation. Fascism then concerns the turning inward of those mechanisms, a faux mass-movement politics oriented not toward a better future, but toward consolidation. Rallying the troops only to entrench tendencies of the status quo. Paraphrasing Benjamin, fascism is mobilization without changing the means of production ([1936] 2008, 41).

We argue that today, we are faced with another kind of farce, one that concerns the concepts of fascism and antifascism as they are deployed within the political field, and what kind of orientation or directionality one can derive from this use. Let us try to make this deployment clear by making a quick and dirty distinction between two types of antifascism, with specific attention to what is absent in each. A brief example to illustrate: Famously, Alenka Zupančič and Slavoj Žižek, among others, have read a scene from Ernst Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* as the perfect illustration of the presence of absence. One of the characters, Leon, tells a joke about a customer entering a café, saying: "Waiter, bring me a cup of coffee without cream." Five minutes later the waiter returns and says, "I'm sorry sir, we have no cream, can it be without milk?" The point for Zupančič and Žižek is that there is something correct about this reply. Even if there is no direct 'material' difference in the coffee, the difference is experienced by us, subjects, in how we understand the coffee. Without cream or without milk, a difference with a distinction.

Something similar holds for antifascism. Sure, antifascism has a general meaning or orientation, namely, against fascism, but it matters what is not mentioned. Are we discussing an antifascism that seeks to bolster democratic procedures to withstand the fascist onslaught? Or is this the kind of antifascism that aims to address the causes of the (re)emergence of fascism? In our shorthand depiction, are we speaking about antifascism with an unmentioned 'liberal' drive, looking at procedures and fortification above all, or is this antifascism with an unmentioned 'socialist' drive, looking at the social and political grounds on which fascism thrives?

In the relatively recently published lectures on the then-new postwar far right, Theodor Adorno recalls a lecture he gave in 1959 where he argued that while fascism may have been defeated in one sense, or rather collapsed in on itself, "the conditions for fascist movements are still socially, if not politically, present." He identifies this partly as "the still prevailing tendency towards concentration of capi-

tal, which one can calculate away with all manner of statistical arts but which cannot seriously be doubted" (Adorno 2020, 1). We take Adorno's point to heart. If indeed we want to address the social and political conditions of fascist movements, then we suggest that rather than getting bogged down in saving liberalism from fascism, the dynamic suspension of violent aberration and renormalization, we set our sights on this larger constellation within which this dynamic plays out.

To us, this means that we resist the analysis of technofascism, as the rejuvenation of fascism by the techno-industrial complex, instead proposing that today's fascism is deployed within, and distracts from, the political-economic conditions that allow for its emergence. We side with the recent surge of theorists, especially from the left, that have proposed similar concepts, whether techno- or neofeudalism (Varoufakis 2023, 106; Durand 2024, viii–ix; Dean 2025, 5–7). In what follows, we will look at the conditions that make this new politics possible. Not as a finished analysis but an opening salvo of sorts.

Our 'counter-analysis' of today's social-political constellation concerns two main claims that work roughly along the lines of the Marxist distinction between infrastructure (or base) and superstructure (Marx [1860] 2000, 425). First, the economic situation still revolves around the same tendencies of capital accumulation and wealth concentration, yet the means by which this is achieved have developed, as rents have returned to prominence while labor is maintained as a commodity. Second, we are dealing with an emerging political constellation that echoes the feudal structure of lords and serfs, while adding the figures of the priest, the courtier, the jester, and the king. We aim to shift the analysis to the broader range of actors that are part of the contemporary political constellation to get a better hold on how contemporary autocratic political power is actually produced within a heavily digitized economy.

2. A GENEALOGY OF FASCISM. HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Before we turn to the contemporary landscape, we will quickly touch upon the historical context and development of both fascism and the more familiar, and still formally democratic, right-wing populism. First of all, we must make the short remark that fascism and populism are not the same thing. They are, however, as Federico Finchelstein convincingly argues, tied together in a genealogical manner (2024, 4–7). Building on Finchelstein's work, we want to emphasize the role of a mediating third: liberalism.

Now, the traditional tale of fascism is well known. The social and political conditions after the First World War proved a hotbed for right-wing fantasies of deprivation, struggle, punishment, and revenge. It is in the interbellum that we saw the high point of the traditional forms, exemplified in the 1920s and 1930s by German Nazism and Italian Fascism. The aestheticization of the political and the mass, or even total, mobilization of the populations were evident. The rising tensions and aggression of the fascist movements eventually led to a global showdown not just

with the socialist or communist world, but with the liberal world itself (Finchelstein 2024, 6).

When fascism was supposedly defeated after World War II, the world was divided between the, at least nominally, socialist or communist actors on the one hand, and a new post-war liberal world order on the other. The latter in particular sought to democratically 'contain' or channel the kind of far-right extremism fascism deployed. There, populism emerged mostly as a right-wing affair, as the successor and retention basin of the far-right. Populism, at least to some formal extent, is still tied to democratic procedures, especially elections (Finchelstein 2024, 15). If Hitler and Mussolini saw elections as merely tools to be wielded for their own power, post-war populists like Berlusconi still respected them and even ceded formal power at times, which is unthinkable from the traditional fascist frame.

But what is it that typifies (traditional) fascism? This is not so clear-cut. The concept of fascism is versatile and malleable, often functioning as an adaptive pejorative to denounce whatever political practice one disdains. Furthermore, fascism, like any political ideology or movement, develops over time and along structural positions. Those who aspire to power use a different playbook than those who are in power. Yet, there is also no shortage of attempts to pin fascism down, to produce (in)exhaustive lists of its characteristics. Our aim here is not to adjudicate between those various lists or understandings, but rather to clarify what we understand as fascistic, how this traditionally operated, and what echoes we find in today's social-political constellation.

Drawing from Paxton (2004, 218–220) and Finchelstein (2024, 4), we understand fascism to concern the following elements: first, fascism is a fantastical project of propaganda and misinformation in which crisis creation, fantasies of decline, and ultimately of revenge, take hold. Second, these fantasies are deployed along in-group/out-group lines often coupled with (ultra)nationalism and xenophobia. This outgroup can be external, as in the traditional opposition to communism, but can also be turned inward, to purify the in-group of the enemy within, as in the Nazi figure of the Jew. Third, this fantastical political struggle between in and out is waged by a strong authority or dictator. Fascism is not democratic but concentrates power in the leader(s), who are then legitimated by acclamation or simply by domination, i.e. lack of resistance. Finally, the struggle is a literal fight in which political violence and militarization are beautified, beatified, and celebrated.

Many of these characteristics are in play today, albeit perhaps distributed over various far-right ideological movements and political figures throughout the West. Political parties in Europe like the Alternative für Deutschland, Fratelli D'Italia, and Party for Freedom (PVV) engage in forms of fantastical propaganda of in- and outgroup creation that do not eschew violence while often concentrating power in a (charismatic) political figure. Yet it is probably the United States Republican Party and president Donald J. Trump that display the most fascist characteristics, given the (current) political climate and use of state-directed political violence (Singh,

Murphy Marcos, and Simmonds 2026; Chapman, Abou-Ghazala, Ash, Bordeaux, and Toboni 2026).

At the same time, one of our gambits here as well is that even though a more traditional feature of fascism has not reared its head, that is, (full) militarization through dictatorship, this does not mean it won't in the near future. This is the second meaning of our 'fascism farce' provocation. Just because it is a farce does not mean we can't farce our way into the real deal. In that sense we have to add to the famous thesis Hegel put forward, and Marx commented upon in the *18th Brumaire*, that history first appears as tragedy and second as farce, that sometimes, tragedy itself first appears as farce. By no means do the farcical, ironic, or only-joking appearances of fascism render it toothless, and this is not an excuse for neglect.

Here we take another cue from Finchelstein, who also shows how the contemporary group of political leaders should be characterized slightly differently from the 20th century populists, even if they stole a few pages from their book. These new leaders are 'wannabe fascists,' who neither fully respect elections nor shy away from militarization and violence, stretching the bounds continually (2024, 2–3). They seemingly merge traditional fascism with populism to create a fresh concoction of right-wing politics. We will return to their place in the current political constellation in Section 4.

3. MYSTIFICATION AND THE DYNAMICS OF LIBERALISM AND FASCISM

To pick back up our initial point, we understand the use of a technofascist frame as farcical because of the excessive focus placed on the overt fascistic elements that at the same time steer attention away from the social and political conditions under which these elements arise, directing our attention to immediate threats to the liberal democratic regime. These threats deserve (some of) our attention but cannot be allowed to obscure the social and political conditions from which they sprang. Leaving those intact is to address the symptom, not the cause. Put bluntly, technofascism's 'fascist' self-presentation is farcical.

This is not to assert that what is emerging is any less vicious or cruel, but that changing conditions in the base of productive relations, toward a still more exploitative form of capitalism, are being smoothed over by the spectacle of fascism enacted by the ownership classes and their political agents. Fascism thus functions in the sphere of political theatre, while these new relations of production appear in the sphere of accumulation. Put another way, the fascist pretensions, even ambitions, of political figures and tech overlords play out in an overburdened system of liberal political theatre that allows for an exploitative shift in productive relations to occur almost entirely unnoticed until, like so many historical shifts, it is experienced as 'always having been that way'.

To Finchelstein's contention that far-right populism is the post-war attempt to redirect fascistic politics into the democratic frame, we have to add that it is liber-

alism spearheading the project by focusing on the formal conditions of democracy. If indeed the Cold War set the stage for the battle between capitalism and communism, in doing so it depoliticized liberal democracy as something that must remain 'outside' yet mediate the two, sometimes also understood as a 'third way'. Liberal democratic politics therefore seem to want it both ways: to keep their middling position intact, discursively upholding the threat of right-wing politics while also maintaining the political-economic tendencies that foster this right-wing threat.

As these conditions have been kept in place since at least the 1990s, the era of third way neoliberalism, we see a rightward political drift throughout the West in particular (Mudde 2018; 2019; Nilan 2021; Kondor and Littler 2023). We contend that as liberalism attempts to pull fascism back into the democratic fold, into populism, the tendency will always ping back towards fascism. Furthermore, the new constellation of productive forces has caused liberalism to turn in on itself, trying to reconcile with its own 'illiberal' product. We end up at a strange impasse: liberalism needs the (far) right, and its fascistic impulses, in the same way fascism relies on the liberal rules and framing it purports to fight against.

3.1 THE END OF (NEO)LIBERAL IDEOLOGY?

(Neo)liberalism, as the contemporary, albeit ever more quickly disintegrating, superstructural framework of contemporary life in the West, is running out of steam, or perhaps, has already run out of it. We contend that this is due to the ongoing tendencies of capitalism, of accumulation and wealth concentration, extending into a new paradigm of ownership and production. Consequently, the various elements of civil society must come to terms with the new expression of these ongoing tendencies. The reemergence of fascism, then, indicates the desire for a historical repetition, a way we could somehow access the golden age of (neo)liberalism again. What presents as an authoritarian rupture in the fabric of liberal democracy, certainly fascist in the way that it walks and talks at times, is immediately singled out as fascism. This allows for easy historical comparisons and, more importantly, the implicit promise that liberalism can and will be back again soon.

Examples of this mystification abound in contemporary political and economic discourse, and we will deal with one particularly germane example for technofascism below, but first a few remarks are needed. As we attempt to navigate the breakdown of the supposedly eternal international order installed under the banner of (neo)liberalism, it has become ever more important for those invoking fascism to identify with a return to a perceived stability. The perceived, and increasingly fragile, equilibrium that characterised the promise of neoliberalism no longer maps onto existing economic and broader political realities. This has placed significant strain on the ideological framework that held the various forces of capital together. A smooth interaction between the productive forces and the forces of politics, culture, and society must, in effect, square the circle, desperately arguing that new

and emerging modes of economic extraction and value production *will* actually fit into the liberal model that has dominated heretofore.

To begin with an early example of this new digital era of rents, take the initial rise of Uber, the ride-share service, in the United States. This company depended upon gaining such a significant amount of market share that they were essentially operating in the red and kept afloat through investment. Explicitly, Uber's model was the refashioning of a unionized and organized service already available, namely, taxis: undercutting the prices of taxis, and by extension labor writ large. Uber was not simply seeking to eke out a profit through market efficiencies, but rather to drive competitors out of business through the use of a unified digital market with only one purveyor (Dean 2025, 29–35). Of course, this was the goal, but not necessarily the outcome. The emerging system of digital rents was simply not powerful enough yet, the model not yet sufficiently necessary, to envelop the liberal system that buttresses and feeds it. Thus we ended up with Uber becoming assimilated, particularly in its expansion to more regulated markets, into the more traditional matrix of corporate competition. All this while significantly pushing the taxi market toward the "gigification" and "platformication" of labor (and other) relations. But this era, we posit, is over now.

The turn to a neofeudal organization then indicates a critical inflection amid the loss of equilibrium described above. What we want to indicate is that this shift has, unlike at the moment of Uber, hit a critical mass to tilt toward an emerging paradigm. But digital rentierism itself is not a new concept, and just as rentierism is incorporated into capitalism, the real question is, as Jathan Sadowski discusses, to what extent this development marks a 'break' from capitalism.

For Sadowski (2020), the question of neofeudalism inherently frames the development of digital rentierism as regressive, not seeing how these platforms "are fully products – and perhaps the perfect encapsulation – of capitalism" (570). The adjudication between continuity and break here thus rests on seeing the neofeudal model as inherently regressive when, in fact, it is precisely about the way the tendency toward monopoly under capitalism can, perhaps inevitably, lead to a redistribution of the political, social, and cultural orders that administer capitalism. In this sense neofeudalism indicates what replaces neoliberalism as the guiding superstructural principle of contemporary capitalism rather than a regression in capitalist relations. In fact, Sadowski himself almost indicates as much when he proposes that avenues for further research from this paper include the permeability between the development of these platforms and governance, an intertwining that we think the neofeudal moment captures with more scope since it indicates that the political and social constellation surrounding capital had been significantly altered along with the emergence of new methods of capital extraction.

And of course, there are no clean breaks. However, in our contemporary moment with the speculative bubble of AI, the forces of production seemingly *have* been sufficiently developed to be deployed along different lines. In an alteration of capitalism, digital commodities and digital rents have initiated a new era of (primi-

tive) accumulation. That AI – whatever that might mean in a given instance remembering our primary interaction with the term is through marketing – is able to succeed where an earlier and more specific iteration like Uber failed is directly tied to the development of productive forces in conjunction with the impossibility to expand profits at the rate necessary under the traditional condition of liberal, and even neoliberal, capitalism (Dean 2025, 27). In Gramscian terms, this is the triumph of superstructure in the tragic sense, its sacrifice to the economic base. Neofeudalism doesn't just describe the emergence of a new form comparable to, or much less isomorphic to and exactly representing, a bygone era, but a concession of the neoliberal superstructure to the new forces of production that emerge in attempts to forestall its own demise.

3.2 THE 'POLITICAL ECONOMY' OF NEOFEUDALISM

The preceding example of mystification deals primarily with the superstructural level of society, acting in accordance with changes, both intensifications and alterations, in the contemporary productive landscape. We will return to this superstructural level again in section 4 to describe the actual positionings of the neofeudal political scene. First, it is necessary to establish just how this shift in productive relations occurred, and there is no better example than the changes to which wage labor has been subject. On one hand, we see new forms of digital rent-seeking that have a surprising resonance with the ownership structures of feudal Europe. Simultaneously, and consequently, there has emerged a push toward what we term the peasantification of the labor force, creating service jobs reminiscent of serfdom, in which rent extraction is once again the most important driver of profits. This brings us to one of the primary features of contemporary neofeudalism: the return of rent extraction, but with the added bonus of the continuity of labor commodification and the efficiencies of capitalist accumulation, all in the thrall of the technological marvels that enabled those profits in the first place, platforms, or 'digital land'.

As mentioned in the introduction, our counter-analysis of today's social-political constellation makes two main claims, and here we will delve more into the first one: that the economic situation still revolves around the same tendencies of capital accumulation and wealth concentration, but that the means by which this is achieved have developed into something new altogether. Most importantly, the core element of capitalism, which Marx remarked upon and made central in his analysis, still stands: labor has been and is still commodified (Marx [1867] 1976, 270–271). This remains the basis of surplus value extraction as the gap between the wages of workers and the profits of owners. At the same time, especially in the liberal world, we have seen a transformation of the production economy into a service economy, recently accelerated by the digitalization of the economy and the rise of online platforms (Srnicek 2017; Gawer 2022; Shen, Sun and Parida 2023). The focus of labor in 'developed economies' in the West is now much less the

production of commodities than the rendering of services, ranging from delivery and transportation to streaming and (web) hosting (Srnicek 2021; Varoufakis 2023, 225–236). In many domains of economic life, especially entertainment, consumers no longer buy commodities, or rather own products; they buy access to a platform (Varoufakis 2023, 216–217). Or at least, platforms aim to install themselves in between, mediating, producer/consumer relations. The mix of contemporary economic relations is thus marked by both the retention of the commodity form of labor and the return to prominence of rent extraction.

3.3 LORDS AND SERFS

In *Capital's Grave*, Dean gives a concise formulation of the prevailing relationship in the political-economic base that marks neofeudalism: "Lordship designates a social relation for the appropriation of surplus" (2025, 94). The point is that contemporary economic relations produce structural positions akin to that of the lords and serfs of (European) feudalism.

The lords of neofeudalism are those that control access to the digital platforms, sometimes also understood as 'clouds', the data centers that host interfaces, information, programs, resources, and so on, remotely and in a concentrated manner. Varoufakis has therefore opted to call these new lords 'cloudalists' (2023, 92–96). These 'cloudalists' are different from traditional capitalists in that they subjugate (other) capitalists by replacing markets with their platforms, the digital infrastructures that generate dependency relations. Of course, Marx himself already acknowledged how the capitalist classes are differentiated, that there are struggles between them for dominance (Marx [1867] 1976, 252–253). And there is a longer tradition of attempts trying to understand, categorize, and systematize the various capitalist logics and classes. If capitalism started with industrialists, and financial capital took over in the early 20th century, we agree that now the 'platform capitalists', 'cloudalists', or what McKenzie Wark has previously understood as 'the vectorialists', are winning this struggle to 'rule' (Wark 2004, 020–022; 029). 'Struggle' between elites has always been a feature of a system marked by capitalist tendencies, yet the specific political-economic formation in which it is expressed changes. What's more, these capitalist tendencies have no 'natural' nor systemic limit, as their intensification can lead to dialectical overturning, pushing or transitioning the political-economic expression beyond 'capitalism' proper. In other words, shaping the political-economic relations into new yet feudal-like structures.

Lordship is a nested relation. When Varoufakis discusses the 'cloudalists', their first dependents, as in feudal society, are lower or other lords, vassals, in this case other capitalists. But those on the bottom rungs of this nested or tiered system, those who have no one dependent on them in the formal economy, are understood as 'new serfs'. And there are different ways in which this serfdom is established today. First, as discussed above, those in the service of digital infrastructures, from delivery drivers, personal trainers, and caregivers to warehouse workers (Dean

2025, 90–93). This is the tendency for service-economy positions to be transformed into more personalized, privatized functions akin to serfdom, or what we come to understand as *serfice*. A service-sector-based economy that echoes serf-like relations while maintaining, for now, commodified labor.

There is a second way serf-like relations are emerging: in the capacity and transformation of the consumer. If capitalism is still marked by a distinction between consumption and production, neofeudalism is fusing consumption and production back into the type of dependency we know from serfdom. 'We' do not own commodities anymore. Cultural commodities such as film, series, games and music are streamed. Modes of transportation are leased or shared. And the subscription model has been extended to include pretty much anything. Unlike feudal relations, neofeudal dependencies are distributed across various relations. One may be a warehouse worker for Amazon who uses Uber to get a ride, JustEat to get a meal delivered, and Spotify to listen to music. That is not to say that this situation will last; there is a drive for integration following the supposed Chinese model (Varoufakis 2023, 133).

These two positions, lords and serfs, have been widely picked up by authors focused on neo- or technofeudalism (Dean 2025; Durand 2024; Varoufakis 2023). But the feudal political constellation did not just feature lords and serfs. Especially in the later feudal period, power started centralizing around royal courts which merged the personalized household management with greater political power. Royal courts featured dozens of other positions which mediated or informed political decisions. We will come back to this second claim in section 4, but wish to make one final remark concerning the nexus of politics and economics.

3.4 THE ECONOMIC AND THE POLITICAL

The relation of the political to the social is one of the reasons why we think it is warranted to speak of neofeudalism. Although we heavily sympathize with the fatigue accompanying a theoretical push for what ultimately can be seen as the 'umpteenth version of capitalism', we still insist that we should technically speak of neofeudal capitalism today. Indeed, as stated in sections 3.1 and 3.2, our analysis does not entail a sharp break with capitalism or capitalist tendencies. Rather, we see both a retention and intensification of capitalist tendencies, that nonetheless alter or push the political-economic constellation to a new expression. We think it is useful to think of the relative strengths of the political and the social, or economic, and how they influence each other. We take a cue from Meiksins Wood's influential essay entitled *The separation of the economic and the political in capitalism*, and do not understand the political and the economic as fully separated spheres (1981). We understand both spheres in terms of 'social factors' and see them as conduits of different forms of (political) power, sometimes at odds, sometimes in alignment. Hence also why we stated in the introduction that we 'roughly' think along the base-superstructure distinction. As Meiksins Wood argues: "the differentiation of

the economic and the political in capitalism is, more precisely, a differentiation of political functions themselves and their separate allocation to the private economic sphere and the public sphere of the state." (Meiksins Wood 1981). It hopefully also helps clarify that we do not think that a return to feudalism is imminent or even possible, but that we are speaking of a new configuration.

Let us briefly, and roughly, recast the development of Western society from (late) feudalism, to capitalism, to neofeudalism through this political-economic lens to illustrate our point. First, in the case of feudalism, we understand it as marked by a kind of fusion in which the non-democratic political has primacy over the economic, relatively in line with how Meiksins Wood understands "feudal relations [as] at once a method of governing and a mode of exploitation". However, we differ from Meiksins Wood when we look at the re-emergence of the late feudal, early Modern, royal court system. We therefore identify these formal economic relations as mostly state-directed, dependent on and informed by the will of the monarch, their small council, and the nobility.

Second, in the case of capitalism, following the analyses of Hegel, Marx, and Weber as well, we understand these relations to transform, as the becoming autonomous of economic relations per the emergence of civil society and the market. We concur with Meiksins Wood that we should understand this as the partial transformation of power from the personalistic feudal setting to the impersonal power of capitalist exploitation. Yet where we somewhat break with her analysis is in how we should understand this partial transformation. To us, the advent of capitalism is marked, at once, by the unleashing of privatizing forces, of economic coercion, and the political conduit of state power in play, albeit indirectly. Our point then is that throughout most of this period, that is since the 1800s, there was no clear 'primacy' for either, as the economic conduit was relatively becoming more powerful, put at some distance from the political, even though there was still clear opportunity for, for instance, national political institutions to control and intervene in their respective economic relations. We are thinking here of the famous cases in the United States where government was able to break up powerful monopolies through legislation (Sherman act of 1890 and Clayton act of 1914).

Our contention is, however, that since the release of the economic conduit of power, it has become a more and more dominant factor, given, for instance, the rise of multinational corporations. Under neofeudalism as we understand it, the political and the economic are fusing again, only now no longer giving the political primacy, but the economic. Put simply: it is becoming more and more difficult to imagine the kind of state intervention that could break up, fight back against, or rein in these multinational corporations. Democratic political power, to the extent it has existed at all, is giving way to economic power through the forces of the supposed global economic market in which the 'international competitiveness' of any state forces them to play into the demands of corporations concerning tax policies, labor laws, concessions, (de)regulations, and other financial support or bailouts. In the neofeudal case it is not that nobility can wield their status to gain economic

power, rather economic power is wielded to gain political status and influence, to such an extent that this influence is beyond any form of countervailing political power on the regional or national level.

4. NEOFEUDALISM AND WANNABE KINGS

In this section, we turn to our second claim, that the current political situation cannot be understood by reference to the tension between liberal and illiberal political systems or fascist and nonfascist movements alone. Not unlike the economic situation, we are dealing with both a retention and return of sorts. Many modern political institutions are retained, such as parliaments, legal courts, and executive state institutions. Yet, there seems to be a gravitational shift toward autocratic political forms in which the supposed liberal notions of checks and balances or countervailing powers make way for a selective and one-sided authority that pulls in support across the various powers (Mudde 2019; Berberoglu 2020; Rosenblum and Muirhead 2024). By shifting the analysis to the broader range of actors that are part of the contemporary political constellation, we claim that we can get a better hold on how autocratic political power is actually produced within a heavily digitized economy. More than a lack of institutional safeguards or constraints then, we aim to look at the enabling actors and conditions of this power production, keeping in mind that power is always a production that cannot be taken hold of or obtained as such.

Feudalism is a politically ambiguous term signifying various regions over a large period in which multiple transitions took place. Nevertheless, several authors find important echoes or specters derived from the types of political constellations usually typified as feudal (Dean 2025, 5; Durand 2024, 147–151; Varoufakis 2023, 24). Most importantly, this concerns the structural positions of the lord and the serf, discussed in section 3. Here, however, we will expand this analysis. We want to stress once more that this is not an actual return. These new lords are not positions of inherited political power, of nobility and privilege; rather, this analysis concerns the return of the types of means by which feudal lords extracted (economic) value and their incredibly skewed private ownership. In the political-economic sense, we saw that whereas feudalism required land as the hinge for rent extraction and labor power in the form of serfdom, neofeudalism revolves around digital land, or rather infrastructure(s), and platforms (Durand 2024, 152–157; Srnicek 2017, 43; Varoufakis 2023, 81).

In this section, we emphasize four structural positions that echo the kings, courtiers, jesters, and priests of yesteryear, only now as legible in our contemporary neofeudal context. We are here inspired by historian Marc Bloch, who understood feudalism through a broader construct of ‘feudal society’, knowing full well that this cannot possibly do justice to the breadth and complexities of several hundreds of years of feudal practice in various regions of Europe and beyond (Bloch and Koziol 2014). While most authors therefore emphasize the decentralized po-

litical-economic relations of lords and vassals or serfs, we also look at the emergence of royal courts with their strange mix of personal-political power. For each structural position, we reference contemporary actors that fulfill (parts of) these positions to clarify them and connect them to real-world practices.

4.1 PROPHETS OF DECEIT

One of the primary concerns Adorno has with the ways in which postwar Western society understood itself to be beyond fascism, to have defeated fascism, was the role of the 'prophets of deceit', a conception he takes from the seminal studies of Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman (1949). These studies were an analysis of the techniques of agitation and propaganda that accompanied fascist politics, especially in the United States, but which outlived the traditional period of fascism. In *Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda* ([1951] 1985, 128) Adorno understands the core of these fascist agitation techniques to be 'personalization'. He goes on to liken this technique to a reification of the medieval practice of distinguishing between believers and non-believers. Now no longer tied to religious or specifically Christian practice but rather to a secularized political notion of loyalty to the leader, there are those who believe in the leader and those who do not and therefore need to be eliminated (Adorno [1951] 1985, 129).

For the neofeudal case, we briefly turn to Spinoza. In his famous Theological-political treatise (1670), he takes aim at the religious leaders of early-modern Dutch society. For Spinoza, they wield superstition, as a proto-propaganda technique, to mask the advancement of their private interests by presenting them as public. Indeed, the operation Spinoza identifies is not only agitation, mobilization and allegiance, but the private or even personalized nature of the deceit. Faux-religious leaders wield superstition to present their private interests as if they were public, or common, and steer away from reason as the capacity to judge for oneself in a quest for the heart, so that followers, the people, "fight for slavery as they would for their survival" (Spinoza [1670] 2016, 68–70).

Today's prophets do not (only) occupy positions of clergy. They are distributed over academic and intellectual endeavors, political-organizational positions, or media outlets. Even more, the lines are often blurred as well, where a figure like Jordan Peterson left academia to focus on privatized and personal pursuits in media and 'counter-academic' organizations like Peterson Academy, promising a better and supposedly cheaper form of (public) education by world-renowned scholars (Peterson Academy 2026). Of course, the supposed academy is not officially accredited. To speak with Adorno one more time, we see how the capitalist tendencies are not breached but intensified. Already in capitalist society, by virtue of a lack of actual orientation, these false prophets provide orientation through knowledge substitutes which function as 'false compasses for a reified society' (Toscano 2023, 86). Under neofeudalism this is only becoming more obvious.

4.2 FALSE JOKERS

The second figure we present is the perverted return of the jester. We say perverted because in the contemporary political landscape, there is actually not much space for a real jester but only for false jokers that are both not funny and not subversive, even when they pretend to be both. We find it helpful here to invoke the distinction made by Alenka Zupančič in *The Odd One In,* where she posits true comedies as subversive and false comedies as conservative (2008, 30). Her point does not concern the content of a joke but its operation: conservative comedies secretly preserve what they pretend to subvert. False comedy leaves intact what it aims to make fun of.

As mentioned, we hold that today there are very few, if any, true jesters, especially in and around the new royal courts. The neofeudal lords have shown themselves incapable of withstanding jokes, going so far as to use their leverage over platforms to purge them (Tangalakis-Lippert 2022). Neither do the faux-monarchs of today, or wannabe kings as we will see, show signs of any humor, resorting instead to vilification and name-calling (Cummins 2016). If anything, there is much less space for true comedy, as part of the ploy of the new far-right is to present itself as powerful, enviable, and cool. Exemplary here is perhaps the false comedic circle around American podcaster and comedian Joe Rogan, who frequently discusses and even interviews political figures like Trump at politically salient times (Fowler 2024). These discussions, interviews, jokes, and even impersonations occur under the guise of humor but mostly serve to retain or display a certain level of coolness, or explicate the 'sui generis' nature of the political leader.

4.3 (LIBERAL) COURTIERS

Third, any royal court also had 'courtiers', a generic term for figures serving or attending the court in some manner. They had practical-organizational duties around finances, law, or enforcement, roles that later became more ceremonial. Here, we have to think of figures ranging from private servants to political agents, including soldiers, clerks, secretaries, etc.

Contemporary political leaders have a host of these courtiers, often aligned with their political projects, or happy to be in the service of the neofeudal lords to do their bidding for a small cut of the profits. These are the lobbyists, party backbenchers, and other executive henchmen who attend to the fulfillment of their political and social desires. While any Western democratic liberal system seems to deal with these figures in one way or another, the American situation is most clearly defined by these willing courtiers, as the agenda for the Republican Party and Trump has been to replace crucial government positions across the judicial and executive branch with loyalists such as Kristi Noem, Pam Bondi, Pete Hegseth, judges like Amy Coney Barrett and Brett Kavanaugh (and a slew of lower court appointees), and lawmakers like Jim Jordan and Lindsey Graham.

We do not mean to argue that such loyalists are indispensable. If anything, they are highly replaceable, cycling in and out of offices, continuously acting under threat of suspension or expulsion by the political machinery (the party, businesses, etc.). Whereas in traditional liberal politics, such measures were intended for those who deviated from a collectively established party line; under the neofeudal regime, this has become a highly personalized line. Exemplary here is Marjorie Taylor Greene, the U.S. lawmaker for whom support was withdrawn when she disagreed with Trump, while originally being one of his most fervent supporters (Zurcher, 2025).

One role we especially aim to thematize here is the way in which contemporary (liberal) political actors enable or channel the political desires of the neofeudal lords and political leaders. This is the kind of secondary support required for the political processes to play out, an allegiance to form regardless, despite, or even secretly in support of, content. In Western Europe, this has occurred in the Netherlands, where right-wing PVV formed a coalition government with supposed 'rule of law'-based party New Social Contract (NSC), among others. This coalition was a spectacular failure, ineffective and short-lived, and meant the downfall of the NSC, which didn't retain a single one of their twenty parliamentary seats (Gozzi and Holligan, 2025). But such integrations and coalitions are occurring throughout, and on the level of, the European Union (Becker, Flach, and von Ondarza, 2025).

4.4 WANNABE KINGS

We turn our attention, finally, to the role of fascism under neofeudalism. Or rather, borrowing from but altering Finchelstein's depiction: the role of wannabe kings. As discussed in section 2, wannabe fascists combine populist and fascist techniques that derive from or play into democratic contexts but stretch their bounds continuously toward a more autocratic or authoritarian form, even up to the point of breaking with or moving beyond democratic procedures when possible. We agree with the attention to the desirous or aspirational nature of these figures, the 'wannabe' part. Yet, we argue, these figures are not really interested in becoming fascist but hope to use far-right ideologies to become 'absolute', a king or monarch.

Of course, while there is no actual turning back, the aspirations mirror the position of the kings of later feudalism's emerging absolute monarchies. What we identify is that these are the kinds of political leaders that aspire to, or dream of, personalized power. Personalization concerns the process of 'power concentration' in a specific leader, often the executive (Kuehn, Llanos, and Richter, 2026). This is a longstanding concern within political theory but has recently become more prevalent.

Plainly put, figures like Trump do not want to be Hitler; they want to be king. Like wannabe fascists, there is a dual gravitational pull coming from the structural position of the wannabe king. First, wannabes recognize and promote other wannabes that are not a direct threat to them (Finchelstein 2024, 177). Second, they use the plasticity of democracy in their favor, as with each stretched boundary it

becomes more difficult to push warped democracy back within the supposed liberal democratic constraints. In other words, we can reasonably expect that Trumpism will outlive Trump (Finchelstein 2024, 185).

For Finchelstein, the actualization of such aspirations is, in some sense, 'luck'. The success or failure of a coup can determine as much, hence Trump's failed January 6th self-coup becomes the only barrier to understanding him as an outright fascist (Finchelstein 2024, 18–19). If it succeeded, the United States could have become a dictatorship, the last characteristic of fascism that is missing according to Finchelstein. We are skeptical to what extent such a distinction is useful or holds up, especially concerning the larger political-economic constellation within which these (self)coup attempts might take place. It seems this distinction is specifically grounded in liberal versus illiberal political practice.

Therefore, we are interested in a slightly different question: how do we understand this aspiration or desire? If we look to courtiers like Curtis Yarvin, we get an idea of what this 'new' aspirational form is: the CEO-monarch (Shahiefisally 2025; Marchese 2025). What is interesting here is not so much how truthful his claims are, that parts of society are already run like a monarchy, specifically the business-side, rather it is the desire for the concentration of power in a leader figure like a CEO who does not have to adhere to democratic procedures, nor draw from or answer to a 'demos'. A desire informed by neoliberal fantasies of the market, corporations, and the role of CEOs, while at the same time 'nostalgic' for the kind of power monarchs used to wield, especially in Early Modern Europe. A mixture which is itself mediated by the experience of (post-)cold war liberal politics that aims for austerity and temperance, and emphasizes or even hides behind a supposed rational-juridical frame.

This is not to say that we have definitive answers, but most importantly it seems to us the right question. We must be concerned with formulating a response that describes the social-economic and political conditions in which such a desire arises, gains (broad) support, and enables political leaders to act on them.

5. CONCLUSION

This contribution has sketched, briefly but pointedly, what we contend is a more viable political framework to understand our contemporary political situation than technofascism. If our alternative framework indeed holds, then the danger of the conception of technofascism is that while it focuses the debates on a particularly urgent matter, rising authoritarianism and its technological support, it seems doomed to either miss or even further entrench the kinds of social conditions and the larger political context within which 'technofascism' could arise. The frame of neofeudalism is an attempt to bring those two factors in, to put front and center the political economy of today, and the various political actors which make this political economy possible. Our assertion is that such a shift is absolutely necessary if we are to hope to avoid falling prey to fascism, traditional or otherwise, and gen-

uinely work towards a different future in which less violence and more equality allow for a genuine democratic political process. Up to this point, we are only perpetuating the conditions for fascism to return as the ground shifts beneath us, and the ongoing fascist spectacle plays out as the ideological footman to the lords of neofeudalism.

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TECHNOFASCISM NORTH AND SOUTH

Cyberlibertarianism and Its Latin American Translations

GUSTAVO ROBLES

1. RISE AND FALL OF TECHNO-OPTIMISM

The awakening of digital technologies became almost the sole inspiration for utopian imagination in the era of the "end of history." In the 1980s, the rise of personal computing and the consolidation of Silicon Valley as the emblem of a new technological capitalism marked the beginning of this transformation. In the 1990s, the spread of the Internet gave rise to a rhetoric of the "global village" and the "information society" that came to dominate public debate (Castells 1996). By the 2000s, enthusiasm had reoriented itself around the dot-com boom and the discourse of "Web 2.0," centered on "participation" and the supposed horizontality of the new digital platforms. Horizontal access to the production and circulation of information on platforms like Napster and Wikipedia, John Perry Barlow's *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (1996) – with its proclamation of a digital territory free from governments and corporations – and the free software movement all seemed to confirm that a new world, liberated from bureaucratic coercion, was under construction (Negroponte 1995).

More than a cultural phenomenon, this enthusiasm served a precise ideological function. In the era of the "end of history," communication technologies made triumphant capitalism appear cool, exciting, and fun, relegating its critics to the role of retrograde Luddites incapable of grasping the future being built around them. Technology thus became the "real utopia" of capitalist realism at a moment when the left could no longer produce images of the future (Fisher 2009). The accompanying narrative tirelessly repeated that digital technologies would make us freer, that information would flow without censorship, breaking the chains of tyranny and bureaucracy, and that political systems would be revitalized by the direct participation of hyper-connected citizens. Events such as the protests in Moldova (2009), the 15-M movement in Spain, Occupy Wall Street, and the Arab Spring (2011) seemed to confirm these prophecies: politics could be reinvented from below through digital connectivity (Morozov 2011).

This techno-optimism also permeated the left, most emblematically in Italian post-operaism. Intellectuals such as Toni Negri (2000), Paolo Virno (2004), or Maurizio Lazzarato (1996) saw in the technological transformations of post-Fordist capitalism not a threat but a promise of immanent emancipation. The shift from material to immaterial labor – grounded in the production of knowledge, affects, and language – had generated a radically autonomous social cooperation that overflowed capital's capacity for control. Cognitive and communicative technology was

thus the vector of an insurmountable contradiction: the more capital subsumed all of social life, the more it depended on a form of cooperation it could neither produce nor govern on its own. Digital capitalism, in this reading, contained the seeds of communism within its own core, through the liberation of cooperative powers that capitalism itself had helped bring into being.

This autonomist optimism was not exclusive to the post-operaists; it was part of a broader intellectual climate tied to the rise of the new information economy. It soon began to dissolve, however. By the time the 2008 financial crisis erupted, signs were multiplying that technology was associated less with the overcoming of capitalism than with new forms of control amid its crisis. Edward Snowden's 2013 revelations about mass NSA surveillance, and the Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2018 – which exposed how data from millions of Facebook users had been weaponized to manipulate electoral processes – laid bare the underside of techno-optimism. The vocabulary of digital networks had once spoken of "horizontality", "participation", and "transparency"; it now spoke of "fake news", "echo chambers", "trolling", "surveillance", and "post-truth".

2. THE DIGITAL ENCLOSURE

These scandals were merely the tip of a far deeper transformation. What was at stake was not – or not only – a change in how technologies were used, but a wholesale reconfiguration of the neoliberal mode of accumulation and the very infrastructure of everyday life. The emergence of what came to be called "platform capitalism" (Srnicek 2017) forced a definitive rethinking of democratic techno-optimism. What the 1990s had presented as a gateway to autonomous, collaborative, and horizontal forms of cooperation had morphed into an unprecedented monopolistic concentration in the hands of a handful of corporations – Google, Meta, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft. The decentralized architecture of the original web was systematically colonized by closed ecosystems that enclosed "the commons" and converted them into private fiefdoms.

The term "platforms" metonymically designates a complex system encompassing data, algorithms, and digital infrastructure, which serves as a virtual space for the exchange and connection of objects, goods, labor, information, and services (Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018). This new structure of the digital world implied a profound shift in the political imaginary surrounding technology. The democratizing dream of techno-optimism was revealed as a nightmare of unprecedented vertical power, in which big tech corporations accumulated a capacity for influence that began to surpass that of most states on the planet. In this platformized stage of digital capitalism, control over data, algorithms, and critical infrastructures was not distributed as techno-optimism had hoped; instead, it became hyper-concentrated in ever fewer hands through increasingly efficient mechanisms of monopolization.

The radicality of this digital metamorphosis inspired the metaphor of feudalism as a framework for conceptualizing the current stage of techno-capitalism (Durand 2020; Varoufakis 2023; Dean 2025). In the classical feudal system, surplus extraction was achieved through tributes imposed on vassals who maintained relative productive autonomy on their plots. Rivalry between lords aimed less at improving productive efficiency than at controlling land as the ultimate source of rent. Proponents of the techno-feudal hypothesis argue that platform capitalism has established an analogous logic: accumulation is no longer centered on production but on the extraction of rent through monopolistic control of a new "territory" based on data and digital infrastructures. Platform capitalism thus completed the passage from techno-optimism to a techno-feudal dystopia that would supposedly be bringing even capitalist dynamics themselves to an end. In this reading, capitalism would be buried not by the workers of the world united – as Marx and Engels once dreamed – but by capital itself.

This conclusion, however, shares a common blind spot with the left-wing techno-optimism it seeks to surpass – one that Evgeny Morozov (2022) has identified acutely. For Morozov, both positions converge on a reductive reading of technological capitalism as a fundamentally rent-seeking system. And in doing so, both ignore that corporations like Google or Amazon do not operate as feudal lords parasitizing wealth created elsewhere, but as companies investing massively under the accelerated logic of classical capitalist accumulation. Yet this rentist capitalism – far from leading to "techno-feudalism" or a "communism of capital" – generates a specific dynamic: it produces affective energies and a libidinal fascination that turn the accumulation process into an end in itself, detached from any democratic, humanist, or emancipatory aspiration. The concept of techno-feudalism, then, fails to capture something essential: the radically futural orientation of contemporary technological capitalism, that digital capitalism is not merely extractive but also utopian; and that its utopia is one of the right. It is precisely this utopian-accelerationist dynamic that opens the conceptual terrain of techno-fascism.

3. TECHNOFASCISM AS POLITICAL RATIONALITY

In recent years, the notion of techno-fascism has gained currency to describe the collusion between big tech companies, right-wing billionaires, and political actors with authoritarian and anti-democratic agendas. The term has been used to name a variety of phenomena shaping the exercise of contemporary power: data processing and AI technologies deployed for war, border control, and the persecution of internal dissent; algorithmic mechanisms aimed at the impoverishment of labor; and the dissemination and amplification of violence, disinformation, and emotional manipulation (Coeckelbergh 2026). These phenomena are not the result of a neutral or value-free evolution of technological innovation, but of the alliance between far-right political authoritarianism and the rent-seeking capitalism of tech oligarchs

– illustrated most vividly today by the convergence between the Trump administration and the oligarchs of Silicon Valley (Lewis 2025).

These oligarchs, moreover, no longer conceive of themselves as mere businessmen. They have crafted narratives and speculative experiments about the future, appropriating the language of science fiction to outline a hyper-technologized world that promises to solve the socio-environmental problems generated by capitalism itself (Morozov 2025). Plans for planetary escape, artificial superintelligence, extraterrestrial mining, eternal longevity, privatized corporate cities, luxury subterranean complexes, proprietary network-states, and post-human brain-machine interfaces: all are versions of what has been called "end-times fascism" (Klein and Taylor 2025), in which collapse is assumed to be inevitable and the only way out is to devise futurist utopias for a humanity severed from the social world and the natural planet. Underlying all these imaginaries is a constitutive aporia: the belief that the problems capitalism has generated can only be solved by more capitalism; a dead end, since the logic invoked as cure is identical to the one that produced the disease. To do so, it would only require accelerating it and, in any case, new territories – other planets, other spaces – where to replicate the very logics that destroyed this one.

This is why techno-fascism should not be understood merely as a right-wing discourse on technology, or as a set of tools for control and violence, but as the political rationality of contemporary capitalism. It emerged in the crisis of neoliberalism from the convergence of technological accelerationism and economic rent-seeking. In contemporary digital capitalism, the source of profit lies in the enclosure and continuous expropriation of the commons: nature and land, social relationality, linguistic creativity, human labor, and political imagination. This destruction of the material conditions of social existence produces a double consequence: on the one hand, economic instability; on the other, exacerbated emotional antagonisms. When the material ground of everyday life – work, housing, environment, community – is systematically dismantled, the experience of loss and dispossession does not remain abstract, but is lived as threat, humiliation, rage, and resentment. These affects do not remain politically inert; instead, they become available for capture by narratives of punitivism, enemy-making, and technological salvation (Pinheiro-Machado 2025; Nizaruddin 2025; Robles 2025a). Thus, techno-fascism is not merely a collection of dystopian fantasies of tech oligarchs but rather the mode of existence and experience of the current digital capitalism.

To grasp this, we must distinguish techno-fascism from classical fascism by a decisive ideological peculiarity: at its core lies a paradoxically libertarian impulse. Unlike twentieth-century fascism, which subordinated the individual to the state and the nation, contemporary fascism presents itself as an enemy of all regulation and a champion of individual and market freedom (Traverso 2019). The dogmatic belief that regulations – whether safety standards in manufacturing, labor and environmental protections, or financial controls – obstruct business and technological innovation is not an ideological accident but the articulating core of the project.

What all these techno-fascisms share is the rejection of any form of state, legal, or social interference, in favor of a supposed "natural order" in which the strong impose their dominance without institutional mediation. As Marc Andreessen declares in his *Techno-Optimist Manifesto*: "Our enemies are the regulators who want to stop technological progress and the bureaucrats who want to control outcomes" (Andreessen 2023).

4. THE CYBERLIBERTARIAN ROOTS

During the golden years of techno-optimism, the philosopher of technology Langdon Winner (1997) defined "cyberlibertarianism" as a current linking enthusiasm for electronically mediated forms of life with right-wing libertarian ideas. This current rests on three pillars: a technological determinism that presents digital development as an unstoppable force; a radical individualism that understands freedom as the absence of any collective obligation; and an unshakable faith in free-market capitalism. Winner also identified two ideological commitments embedded in this vision. On the one hand, an exclusionary notion of community based on affinity and homogeneity; one that replicates the logic of gated communities and abandons the political task of building coexistence among heterogeneous groups. On the other, a contradiction between the discourse of freedom and the concentration of power in the hands of a few transnational corporations, where the proclaimed freedom amounts, in practice, to the freedom of large companies to operate without democratic oversight and to dismantle social protections.

Winner's diagnosis remains entirely valid, but the landscape he described has since radicalized into its current technofascist form. Digital communities have not only devolved into echo chambers but also into hierarchical, ultracapitalist dystopias. More decisively, contemporary techno-fascisms no longer need to disguise their reactionary projects behind promises of democratization: they now unabashedly affirm their will to power, dispensing with any appeal to discredited universals such as justice or equality. This techno-fascism fits into a broader global mutation toward a "global war regime" (Hardt and Mezzadra 2024), in which violence no longer requires justification through argument, legal norms, or international agreements; and the power of property imposes itself directly, without institutional mediation and without promises of shared well-being.

In an update of Winner's diagnosis, Golumbia argues that cyberlibertarianism currently represents "a commitment to the belief that digital technology is or should be beyond democratic political sovereignty" (2024, 3). In fact, when technocrats criticize regulations, taxes, barriers to innovation, and bureaucracy, what they are targeting is not the administrative Leviathan they routinely exploit to conduct business and boost their profits. Embedded in that critique is something more specific: a rejection of the very tools that allow decisions to be made collectively, tools oriented not toward profit or capital appreciation, but toward human needs and aspirations. With technofascism, cyberlibertarianism has completed its trans-

formation into a moral crusade against political democracy and the ideals of social justice.

5. TECHNOFASCISM FROM THE SOUTH

Techno-fascism, however, does not travel identically to every corner of the global capitalist system. Like any ideological phenomenon, it is articulated with the material conditions, political traditions, and structural position of each social formation. What happens, then, when libertarian techno-utopian narratives land in structurally dependent economies with weakened state apparatuses, high levels of informality, and a long history of extractivism? In these contexts, the answer is not the same as in California or Singapore. In the peripheries, libertarian techno-fascism does not project superintelligences, eternal life, or expansion into space; instead, it produces precarious responses to the demands of global capitalism. The same components (rejection of regulation, technological fetishism, anti-statism, anti-democratic libertarianism) operate here within dependent economies, hollowed-out state institutions, and populations accustomed to decades of unfulfilled developmental promises. The result is not the techno-fascism of the North, with its post-humanist megalomania and its fantasy of escaping the existing world; it is a subaltern variant whose image of the future is not escape but sacrifice, offering peripheral territories as extraction zones for global techno-capitalism.[1]

To examine this logic concretely, we turn to Latin America. Following the decline of the progressive governments of the so-called "pink tide," the region witnessed the rise of radical right-wing movements characterized by a strongly conservative moral agenda and a libertarian economic one. The two most prominent current exponents of this tendency are Javier Milei in Argentina and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador. Their paths to power were responses to structural crises: Bukele capitalized on widespread exhaustion with systemic violence and partisan corruption, while Milei emerged from a macroeconomic and inflationary crisis sustained over more than a decade. Both share disruptive, anti-establishment leadership styles, a faith in deregulated market forces, an affirmation of traditional patriarchal values, and a punitive and anti-democratic approach to social conflict.

The convergence that concerns us here, however, is more specific: the way in which cyberlibertarianism, political authoritarianism, and anarcho-capitalism intersect in concrete figures, projects, and imaginaries that can be read as peripheral translations of techno-fascism. The following sections examine two such cases. First, the role of cryptocurrencies in these projects: the attempt to establish Bitcoin as legal tender in El Salvador, and the $LIBRA scandal in Argentina. Second, the AI imaginaries animating the Argentine government's ambition to position the country as a global hub for artificial intelligence – and what that ambition reveals about the

1 The empirical analysis developed in this and the following sections draws on and reformulates material previously discussed in Robles and Orovitz Sanmartino (2025; 2026), to which the reader is referred for a different treatment of the cases.

structural place assigned to the periphery in the global digital economy (Couldry and Mejías 2019; Ricaurte, Gómez-Cruz, and Siles 2024).

6. CRYPTO-LIBERTARIANISM IN LATIN AMERICA

Nayib Bukele did not come to power from the traditional right but from its ruins. Trained in business and advertising, he built his career under the umbrella of the FMLN, El Salvador's left-wing party, until his expulsion in 2017 handed him his defining political narrative: the outsider persecuted by the system. With that political capital, he founded Nuevas Ideas and won the presidency in 2019. What followed was a government of high popularity and accelerating democratic deterioration: power concentrated in the executive, permanent states of exception targeting gangs, and mounting allegations of human rights violations. The Bitcoin Law of 2021 belongs to this same illiberal framework as a coherent piece of the project.

According to the government's promises, Bitcoin as legal tender would offer financial inclusion to the unbanked, protection against inflation, and individual sovereignty beyond state control. The state deployed the Chivo wallet with over $200 million in credit and a $30 bonus per user. The results were the opposite. Most Salvadorans downloaded the app to collect the bonus and never used it again; over 80% of the population reported never having used Bitcoin at all. The impact on remittances – one of the project's central arguments – was marginal, accounting for less than 2% of total transfers. In January 2025, under IMF pressure, El Salvador reversed the measure. The experiment had cost between $400,000,000 and $450,000,000 in public funds, with no clear accountability, massive technical failures, fraudulent accounts, and the theft of millions from the state bonus itself (Meijering and Rosales 2025).

Behind this crypto-utopianism lies a vision of digital progress in which, as one analyst puts it, “Bitcoin resembles the evolution of humanity”: not merely a good or useful idea, but an inevitable one (Boos 2024, 590). A revealing expression of this libertarian futurism was the announcement of Bitcoin City in November 2021 at the Latin American Bitcoin and Blockchain Conference (Bukele 2023). Bukele presented the project as a futurist libertarian city-state, tax-exempt and carbon-free. The launch featured a video with the aesthetics of video games, memes, and science fiction, in which an animated avatar of Bukele flew a UFO while volcanoes erupted bitcoins. The project never advanced beyond the promotional stage, but that was enough to reveal the foundational myth animating these techno-libertarian narratives: the fantasy of a marketplace purged of politics.

Crypto-utopianism adds to this myth the illusion that technology can substitute for the social bond that underpins money as an institution. Money has never been a mere technical instrument arising spontaneously from exchange; it is an institutional creation deeply embedded in social relations. The premise of “politics-free” money is, in itself, a political project: one of transferring control from democratic spaces to opaque spheres, such as algorithms and large crypto-asset holders.

Money is not a commodity but a central social institution whose functioning implies a form of legitimate authority. The erosion of that authority is therefore not a collateral effect of the techno-libertarian project but its core: the construction of what Slobodian (2023, 13) calls "institutional enclosures" designed to protect capital from democracy.

Javier Milei's relationship with cryptocurrencies tells a different version of the same story. Before taking office, he was engaged as an influencer to promote crypto-assets that proved short-lived and were subsequently suspected of fraud. None of those cases, however, matched the scale of what occurred on February 14, 2025. That day, Milei promoted the cryptocurrency $LIBRA on his social media accounts, presenting it as a private initiative to fund Argentine entrepreneurship. The gesture triggered a price surge of over 1,300%, which collapsed almost entirely within hours when a group of wallets withdrew close to $90 million. Investigations revealed that, before and after the post, there had been telephone contacts and agreements between Milei's inner circle and the creators of $LIBRA – leading to accusations of abuse of presidential office, potential malfeasance, and calls for impeachment (Wikipedia 2025).

This scandal not only implicates various actors from the crypto world but reveals a close collusion between that sector and media figures of the local far right. These figures were recruited as influencers to promote digital assets, ranging from minor profiles to prominent ones such as Agustín Laje, an intellectual reference for the new Latin American right. This symbiosis points to more than a shared business interest: it shows how the libertarian imaginary associated with cryptocurrencies has become inseparable from the social vision these sectors promote across the region. Investing in crypto is framed not merely as a financial bet but as a moral stance: anti-collectivist, anti-redistributive, and anti-progressive. The cryptocurrency thus functions as an ideological artifact: a tangible instantiation of a capitalism imagined as prior to regulation, stripped of social contracts, and purified of politics itself.

7. "SILICON PAMPA" AND OTHER AI HALLUCINATIONS

Nowhere is this peripheral techno-utopianism more visible than in Javier Milei's fantasy of turning Argentina into the "fourth global hub of artificial intelligence" (Infobae 2024). In December 2024, he announced the so-called Argentine Nuclear Plan, whose central idea was straightforward: to build a 300 MW modular reactor – the ACR-300, designed and patented by scientists from the state-owned company INVAP – to supply cheap energy to the data centers that global tech corporations need with increasing urgency. The country's cold southern climate, its energy potential, and its skilled human capital would complete the picture of comparative advantages (Argentina.gob.ar 2024). With the added potential for local uranium supply, the government hoped to attract multinational AI companies requiring

large-scale energy to meet their growing demand (Robles 2025b). The project ended in a minor scandal and subsequent oblivion.

The announcement was spearheaded by Demian Reidel, head of the Presidential Advisory Council and the project's chief ideologue. Reidel holds a degree in nuclear physics from the Balseiro Institute – a world-renowned center for nuclear science in Argentina – but his career has unfolded in the financial world, far removed from applied science and from the community of researchers who developed the reactor patent. This is one of the most controversial aspects of the project: the ACR-300 was developed over decades by the National Atomic Energy Commission and INVAP, two public institutions that this same government has been defunding and dismantling. Argentina built the first nuclear power plant in Latin America in 1974 and added two more in the following decades. That trajectory did not emerge from the autonomous forces of the market but from sustained public investment in science and technological infrastructure; precisely the material foundation that the libertarian imaginary has attacked through cuts to university and science budgets, provoking the exodus of many of the researchers who worked on the ACR-300 patent.

The real asset the libertarian government wishes to offer global capital is not reactors, physicists, or technological infrastructure, but the absence of rules. In his own statements, Reidel acknowledged that Argentina's competitive advantage over Europe – constrained by environmental and labor regulations – or China – where the state controls data – lies precisely in its willingness to offer low wages, minimal protections, and lax ethical limits on AI development. The libertarian paradise is, in concrete terms, a "sacrifice zone" (Lerner 2010). This was made explicit in a remark Reidel delivered as a joke during one of his many investor pitches: Argentina, he said, "has all the conditions for this project; the only problem is that it's populated by Argentines," adding, "but the government is taking care of that." The concept of a sacrifice zone could not have been expressed more plainly.

This imaginary connects with an older one in the capitalist periphery: extractivism. Digital capitalism does not float in the air. Behind every server, every data center, and every battery lie extracted minerals, consumed water, and contested territories (Svampa and Viale 2014). Argentina holds uranium reserves – though it suspended extraction in 1995 – and forms part of the "Lithium Triangle" alongside Bolivia and Chile, which together hold 70% of global lithium reserves. The aesthetic accompanying lithium extraction narratives – white expanses, supposedly empty deserts – obscures the massive water consumption in arid zones, the displacement of indigenous communities, and the structural reality that power in this market lies not in owning the raw material but in controlling the technologies that process it (Dorn and Dietz 2024). To give legal expression to this ambition, the government approved the Large Investment Incentives Regime (RIGI) in 2024, guaranteeing transnational capital fiscal stability for thirty years, currency exchange exemptions, and tax reductions, while subordinating territorial and environmental rights to the logic of investment attraction (Reydó 2024).

Argentina's ambition to become a global AI power ended in scandal when Demian Reidel was forced to resign from the presidency of Nucleoeléctrica (the state enterprise responsible for managing the country's nuclear plants) following corruption allegations involving inflated contracts and discretionary procurement. The so-called Nuclear Plan, along with the broader fantasy of positioning Argentina as the world's fourth AI hub, never materialized beyond press announcements, and it joined the equally unfulfilled promise of building OpenAI data centers. What the episode ultimately revealed is that AI development in the periphery amounts, at best, to a subordinate insertion into the global digital economy: providing data center infrastructure that is resource-intensive, low in skilled labor demand, and negligible in added value. Without an active industrial policy, a functioning scientific ecosystem, or the public institutions that made Argentina's nuclear capacity possible – institutions this same government has been systematically defunding – the peripheral AI hub remains a fantasy sustained by economic re-primarization and technological colonialism: the peripheral expressions of the technofascist rationality.

The confirmation of this peripheral cyberlibertarianism is, without a doubt, Peter Thiel's prolonged stay in Argentina since April 2026. Co-founder of PayPal and chairman of Palantir, a Trump donor and, perhaps, the technofascist par excellence, Thiel moved his family to Buenos Aires, purchased a twelve-million-dollar mansion, enrolled his children in a local school, and held a series of meetings with the libertarian establishment. The gesture condenses, with unusual clarity, the logic we have been describing. On one hand, his move stems from a flight from the State and its taxes, anticipating a California ballot initiative that would impose a 5% tax on fortunes exceeding one billion dollars. On the other, his choice of Argentina reproduces the North's "end-times fascism," anchored in the fear of nuclear conflict and the search for bunkers of salvation; Argentina, owing to its geographic remoteness, its promise of a tax haven, and its far-right government, offers a strategic refuge for that fantasy. In Thiel's figure, settled in Buenos Aires, the north and south of technofascism converge.

8. TO BE TECHNO-OPTIMIST AGAIN

The argument developed in this article traced a genealogy from techno-optimism as the utopia of triumphant capitalism, through techno-feudalism as a diagnosis of its rent-seeking mutation, to techno-fascism as its current political rationality. The second part sought to show that this rationality is not homogeneous but takes distinct forms depending on the structural position each social formation occupies in the world system. In the Global North, tech oligarchs design bunkers or Martian colonies to escape the coming collapse; in Latin America, the libertarian project translates into the deliberate surrender of territories, sovereignty, and democratic aspirations. The imaginaries mobilized (Bitcoin as free money, AI megalomania, lithium and uranium mining as a new El Dorado) do not propose escaping the global order but integrating into it in the place that order has already assigned: providers

of resources, cheap energy, precarious labor, and sacrifice zones under the banner of a mutilated freedom.

This critique should not, however, be mistaken for an abstract rejection of technology or of the possibilities for collective well-being, democracy, and justice it carries. These technologies do capture legitimate aspirations: the hope for economic inclusion, dignified work, better public services, and shared prosperity. The tragedy is that these aspirations are structurally undermined by the material realities of dependent economies, where the same technologies that promise emancipation tend to deepen exclusion and concentrate power. It is here that utopia curdles into dystopia, techno-optimism into techno-pessimism, and the prospect of digital integration into a consolidation of inequality. The task, then, is not to abandon techno-optimism but to detach it from the cyberlibertarianism in which it has been embedded. This means rethinking technology, AI, and digital platforms within institutional and democratic frameworks capable of promoting data sovereignty, digital transparency, cognitive justice, and genuine popular participation. What must be rejected is not technology itself, but the extractivist, technocratic, and cyberlibertarian logic that fuels these peripheral techno-fascisms.

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FIRST PRINCIPLES AND ALGORITHMIC REASON IN TECHNOFASCISM

ANTHONY BURTON

1. INTRODUCTION

The mobilizing question of this issue is to define and demarcate the limits of what has been called technofascism, that derivation of a term historically slippery enough to resist easy circumscription. One thing is certain: this technofascism emerges from, and has a close relationship to, a form of libertarianism that scholars have called the Californian Ideology (Barbrook and Cameron 1996), cyberlibertarianism (Winner 1997; Golumbia 2024), and various other terms that refer to a blend of brutal, Manichean ideas of the social world with the power fantasy of computational dominion. The purpose of this article is to analyze the animating logic of this political imagination's veer towards commutability with fascism. I call this logic *algorithmic reason*: the belief that all of the social world is not only available to, but is necessarily made virtuous through, rational calculation. More specifically, I look at this through Silicon Valley's attachment to "first principles thinking" and how it constitutes a form of computational authoritarianism that translates social complexity into axiomatic epistemological binaries, grounding technofascism in the operations of logic itself.

We can start with the political donations from this milieu to Donald Trump's presidential campaigns in the U.S. Peter Thiel, founder of the data analytics company Palantir and erstwhile privacy warrior, gave roughly $1.5 million USD to support Donald Trump's 2016 presidential run, securing a prime speaking slot at the Republican National Convention and positioning himself as Trump's main bridge to Silicon Valley. And while he bowed out of any direct presidential endorsements in both 2020 and 2024, his seat remained warm through the participation of Elon Musk and the latter's roughly $290 million USD in donations to Trump's 2024 campaign (Schouten et al. 2024). Musk's efforts were rewarded with a brief appointment as the head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), an initiative named after a 2013 internet meme. The initiative aimed to "slash excess regulations, cut wasteful expenditures," and restructure federal agencies through what was framed as pure rational calculation (Trump 2024). DOGE shuttered agencies, defunded programs, and enacted mass layoffs based on claims of "fraud and abuse." While efficiency was the ostensible rationale, its mandate extended beyond eliminating waste to include purging diversity initiatives and reshaping priorities to serve a "cost-cutting" agenda (Clarke 2025). The agency proved more spectacular than efficient: Musk initially claimed DOGE would save $2 trillion before reducing estimates to $61 billion. After 130 days, Musk left acrimoniously and started a new party focused on deregulation (Schneid 2025).

DOGE exemplifies a conflationary fantasy between information economism and power that I examine in this article, one with its roots in thinking of logical machines and human behavior as analogues (Mirowski 2002). This fantasy – algorithmic reason – has a wide-ranging cultural history in the West, from Enlightenment rationality and its calculative racism (Braun 2014; Morgan 2021) to early aughts New Atheists rationally disproving God (Eagleton 2009; Harris 2006; Dawkins 2006). It also has manifold contemporary manifestations, from crypto governance (Golumbia 2016) to speculative finance (Zook and Grote 2017; Grindsted 2022) to cultures of "maxxing" and self-optimization (Hong 2020; Abebe 2025). As a vector through which this fantasy is embodied, I focus on Silicon Valley's attachment to what its leading figures call "first principles thinking": a mode of reasoning that treats complex social and political problems as computational puzzles solvable through axiomatic logic.

This piece proceeds as follows. First, I define first principles thinking as articulated by Silicon Valley's authoritarian entrepreneurs. I then explore the computational foundation of first principles reasoning through the lens of axiomatics and computability, before turning to the question of *why* axiomatic thinking exerts such a powerful attraction. I argue that first principles thinking represents a particular form of technosolutionism that translates social complexity into computable binaries, and that this translation constitutes the operative logic of technofascism by necessarily excluding democratic deliberation.

2. "A PHYSICS-BASED WAY OF LOOKING AT THE WORLD"

Reasoning from the perspective of "first principles" is a belief in a sort of seed of knowledge, an algorithmic process that understands reasoning itself as not a (re)generative social activity but instead as something traceable to a fundamental starting point – emergent from the metaphysics of an Enlightenment understanding of the person as possessing capabilities of reason analogous to physics or computational logic gates. Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and Peter Thiel have all made this idea a core element of their business philosophy, expressing it as a means to avoid the supposed errors of what Musk calls "analogical thinking," Bezos "proxies" (Bezos 2016), and Thiel "formulas" (Thiel and Masters 2014). In other words, first principles stand as an antidote to the knowledge of the crowd. They represent the possibility of getting around the significations of knowledge's circulation: a first principle is that which is true *prior to* any other propositions or assumptions. Empiricism – the deduction of actionable knowledge through observable, shared experiences and phenomena – is replaced by a form of axiomatic, logocentric thought.

In a 2013 interview, Musk describes first principles methodology as "a kind of physics way of looking at the world." When one thinks according to first principles, they "boil things down to the most fundamental truths and say, 'what are we sure is true?' or 'sure as possible is true' and then reason up from there…" (Innomind

2013). But this extends beyond particular business decisions. In the same interview, Musk frames it as a total epistemology:

> The normal way that we conduct our lives is we reason by analogy. We're doing this because it's like something else that was done, or it's like what other people are doing. It's a slight iteration on a theme, and it's *mentally easier to reason by analogy rather than from first principles*.

For Musk, reasoning by analogy impedes technical progress, which is itself attached to innovation, to genesis, to the new. First principles, meanwhile, are not only the superior mode of reasoning – they *are* reasoning itself. The first principle contains within it its own justification: if it is a fundamental truth, then anything that might emerge from it as an axiom must also be true. To illustrate, Musk compares Tesla's bet on lithium-ion batteries over gasoline to the earlier shift from horses to automobiles – both supposedly succeeded by going against the dictates of the masses. It is a form of market rebellion where the market, a symbolic and representative mass, becomes amenable to being "gamed" through a distillation to its physics. Possessing the reasoning ability to identify its underlying logics means being able to work it like a program while existing outside of it.

Peter Thiel likewise associates thinking through first principles with intellectual power. In the introduction to *Zero to One*, he writes that "the single most powerful pattern I have noticed is that successful people find value in unexpected places, and they do this by thinking about business from first principles instead of formulas" (Thiel and Masters 2014). Thiel's misunderstanding (first principles in physics *are* formulas) is telling. While the formula is used as needed, the first principle necessarily dismisses all that is formulaic about its own legitimacy. Setting up a dichotomy of "horizontal" and "vertical" progress, Thiel writes:

> When we think about the future, we hope for a future of progress. That progress can take one of two forms. Horizontal or extensive progress means copying things that work – going from 1 to *n*. Horizontal progress is easy to imagine because we already know what it looks like. Vertical or intensive progress means doing new things – going from 0 to 1.

The first principle is the zero, the apparently naïve state that only logical progression, as opposed to mimetic knowledge, can fulfill. Horizontal progress is presented as easy, the path forward already laid out through imitation, already at hand in contrast to the generativity of first principles. Vertical progress is the "new" – it is the prior form by which things can then be treated through the lens of the axiom. "The single word for vertical, 0 to 1 progress is *technology*," Thiel writes. Technology is the repeatable disruptor, the thing that can start anew, that can always autogenetically instantiate itself – it lacks any relational element. Yet this vision of technological progress belies an apocalyptic undertone. As Thiel himself writes:

> New technology has never been an automatic feature of history. Our ancestors lived in static, zero-sum societies where success meant seizing things from others… The smartphones that distract us from our surroundings also distract us from the fact that our surroundings are strangely old: only computers and communications have improved dramatically since midcentury.

The impetus to first principles thought is not only a path forward, but a borderline necessary one, a computational vision of truth with logical validity as its only criterion. The first principle, as both Musk and Thiel articulate it, is positioned as the *original* – the thing that engenders the copies that "work." The logic is algorithmic, and by extension, technological.

Etymologically, first principles are rooted in scientific knowledge-making. The concept of *ab initio*, Latin for "from the beginning," emerged alongside work on quantum mechanics, where *ab initio* approaches prove useful because they are independent of experimental data, using the Schrödinger equation as a fundamental law or axiom (Griffiths 2005; Pokluda et al. 2015). But the term's deeper history lies in Western metaphysics, and this rarefied history reflects the stakes of Silicon Valley's adoption. Aristotelian "unmoved movers" – divine intelligences that set everything in motion while remaining unchanged – established the template for sovereignty as first principle. As Derrida notes, the prime mover represents ultimate sovereign power: the capability to cause without being caused (Derrida 2005). The prime mover takes its political form in conceptions of the monarchical sovereign – sovereignty as the first principle, or power to *cause*, the source code of the social order.

3. IRRATIONAL RATIONALITY

If first principles thinking claims the world is reducible to fundamental truths from which all else can be derived, then its operative logic is that of the axiom. And axiomatics – the formal system of deriving knowledge from self-evident propositions – has a far more fraught history than Musk's breezy invocation of "physics" would suggest.

Alexander Galloway's work on the *Uncomputable* is generative here, for it illuminates the possibility that there might *be* things beyond the computable. In fact, computation itself has been wrestling with the uncomputable – rationality's own resistance to itself – since the turn of the 20th century. As Galloway writes:

> A rash of rational paradoxes in the early twentieth century culminated in a series of limits to rationality from within that very reason. Bertrand Russell's paradox from 1901 – "the set of all sets that are not members of themselves" – seemed to impose limits on what was possible within the theory of mathematical sets. Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theories of 1931 showed that for any formal axiomatic system there will always

> be statements that are true in that system but not provable. Later, in 1936, Alan Turing demonstrated that it was logically impossible to calculate what sorts of machines will halt (given a certain input) and what sorts of machines will not halt. (Galloway 2021, 2)

Computation in the twentieth century is defined more by the limits to computation – more by the uncomputable – than by a positive set of capacities. First principles thinking, by contrast, proceeds as if these limits do not exist, as if the uncomputable were merely a temporary problem rather than a constitutive feature of rationality itself. As Galloway continues, "part of the history of computation is the history of the uncomputable being colonized by the computable" (Galloway 2021, 3). While to be colonized is not to be eliminated, on the order of algorithmic reason, that which is colonized is made functionally subject to a binary sort: either *now computable* or soon to disappear altogether.

Luciana Parisi pushes further in *Contagious Architecture*, proposing that contemporary information theory's dictate that axioms can generate infinitely complex structures – what she terms the *metacomputational* approach – fails to capture the possibility that algorithms themselves are actual entities, distinct from their status as instructions amenable to mathematical truth or physical law (Parisi 2013, 3). The Turing machine demonstrated that problems solvable axiomatically are computable problems. But as Parisi shows, "beyond the axiomatic method or the mathematical program that could calculate all (in which all can be decided on the basis of its mathematical ground), Turing realized that there was a constellation of undecidable, incomputable propositions, the reality of which could not be empirically proven" (Parisi 2013, 15). Disorder is a fundamental part of computation, running "against the metacomputational view of a universe contained in simpler axioms" (21): "ontological complexity or chaotic incompleteness does not emerge from order, but is rather the unconditional condition, part and parcel, of procedural calculations."

Computationalism thus relies on the presumption that the world *is* a set of first principles, ultimately computable and grounded in axiomatics. As Gilles Deleuze argues in his lectures on axioms and capitalism, axiomatics are "treatments" of systems of objects – rather than being characteristics that exist in phenomena as qualified prior to the object, axiomatics are those very phenomena, intimately involved in actively determining or giving form to the things that they are applied to, the "untreated elements" that we might consider as the input to an algorithmic form of knowledge construction (Deleuze 1980, 9). An axiomatic, rather than a generative means of shaping phenomena, is a discriminant of those things and their logical system: it decides what counts and what does not.

4. THE SEDUCTION OF THE AXIOM

Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, in their history of the concept of objectivity, precisely capture the impulse towards clinging to the axiom: "all epistemology be-

gins in fear – fear that the world is too labyrinthine to be threaded by reason; fear that the senses are too feeble and the intellect too frail" (Daston and Galison 2007, 372). The axiom promises to master this fear. It offers a fundamental truth from which all else can be derived, a ground beneath the groundlessness of the contemporary condition. In an era of what Mark Andrejevic terms "infoglut" – where data's appearance as objective and immediately indexical has instead morphed into an ether that exceeds human knowability (Andrejevic 2013) – the axiom offers the fantasy of total objectivity and, in turn, legibility. "Objectivity fears subjectivity," Daston and Galison write, "the core self" (2007, 374). The search for first principles is the search for a form of objectivity in the realm of decision-making: to repeatedly reason from axioms is to continually claw back toward a state of isolation and primacy, prior to the contamination of the social.

There is also a specific aesthetic dimension to this attraction. Alan Liu, theorizing the concept of "cool" in knowledge work, identifies cool as the "aporia of information" (Liu 2004, 179): that which is designed to communicate as *little* as possible. Cool is "not so much noise in the information theory sense as information fed back into its own signal to create a standing interference pattern, a paradox pattern" (ibid). In the face of infoglut, the axiom is the coolest possible form of knowledge. It reduces everything to a single starting point; it resists elaboration, context, and history. Its low-information quality – its refusal to engage with the messy particulars of the social – is precisely what gives it its appeal. While Liu theorizes that this resistance to being informatized imparts the sense of cool, an "ethos of the unknown" emerging from the restrictive and bureaucratized rationality of contemporary knowledge work, first principles do not grant the same affective relief as they might first promise. Rather, they foreclose the possibility of surprise, of the impulsive, of chance and the uncertain. They occupy a relationship to the world that relies on a self-referential binary. Emergent from this cool is the axiom's ability to prescribe its own usage: it describes what to do with the world and how to split phenomena into computable and incomputable. This is a powerful comfort in conditions of complexity. Its certainties are not merely facts in the world but actionable, transforming the paralyzing surplus of possibility into a determinate chain of logical operations.

The mastery promised by knowledge of the axiom is the ability to reduce, in categorical terms, the world to a logistical problem. As Klaus Theweleit writes of the bourgeois male subject's relationship to mastery, knowledge emerges "as long as he can dissect [phenomena] into numbers, tables, statistics, analyses of materials, investment costs, empirical details" (Theweleit 1987, 422). Logistical–logical–masculinity renders space rational; it presents itself as the control that will beget freedom.

In this adherence to the axiomatic logic, infringement from the outside is an epistemic and metaphysical threat; axiomatics are imbued with eliminationism. This is what differentiates the axiom from a law. Laws can be transgressed, reinforced by punishment; first principles epistemology, because it shapes its elements prior

to their enactment, *cannot be ignored* if it is to remain faithful to itself. As Antonia Majaca writes:

> The paranoid automatic writing-down-system sheds light on the moment when the fantasy of the complete (white male) subject is equipped with new means to become a next-level arbiter of truth, including in the control over life and death. Such a configuration of secular authority is accompanied by the immediately suppressed horror of recognizing that in his newly acquired position of the absolute sovereign, Man is the secular incarnation of Divine Law on Earth… Here lies the uninterrupted and chilling continuity of the Schreberian double bind that leads to our age, in which the latest incarnation of totalitarian paranoia produced by the contemporary necropolitical apparatus of data positivism, profiling, and prediction creates its very own *Aufschreibesystem*. (Majaca 2016)

The axiom's attraction is thus inseparable from its violence. It seduces through the promise of certainty, mastery, and cool. In the same motion, it demands the elimination of everything that falls outside its domain. Monarchy and monopoly are its political and economic forms: tautological, hardened against possible decay, assuaging the fears of decomposition by any imposition from the outside. The desire for the mono, the singular leader, the first principle, plays into the aversion to the mass, the macrological, the mimetic – everything that threatens the sovereign closure of the axiom.

5. A TECHNOSOLUTION LOOKING FOR A PROBLEM

First principles thinking, then, is more broadly an attempt to render social phenomena amenable to calculative or computational means of problem-solving. It is indeed a "physics-based way of viewing the world," if here we view the world as a construction of enclosed knowledge, a metaphysics and a *logos* underlying all possible modes of meaning-making.

This is a dream of unlimited power through the possibility of mastery, one uniquely afforded to the linear, causal possibilities of self-creation. And as Julietta Singh writes, a colonial master "understands his superiority over others by virtue of his ability to have conquered them materially *and* by his insistence on the supremacy of his practices and worldviews over theirs, which renders 'legitimate' the forceful imposition of his worldviews" (Singh 2018, 7). In this sense, it is an extension of *computationalism*. As David Golumbia describes it, computationalism "underwrites an extremely specific and contemporary notion of the self that is tied closely to the kind of subjectivity displayed by powerful leaders in our society. Instrumentalist reason is now the highest form of reason; means are everything, because the ends will be taken care of by themselves" (Golumbia 2009, 76). Computationalism functions as precisely this mode of mastery: it "invariably and relent-

lessly reaches toward the indiscriminate control over something," for the "full submission of an object – or something *objectified*" (Singh 2018, 10).

The violence of this translation lies in what it excludes. The idea that knowledge can be created from an axiom, with no trace of its construction detectable, makes things appear to be objective: first principles elide the social and attempt to illustrate the pure and unadulterated. The "physics," or *logos*, of reasoning by first principles necessarily recreates the past in contrast to the continued construction of the social. It promises possible domination because it hides its reliance on historical contingency and social construction. This leads, naturally, to singular (dominant) entities as an unequivocal good, which we can read in Peter Thiel's defense of monopolies. In an essay for the *Wall Street Journal*, Thiel argues that a monopoly is "the kind of company that is so good at what it does that no other firm can offer a close substitute" (Thiel 2014). The monopolist transcends competition, possessing and exerting power over its market in an unassailable manner. Thiel doubles down:

> Economists copied their mathematics from the work of 19th-century physicists: They see individuals and businesses as interchangeable atoms, not as unique creators. Their theories describe an equilibrium state of perfect competition because that is what's easy to model, not because it represents the best of business. But the long-run equilibrium predicted by 19th-century physics was a state in which all energy is evenly distributed and everything comes to rest – also known as the heat death of the universe.

And further: "every new creation takes place far from equilibrium. In the real world outside economic theory, every business is successful exactly to the extent that it does something others cannot. Monopoly is therefore not a pathology or an exception. Monopoly is the condition of every successful business." Equilibrium presumes power exceeding the individual. It is a mass. It invalidates hypotheses of singular autogenesis and the primary power to cause. The monopoly has no imitators; it exists outside the equilibrium and has the power – the core function – *to* author all knowledge within its domain.

6. (TECHNO)FASCISM AGAINST THE DEMOS

First principles thinking is structurally anti-democratic. Democracy requires negotiation between incommensurable perspectives; axiomatic logic demands singular truth derived from fundamental premises. If the social world reduces to computable problems with algorithmic solutions, then democratic deliberation becomes not just unnecessary but actively harmful. Consider Thiel's 2009 essay for the Cato Institute, "The Education of a Libertarian":

> I remain committed to the faith of my teenage years: to authentic human freedom as a precondition for the highest good. I stand against confiscatory taxes, totalitarian collectives, and the ideology of the inevitability of the death of every individual. For all these reasons, I still call myself "libertarian." (Thiel 2009)

So far, so libertarian. But Thiel continues: "I must confess that over the last two decades, I have changed radically on the question of how to achieve these goals. Most importantly, I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." The justification is revealing: "the higher one's IQ, the more pessimistic one became about free-market politics – capitalism simply is not that popular with the crowd." Democracy, for Thiel, cannot get things done because it distributes sovereignty across the mass. He further attributes the atrophy of freedom to the "vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women – two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians." Thiel's incompatibility thesis – that freedom and democracy are in fundamental conflict – follows directly from the axiomatic logic of first principles. If truth is singular and derivable from a fundamental axiom, then the democratic process, which by definition introduces multiple, competing, and often incommensurable truth-claims, can only be an impediment.

Curtis Yarvin arrives at the same anti-democratic destination by a different route. In his "Cathedral" essay, Yarvin theorizes that democratic institutions coalesce into a discursive power structure – the "cathedral" – that stamps and shapes governing concepts: "the cathedral operates as a *discourse* – not an army of ideas, a *market* of ideas. The institutions are just *brands* – marks of prestige. Ideas in this market *evolve*; they reproduce by being taught, they mutate by being thought" (Yarvin 2021). Yarvin's solution is monarchy. He writes:

> The professors and journalists have sovereignty because final decisions are entrusted to them and there is no power above them. Only professors can formulate policy – that is, set government strategy; only journalists can hold government accountable – that is, manage government tactics. Strategy plus tactics equals control.

In this framework, thought is base thinking, centred, achievable and identifiable as long as it is logically and formally impervious to outside influence. The demos, necessarily, cannot think – it is ruled by the injunction to mimic. Monarchic power is fundamentally axiomatic power, because the monarch has absolute authority to engender the conditions of society without external input or deliberation. The CEO of a startup, in this vision, is the appropriate model for political governance (Yarvin 2008).

There is a historical irony here. Critiques of liberal bureaucracy are part and parcel of the critical-theoretical tradition, beginning with the Frankfurt School. Adorno, in *Negative Dialectics*, contends that bureaucratic reason classifies and os-

sifies the individual, dismissing the possibilities of subjecthood in the name of categories that make things easier to manage (Adorno 2004). The technolibertarian critique breaks from the Frankfurt tradition in its proposed solution, attempting to reclaim algorithmic rationality *against* the social process. As Moira Weigel shows in her analysis of Palantir co-founder Alex Karp's dissertation, this instrumentalization of Frankfurt theory strips it of its political content, adapting the Frankfurt School for technical purposes (Weigel 2020). Karp's dissertation attempts to find a ground truth in the human psyche – aggression – and render it as a set variable in a social formula: to "illustrate that the social is constituted through acts of aggression, and that this aggression becomes legible in specific linguistic interactions" (ibid). He makes aggression objective, identifying it as a first principle of social existence. Karp's reduction of social complexity to axiomatic rules exemplifies the "instrumental reason" that Horkheimer and Adorno identify as fascism's preparatory condition (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002). The result is the migration of fascist potentials from the realm of mass psychology into the operations of computational logic itself.

The Frankfurt School defined fascism as operating through the mobilization of mass affect: the spectacle of the rally and the charismatic leader (Löwenthal and Guterman 2021). Roger Griffin's theory of fascism as "palingenetic ultranationalism," a revolutionary ideology seeking national rebirth through the destruction of liberal decadence, further specifies this libidinal investment in a nation's narrative existence (2018, 40). Yet where classical fascism's investments were located and discharged through this concept of the nation (what Toscano describes as "an era of mass manual labour, universal male conscription for total warfare and racial imperialist projects" (Toscano 2023, 14)), today's fascistic movements are "profoundly invested in fantasies of a white, industrial, patriarchal modernity that have the post-fascist, post-war period as their seedbed" (ibid.). The palingenetic temporal structure of crisis, destruction, and rebirth remains, yet now facilitates the convergence of "stereotypy and personalization… aided and abetted by algorithmic architectures" (89) that locate the nexus of revolutionary meaning in necessarily atomistic conceptions of the individual (as a singular datapoint, or neoliberal subject). Technofascism's mode of domination is not primarily affective but *logical* – or, more precisely, it mobilizes affect in the *guise* of logic. The claim to "physics-based reasoning," to "first principles," to the axiom describes an operative logic that structures both the self-conception of its adherents and the material systems (platforms, algorithms, data architectures) through which they exercise power.

What is specifically technological about this fascism is the computationalist ontology that underwrites it. Where classical fascism required the spectacle of the mass, technofascism operates through the logic of the algorithm: a series of steps, derived from axioms, that produce determinate outputs from given inputs. The social world, in this view, is not a field of competing interests, irreducible differences, and negotiated meanings (that can be united under the palingenetic myth) but a set of computable problems awaiting optimized solutions and actively harmed

by the interference of the uncomputable. This computational authoritarianism constitutes technofascism in several interlocking senses.

First, it operates through what Parisi calls a "reprogramming" of decisionism: the political decision is reimagined not as a sovereign exception (as in Carl Schmitt's classical formulation) but as an algorithmic output, the result of correct reasoning from correct axioms (Parisi 2017). As Parisi writes:

> Post-truth politics is the art of relying on affective predispositions or reactions already known or expressed to stage old beliefs as though they were new. Algorithms are said to capitalize on these predispositions or reactions recorded as random data traces left when we choose this or that music track, this or that pair of shorts, this or that movie streaming website.

The sovereign is no longer the one who decides on the exception but the one who writes the algorithm – who, in Musk's terms, identifies the first principles from which all subsequent decisions can be derived. This gives the political decision the veneer of technical necessity, naturalizing what are in fact deeply political choices.

Second, it emerges from a specific fantasy about subject formation that is intimately tied to the neoliberal subject: the autogenetic sovereign, the self-created individual who reasons from first principles and is therefore entitled to exercise power over those who cannot. As Susan Buck-Morss writes of the modern myth of self-creation at the core of this fantasy, this is a necessary emergence from the restrictions on imagination in this subject formation: "the fact that one can imagine something that is not is extrapolated in the fantasy that one can (re)create the world according to plan" (Buck-Morss 1992). The plan of the autogenetic creation requires control over the causal chain; an axiomatic or first principle allows for this control through the conception of total knowledge. Computational thought's "syllogistic, quasi-mathematical logic" aligns with masculinist conceptions of knowledge as objective rather than intersubjective (Edwards 1990, 107). The computer's self-contained simulation mirrors the masculine fantasy of autogenetic sovereignty – the (male) self as axiom, divorced from relational complexity.

Third, and most critically, this computational authoritarianism enacts what Galison calls a "Manichean science" (Galison 1994, 233). Galison adopts pioneer cybernetician Norbert Wiener's term to designate a continuing struggle against an "active oppositional intelligence" (232). Under the conditions of first principles thinking, any mode of knowledge that violates the logic emergent from the axiom becomes an oppositional intelligence. This is because the strict adherence to the axiom requires the binary division of the world into the computable and the incomputable, the rational and the irrational, the signal and the noise. That which falls outside the axiom – the historical, the affective, the relational, the democratic – is not merely excluded but rendered as waste to be eliminated. This is the logic that led DOGE to classify institutional knowledge as "bloat," diversity programs as "inefficiency," and democratic deliberation as bureaucratic obstruction. The axiom's

logic is already known, which recreates the past in contrast to the continued construction of the social. Here, algorithmic reasoning is the only mode of intelligence: an input, subject to a formula, which produces output. Intelligence becomes computation.

7. CONCLUSION: INTELLIGENCE ARTIFICIAL AND NOT

I have here argued that Silicon Valley's "first principles thinking" represents a form of algorithmic reason that constitutes the operative logic of technofascism. I have traced this epistemology through its philosophical roots in Aristotelian metaphysics, its computational foundations in axiomatics and computability, its seductions, and its contemporary articulation by figures like Musk, Thiel, and Yarvin. We see that first principles thinking is less neutral technical rationality and more political epistemology, one that translates social complexity into computable binaries and excludes democratic deliberation by design. What distinguishes technofascism from mere authoritarianism is that its mode of domination is immanent to the logic of computation itself. It does not use technology as an instrument of power. It derives its conception of power, and its legitimating judgments, from the operations of computational logic. This logic does not need to signal itself as fascist to produce fascistic effects.

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STATES OF GLASS

Metaphors and Agents of Medical Informational Self-Determination in West Germany's 'Long 1970s'

LAURA NIEBLING

1. INTRODUCTION

The democratic state holds a paradoxical position in modern data politics: it is simultaneously the institution most capable of protecting citizens from mass surveillance and the institution most capable of perpetrating it (Keulen and Kroeze 2018, 30). This paradox defines information politics within the "guardian state" (Yesilkagit et al. 2024) framework, in which such a state must continuously protect its citizens from a prospective abuse of its own structures. In this context, technofascism is often narrated as a recent phenomenon. It seems to mark the moment Silicon Valley's Big Tech libertarian utopianism eventually opened the door for authoritarian politics, the point at which platform monopolies, predictive algorithms and venture-capital futurism took up fascist ideologies.

But this narrative of companies just following political trends conveniently ignores the long history of states trying to prevent exactly this. Historically, the convergence of state power and digital infrastructure as a threat to informational self-determination and democratic, voluntary participation in "information states" (Higgs 2004) is nothing new. The state itself is necessarily a data collector, which in many countries implies a long, troubled history of mass control and surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019), if not outright (techno)fascist ideologies enabled through citizen data. The advent of administrative computing in the late 1960s was envisioned to make possible massive data collections on a national scale, the "telematic age" was one of rationalized networks in all public service fields (Grande 1989).

At the same time, data protection laws were developed from a fundamental, historic distrust of the state. This distrust was founded in the living memory of how state bureaucracy had enabled totalitarianism. When West Germany drafted the world's first data protection legislation in 1970, the Hessian Data Protection Act, the underlying premise was clear: the democratic state, by its very nature as an information/data collector, posed a potential threat to individual freedom. In this article I trace how that premise shaped both legal language and cultural metaphors in West Germany's 'long 1970s'.

I use the example of medicine and health care, a public service field with both a need for data collections and strict legislation to protect sensitive patient data, to show how data protection was framed through a critical data literacy and democratic self-defense. The aim is to examine how the anxieties around the state as a data collector first emerged and how the idea of a 'transparent' state can be seen

as a strategic way into technofascist infrastructures.[1] This threat, I argue, was identified in the 1970s; it was named in the metaphor of the 'glass citizen' and it is highly debated today, as state power and private technological infrastructure become inseparable in ways that the architects of early data protection feared, but could not foresee in scale.

By looking at West German debates around the emergence of data protection legislation, I will discuss how the 'techno' dimension of technofascist governance is defined especially through an evil banality of bureaucratic normalization, which is framed through Germany's history. From there, I show how the paradox of the guardian state was built into the legal architecture of early data protection, how it was embodied in the deliberately chosen political biographies of the first Data Protection Commissioners (DPCs), and how the metaphors of the 'glass citizen' came to define a defensive informational self-determination against future technofascist states.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE BANALITY OF AN "EVIL" MEDICAL DATA COLLECTING STATE

In 1969, a television roundtable on West German channel *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen* put a controversial topic on public display: doctors and health care administrators discussed the legal foundation of a state collecting data in medical settings. When West Germany's biggest medical journal *Deutsches Ärzteblatt* reviewed the talk show, it used a striking metaphor, which was to become a defining national symbol of the highly controversial datafication of humans:

> Trust is a tricky thing. Citizens are happy to give it, but what does the state do with their information? Citizens cannot shake the feeling that the state will feed it into the supercomputers that are rolling out in administration, and that these computers will turn everyone into 'glass' individuals, where everything from your house number to your latest affair can be seen at the touch of a button. Is there really no need to fear that one day health information will be misused? The state representative used the term 'disillusionment with the state.' Unfortunately, citizens have many reasons to feel this way. (Anon. 1969, 2331)

1 For this article, the activity reports of the federal and state data protection commissioners and the supervisory authorities for data protection from the Data Protection Archive were examined, including the early activity reports of the Data Protection Commissioners from 1972 onwards. For the case study on metaphors in data protection, a selection of 25 articles on 'glass' 'citizen' from *Der Spiegel* (1979–1990) was cross-referenced to mark the transfer into public debates. The article additionally correlates some archival documents on the projects DOMINIG II and MEDKOM and 23 articles on 'glass' humans in the *Deutsches Ärzteblatt* (1966–1990) to further contextualize the medical discourse.

The roundtable on 'glass' patients – or citizens in general – was both a response to computerization measures and to rationalizing federal involvement in medical work since the 1960s. In West German medicine, the computing debates revolved around the role of medical confidentiality in medicine (work) and health care (public service), with the head of the Federal Health Office arguing on television that "the state administration should be informed about serious illnesses – for statistical and scientific evaluation and possible epidemic control measures" and that a doctor entering public service was "first and foremost a civil servant" (Anon. 1969, 2331). To the doctors in the talk show, but just as much to medical journals like the *Deutsches Ärzteblatt*, the idea of the doctor as a public servant first was an alarming claim, as it potentially forced a decision between federal requirements and patient needs.

Crucially, the discussed disillusionment was not directed at the West German democratic state itself, but anxieties about its techno-rationalized future. This 'tricky trust' issue was rooted in the catastrophic application of bureaucratic logic to human life before 1945, for which the emergent field of Holocaust Studies from the 1960s to the 1980s would eventually write the complicit pre-history of medical computing (Aly and Roth 1984; Stöckel 1993; Black 2001). The disillusionment did not come from ideological alignments with specific parties – even though the parties did not agree on all details of privacy laws – but was a broader expression of historically curated suspicion of what states do with data when political conditions change. It was directly informed by an anticipatory reading of the "post-war Germans['] […] recent historical experience of totalitarian government combined with long-standing intellectual and cultural themes" (Kilian 2008, 80), like the autonomy of will or dignity of man.

Critical state theories (within Holocaust Studies) give a partial framework for the privacy law discourses. Hannah Arendt's (1963) widely discussed conceptualization of the banality of evil in the wake of Adolf Eichmann's trial reflected on one's role in a totalitarian, abusive system, which did not necessarily arise from malice but from the "curious, quite authentic inability to think" beyond one's administrative role (2003, 159). Arendt's focus on systems and active thinking as an act of defiance is important here. It aligns with another impetus for Hesse's DPA coming from the US debates about the individual's right to not have "one's whole personality registered and catalogued" (Thomale 2006, 61). Critical thinking, privacy concepts and (professional) ethical care would come to inform the DPA, the role of the DPCs and the metaphors of informational self-determination emerged to counter potential technofascist abuse of federal data collections.

3. PREVENTING THE STATE AS A DATA-COLLECTOR: FROM PRIVACY LAWS TO INFORMATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION

In state theory, democracies have principles to keep them in place, and they will ideally continuously negotiate new forms of protection. This is embodied in the

concept of the "guardian state," which is "not neutral in the classic liberal sense, but protective of liberal principles of governance" (Yesilkagit et al. 2024). Notably, this can mean seemingly undemocratic measures against anti-democratic forces, e.g. a party ban (Schupmann 2024, 1) or critical monitoring or obstruction of data collection measures, since those could potentially be turned (again) into data mines for fascist regimes or political institutions taking over democratic infrastructures.

The concept of media privacy has been historically entangled with the ability of media to document and distribute (Bendrath 2007, 2), but as data processing measures became more widely discussed in the second half of the 20th century, the idea of personal information increasingly concerned any (new) medium capable of creating, storing, processing and transferring data – as well as automatic sorting. As European states announced tenders to establish public data processing measures in the early 1970s,[2] the new data protection laws and discourses turned a focal point on the state as a potential data collector. The Greek-German law professor Spiros Simitis cooperated with legal experts in Hesse to implement the DPA, signed into action on October 7, 1970. In his first draft for a data protection law, Simitis advocated for a right "to decide for themselves what happens to their own data" (Simitis quoted in Erd 2011).

The background of this "informational self-determination" had been politically proposed in 1971 in a comprehensive federal report on data protection by Wilhelm Steinmüller, which framed data protection as the necessary "reverse side" of data processing (Steinmüller et al. 1971, 34) and noted how the information age could not be explained through the "dualism state – society […] anymore" (ibid., 35) but was instead an interconnection of both in new communication channels (for a history of the term: Bull 2011, 25). Steinmüller's report would become the theoretical backbone of West Germany's data protection ideology. It is important to note for the discourse on technofascism that data protection was never intended to obstruct new infrastructures, but much rather to negotiate who should have access to them and for what purpose: "[D]ata protection is a political (and, by extension, organizational and financial) problem, not a technical one; its solution is facilitated, not hindered, by technology." (Steinmüller et al. 1971, 41).

From the beginning, data protection in medicine and beyond occupied a specific political space in state law: it was a legal instrument *created by the state* to potentially protect citizens *from the state*. Because states always imply a power relationship toward individuals, they are the unexciting but necessary governing administration; there is no opting-out of procedures and rules – especially if one needs medical attention. However, the Hessian DPA limited and justified for the first time

2 Two networks briefly discussed in the following are DOMINIG II (1975–1980) and MEDKOM (1986–1994). DOMINIG II was a hospital pilot project set in Hesse (accompanied by two other national projects) (Schneider, Giere and Schuster 1973). The overall DOMINIG goal was a fully electronic, nation-wide eHealth infrastructure. MEDKOM was a project to implement telemedicine consultation structures in hospitals in Lower Saxony, and prospectively West Germany (and even the GDR).

what could be collected and used, implying not a general data security but five 'encroachment' principles (freedom, legitimacy, purpose, caution, control) under which "each processing of personal data is considered an infringement on somebody's rights" (Kilian 2008, 85). But who was to decide on these principles?

4. DATA PROTECTION COMMISSIONERS

The emerging field of privacy and data protection demanded a new form of supervisors – the Federal Commissioner for Data Protection and the 16 state Data Protection Authorities (collectively referred to as DPCs here). As their biographies demonstrate, the first DPCs in particular were anti-fascist defenders of democracies, not just state law professors (and juridical experts) designing regulations on paper. The role as DPCs aligned with a refusal of the idea "that the German professor can only be found in an ivory tower," it required a "political professor" (Bull 2012, 9). This political engagement becomes exemplary in Willi Birkelbach, Hesse's first DPC (1971–1975). Born in 1913, he joined the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) in 1930, then from 1934–1938 became an active member of the underground resistance against the National Socialists through the Socialist Workers' Party (SAP) alongside future Chancellor Willy Brandt, for which he was arrested in 1938 (Schmid 1983, 274). Birkelbach served time in prison, was then drafted to the infamous 'Strafdivision 999'/'Strafbataillon 999,' from which he deserted in 1944 to join Albanian partisans (Ulrich 2005, 57) and eventually returned into (inter)national politics for the socialist party SPD, becoming a member of the first Bundestag in 1949. He was chosen for his role against this background, "because he was a particularly credible politician within the Hessian Social Democratic Party" (Fittkau 2018).

Just like the doctors wanting to maintain ethical professional guidelines in their task as civil servants, so did the DPCs with their background in (state) law. Both rejected the idea of being (ever again) a cog in an evil and banal machine. Notably, Birkelbach did not oppose electronic data processing in general, but he warned the German Parliament (Bundestag) of the "dangers of a technical erosion of parliamentarism" (Birkelbach quoted in Stadler 1984, 328). Similarly, Simitis was e.g. painted as a 'security risk' by the conservative CSU for his political opinions (Frohman 2021, 131f.), as he openly defended the right to informational self-determination against any institution, even the state.

West-Germany's first Federal DPC, Hans Peter Bull (in office: 1978–1983), prominently described the DPCs' role as "administrative controller and ombudsman at the same time" (Bull 1986, 63) and he later stated how both Birkelbach and Simitis had been an "excellent choice" as DPCs, as they influenced the evolution of Germany's data protection laws "through fundamental legal and administrative statements" during their terms of office (Bull 2012, 64). This became particularly relevant to large medical networks, which were prominently tested in the 1970s and 1980s to build an eHealth infrastructure for West Germany.

While the DPCs did not oppose DOMINIG or MEDKOM, they actively demanded supervision and justification of the projects' implementation of data protection regulations (Birkelbach [Archived Letter] 1974; Dronsch 1989, 29). This evolves into a perception of DPCs at times even being antagonistic, as their fight against "surveillance and oppressive tendencies of the state and the industry" (Bull 2012, 11) could put them in the way of projects. And while the DPCs tried to regulate the information age through monitoring and legal frameworks, informational self-determination mostly evolved in public debates (Frohman 2021, 29).

5. DATA PROTECTION METAPHORS AND LANGUAGE

Metaphors inform our conceptual systemic understanding of the world, of "our everyday realities" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 3), often without an acute awareness of them – but thinking about them, in the sense of Arendt, can help with a detachment from becoming a part of this machine. The emergent new media were "particularly prone to metaphorical thinking since human experience of them rests on a fundamental disconnect between their material and social realities" (Farkas and Maloney 2025, 2). Because technological metaphors work *for* and *against* new media, they fuel both imaginaries and anxieties.

In the case of data privacy, they are e.g. tied to certain anxieties, in essence marking an early use of "metaphors as vehicles of ideology in ICT" (Stahl 2008, 351). New media were often framed with a 'predatory' nature. The magazine *Spiegel* called an intelligence software a "data wolverine" (Der Spiegel 24/1976), another article in 1982 speaks of an American company as a "telephone kraken" (Der Spiegel 3/1982, a variant of the still prominent, but occasionally critically discussed term 'data kraken', Aly 2015).

Crucially, these metaphors initially pointed not at state actors but at the technologies themselves. The state that deployed them remained in the background, framed as the responsible administrator of unruly machines. During the MEDKOM negotiations – more specifically, the subsequent expansion of MEDKOM to other federal states in the form of the "Mainz Table" in the early 1990s – the *Deutsches Ärzteblatt* still compared the facilities to a spider "in the middle of its web. Some threads have already been spun, others are currently being woven" (Orbach 1992, A1263) – intriguingly, both a parasite in the communication channel and the actual enabler of the networking.

Overall, German discourses of the new technology from the 1970s onwards often evoked the idea of technology as data hungry animals, placing the new medical media beyond human morals and suggesting an impulsive unpredictability. These metaphors initially question the computer as an opaque entity. Accordingly, Larry Frohman has illustrated how public metaphors like the 'sheep' emerged for 'uninformed prey animals', but also quantifiable (as in: countable) citizens (2021, 135–177), still used in German and some English-speaking political discourses ("sheeple") today (Eickelmann and Meis 2023, 1–25).

Birkelbach himself later recalled how the metaphor of citizens as a "goldfish in a mirror fish tank, completely screened and eventually saved as data" was also widely used at the time (Birkelbach quoted in Fittkau 2018). These metaphors occasionally evoked animal references but mostly framed the computer as an instrument for surveillance practices through data collections. The democratic DPCs opposed the state as a screening entity in the sense of "Big Brother", the "specter […] [that] haunted computerization from the beginning" (Mowshowitz 1996, see also Lyon and Zureik 1996, 7), a perspective, which was shared across political parties.

The 1983 right to informational self-determination seemed like the only sensible answer to "federal data centers", which "symbolized […] the change to 'numbered', completely screened, 'glass' individuals threatened by uncontrolled organization" (Simitis 2000, 361). And the 1980 protests leading up to it even reflected a "much discussed legitimation crisis of the state" in the information age (Bull quoted in Frohman 2012, 359). The turn-over to 1984 gave cause to reflect on how "the glass human being is here, their data is stored. The technically perfect surveillance apparatus awaits its political abuser: 1983 is '1984.' The dangers of 'Big Brother' are no longer just literature" (Der Spiegel 1/1983). The fact that sci-fi anxieties of technofascist states were evoked prominently is as topical as the term 'transparency' itself.

6. TRANSPARENT SYSTEMS VS. TRANSPARENT PATIENTS

In its media-philosophical reflection, glass is medium, metaphor and matter (Innerhofer 2007, 155–163). When it became *the* material or medium of telematics in the 20th century, it made computers and cables possible, but it also symbolized – especially when it referred not to technology but to people in a networked computer world – a translucent relationship between public and private spheres (Carr 2015). As such, it directly invited references to the intellectual history of transparency in Europe (Geroulanos 2017), tying to social and political reflections on how "*social* transparency turns dystopic, totalitarian" (Dunstall 2019, 463, emphasis adapted). Consequentially, the medium glass lent itself to anxieties pertaining to new (medical) media networks and reflected a broader discourse on the societal distribution of power in an increasingly networked, globalized Europe in the second half of the 20th century.

The metaphor of the "glass human" reached prominence with the census debates in the 1980s (Frohman 2021, 135–209). In 1983, writing in *Die neue Ordnung*, German legal scholar Friedrich Graf v. Westphalen questioned a prospective path the FRG had taken toward the "transparent citizen" or "glass citizen" (1983, 136–142).[3] His glass metaphor proposed an almost medical gaze on humans, the feedback of data from the census was nothing less than a "cancerous evil," (ibid., 136)

3 The magazine is critically discussed for its increasing proximity to right-wing populist positions today but used to be a prominent Christian-conservative legal voice.

the data itself a proliferating foreign extension of the human body. It was, in essence, nature not only uncovered but disfigured by technology. Many legal texts later referenced his thoughts, but von Westphalen did not invent the term or discourse. In the late 1970s, the term was already axiomatically used to discuss a "taming of the computer for the sake of our society's freedom" (Haeschke 1977, 12).

The informatics handbook *Grundlagen der Datenverarbeitung* references "Big Brother", "George Orwell", "glass citizen" and "surveillance state" as "journalistic wordings […] describing an unease regarding data processing" (Dworatschek 1989, 457), suggesting that the metaphors had mostly taken form in mass media reporting. But, as argued before, their intellectual roots lay in literature, in which bestselling novels had already widely reflected on the dangers of technofascist dystopias. The terms can be understood as a canon of critical data rhetorics, which has since been evoked with almost every update to data collection technologies, especially for states.

In the Data Protection Archive, the term 'glass citizen' appears in 47 documents from the 1970s onwards.[4] The *Deutsches Ärzteblatt* has 23 mentions until 1990, the earliest from the 1960s talk show. The controversy between transparency and medical confidentiality embodied in the 'glass patient' was evident in 1969, and it reoccurred throughout debates on data collections – e.g. a mandatory reporting for children with disabilities (1974) or a national AIDS registry (1980s). Prominent vocal skeptics of federal medical data collections, like the medical professor and high-ranking policy maker Hans Joachim Sewering, saw patient data as purely a matter of "trust between patient and doctor": "It will always be incomprehensible to us how the political forces in our country, on the one hand, enthusiastically proclaim their belief in 'responsible citizens,' but on the other hand, with the introduction of a register, provide clear evidence of mistrust toward those same citizens." (Sewering 1974, 1936) With similar arguments, some existing registers were even shut down by DPCs (Wagner 1982, 18).

But MEDKOM's start also had a striking initial reframing: the prospective glass-fibre infrastructure of the FRG was *the* selling point. An early report in *Postmagazin* (the official magazine of the Postal Service) described its idea of a 'glass' hospital not as a surveillance complex, but as a utopia of absolute accessibility: the hospital of the next millennium, networked via fiber optics (Rolf 1986). The press took up this idea. The play on words referring to 'glass' as a component of the "key technology [...] of telematics" was obvious – MEDKOM's fiber optic overlay network was seen as the path to "a glass future", as a big local newspaper proclaimed (Hirche 1989, 2). As new European measures for medical networks were announced after the project's end, the medical journalist and doctor Heinz Orbach eventually warned that "[t]he terms 'networked patient' and 'glass human being'

4 Exempl. *10. Tätigkeitsbericht des Landesbeauftragten für Datenschutz Niedersachsen*, 1989/90. 1991, 30. File 12/1270. Datenschutz Archiv (ZAfTDa).

should be avoided as buzzwords because of their negative connotations" (Orbach 1995, A1694).

The ease with which the established 'glass' metaphor was inverted – from surveillance threat to technological promise – spoke to a broader logic in infrastructure (re)branding typical for Big Tech (Corry 2025). 'Transparency' could potentially become a selling point, if it promised a governmental form of accountability, this was done in the broader 'transparent state' approach (Barnstone 2005; Sperling 2011). But the 'glass hospital' of MEDKOM's promotional literature was the same glass tank that critics feared, but it was just 'sold' as a rational structure from the spectator side. This reframing cleverly ignored the question, who was inside the tank for matters of transparent convenience brought by trend-setting technologies and companies – an approach, which would come to define a changed relationship to the technological industries surrounding networks.

7. CONCLUSION: THE GUARDIAN INFORMATION STATE

The history of West German data protection is, at its core, a history of democratic self-defense going into the post-digital age. In the 1970s, the primary threat seemed to be a state deploying new computing infrastructure to mass-accumulate citizen data, against a population that had historically founded reasons to distrust such attempts, especially concerning their medical data. Envisioning the 'information age,' the democratic state found itself in a paradoxical position: it should build new and improved infrastructures but equally secure a protection of its citizens if these infrastructures were to be co-opted or abused in a change of government. To achieve this, West Germany implemented independent monitoring institutions, the DPCs, and a right of its citizens to their own data to interrupt or subvert the logic by which administrative efficiency could turn into totalitarian control again.

But looking at medical networks and their discussions then and now, shows how the state found itself in a legitimation crisis over its own paradoxical role in the information age. As the ruling institution, states are always subject to critical discussions of their accountability, a problem many (Big) Tech companies, who would come to sell the digital age as a lifestyle, do not have. If looking at a pre-history of technofascism, this might be *the* main point of convergence between states and companies, through which totalitarian power could enter into administrative procedures.

The slow 'take-over' of state services through private companies from the 1970s measures until today was in part enabled by the initial, systemic distrust with the state as a data collector, which is deeply embedded in the history of privacy and data protection ideology. Projects like MEDKOM saw rebrandings of anxiety-based metaphors, from predatory animals to the glass panopticon, for infrastructures in an attempt to sell something, which needed to be implemented anyway. How glass turned both into a material to describe totalitarian control instruments against a backdrop of sci-fi references, and into a material to mark rational administrations

of the future, is a translation of the guardian state paradox into informational self-determination.

In retrospective, the "glass citizen/patient" debate of the long 1970s became a critical assessment of the foundation of information states (Anon. 2023). The same infrastructure that delivers public services also enables mass control. Depending on the perspective, it can raise anxieties but also promise convenience and technological utopias. The 2025 launch of Germany's centralized patient files (ePA), for example, has framed data collection as a lifestyle benefit – comparable to digital loyalty cards – rather than a matter of informational self-determination (Anon. 2025). In an age of technofascism, such rebranding attempts mask the "black boxes" of private tech companies once again with the promise of administrative efficiency through transparency (of citizens, not the companies). Ultimately, a guardian information state needs to maintain its uncomfortable paradox of transformation versus self-containment, because without a conscious defense of informational self-determination, it risks the catastrophic totalitarian potential of a dehumanized, datafied bureaucracy.

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TWENTY YEARS AFTER "FROM COUNTERCULTURE TO CYBERCULTURE"

FRED TURNER IN CONVERSATION WITH MARTINA LEEKER AND LAURA HILLE

LAURA HILLE: It's 2026, twenty years after your book "From Counterculture to Cyberculture" (Turner 2006) was published, and things have not turned out as utopian as we hoped they would. What continuities can you still see, and what discontinuities? What did not happen that we envisioned in Silicon Valley?

FRED TURNER: I think the dream of the 1960s that was so alive in the 1990s tech world was the dream of interconnection without bodies. We would just put wires everywhere – phones, laptops, desktops. We would no longer need our messy bodies, and we could just connect through our consciousness; we could just meld our minds together. That is a ridiculous idea, but it is a powerful one. It has been very common in America for a long time. It has deep roots in American spiritualism and American religion, but it is not a very practical idea. Nevertheless, that was the idea on offer. The problem with that idea is that it is rooted in this fantasy of a world without politics. It is a very sixties fantasy, and also a very technocratic fantasy from the forties. Politics, in this view, is where Germany was in 1940: politics is hierarchy, politics is big technology, politics is domination. What we need to do, say the "consciousness people" of the sixties, and again of the nineties, is: get the right technology, share our minds intimately, leave our bodies behind, and escape politics. Let them do politics; we do consciousness. That is a terribly dangerous idea. On the communes of the 1960s it produced real distress, because when you take away rules, charismatic men take charge. You see a similar process now, certainly in America, with a right wing trying to tear down the institutions that protect liberal democracy and install a charismatic man at the top. I think the deep irony is that the ways we tried to turn away from fascism and toward a kind of new way of doing democratic community ironically opened the door to authoritarianism. By turning away from politics, turning away from institutions, and toward the sharing of consciousness, we opened the door to the arrival of charismatic semi-dictators.

One last thought here that might be useful: A lot of Americans believe that democracy depends primarily on the ability of everyone to make their voices known, to speak out loud. Democracy is a speech act. In that model, the internet should be a great enabler of democracy. But what I think Americans misunderstand is that democracy depends much less on voice than on institutions: institutions that can navigate and distribute resources between groups that have very different agendas, very different amounts of power, and very different goals. The fantasy in

the tech world is: get rid of institutions so we can all just do our tech. Do not regulate us; let the tech grow; profits will flow; people will be happy. But if you actually do that, you tear down the pillars of democracy, because the pillars of democracy are not just the voices of the people. That is populism. It is the voices of the people channeled through institutions that represent them fairly.

> LAURA HILLE: The second question, coming into the idea of continuities and discontinuities, is about "The Texan Ideology" (Turner 2025). After you published the text in *The Baffler*, it was sent to me by five or six people over a few days. Obviously, it struck a nerve in the academic community, among people researching Silicon Valley and thinking about how to analyze and write about ideology. You are referencing the whole thread on "The Californian Ideology" (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) and commenting on that. You start with this idea of exit, that they are going to Texas. How did you come to this topic? Could you say a bit more about the Texan Ideology, and how we can see it in relation to technofascism?

FRED TURNER: That article was a commission from *The Baffler*. The editor of *The Baffler*, Matthew Shen Goodman, wrote to me and said, 'It is the thirtieth anniversary of *The Californian Ideology*. We all see these tech lords moving to Texas. I think there is an essay there.' I said, 'Sure, I will try.' I think the interesting thing about it is that, if you start looking at why they are moving to Texas, they are moving for deregulated environments. They are moving for a landscape that is wide open, where the land is cheap. They are moving for water rights that are easy to acquire, and they are moving for a kind of state government that is easy to manipulate. Those are all things that you need if your industry is an extractive industry. And this is the big change. The Californian Ideology was an ideology of interconnection, of shared consciousness, born in the counterculture but perfect for the networking era. If you are trying to build out the internet, then you have a rationale for doing that in the Californian Ideology: if we build the internet, we can escape politics, we can build utopia, we will be free. In the current moment, the goal is no longer building networks. The networks are built. What is happening now is that the networks are becoming sites of extraction: extracting social value, extracting social patterns, extracting information from our social lives, our intimate interpersonal lives, and turning them into commodities that can be bought and sold. That is starting to happen on steroids with AI. AI, in my view, is actually not that interesting; it is sort of like search on steroids. But it requires tremendous server resources. It requires warehouses full of computers getting hot, needing to be cooled down, being loud, needing space, and it requires energy. Texas has the land to do that. Texas also has a culture of extraction, in the same way that California had a hippie culture of connection. Texas has a long history of extraction. There are two kinds of extraction that matter especially. One is extraction from the land, so there has always been farming and ranching, but there was also, of course, the oil boom of

the twentieth century, which made Texas wealthy and politically powerful. Alongside that kind of extraction, there is a human extraction that has taken place in Texas. Texas was one of the very last states to hold slaves. Enslavers ran the northeast corner of the state for a very long time. In fact, when it was still Mexico, slave-owning people established cotton farms in the state with the understanding from Mexico that they would be allowed to have slaves. They resisted enslaved people's freedom for a very long time. The Juneteenth holiday, which you may know, is a celebration of the freeing of the slaves in Texas. That is the last place. It is a tremendously conservative state.

This is a very important piece that I really want to hit: it is also a state with a very strong religious tradition. Something that I think is hardest to understand in Europe about America is that it is a deeply Protestant land. It is infected with the notion that it is somehow a chosen space, chosen by God. Depending on your denomination, you have different theological ways of explaining that, but the idea is that Texas is an open landscape in which you should make your wealth, and if God has chosen you as the kind of person he wants to celebrate – if you are going to be a saint in the afterlife – he is going to reward you with some money right now. When people come to Texas, they come with the idea of extracting things from God's gift, from the land, and doing it in a way that is often suffused with racism, with misogyny, with the legacy of slavery, and the legacy of conservative domestic politics. But also, God's eye seems to be upon them. It seems to be a divine mission. This idea of a divine extractive mission gives people from Silicon Valley the resources they need. All they have to do is profess at least some comfort with the religion that dominates the region. This is something I took up in the essay. Elon Musk is on Twitter, with a picture of one of his children, saying, 'I am not religious, but I do know that Jesus Christ was a wise man.' That is the kind of bending that you see happening as people move there.

> LAURA HILLE: This is a little bit different from the visions of Silicon Valley. Religion is normally found in technology.

FRED TURNER: We go back to the seventeenth century, the early 1600s. The European settlers who come to New England in the northeast are not just Protestants; they are Puritans. They have a belief in predestination. This is all Max Weber. They say some people are going to heaven and some are not. If God loves you enough to take you to heaven, he is probably going to reward you on this earth. So they begin to watch one another and to see: oh, she is wealthy, so she is probably going to heaven. That habit of watching the accumulation of wealth as evidence of salvation travels all through the United States. In the South, it takes on a different valence because the South, and particularly Texas, is dominated by the Southern Baptists, who have a very different view. They come along a little bit later, but they, too, absolutely see the American landscape as a site for the pursuit of salvation. Silicon Valley was part of that story in a different way. Silicon Valley was, and still is in many ways, what the Puritan minister John Winthrop called a 'City upon a hill'.

In 1630 or 1631, he was sailing across the Atlantic with a congregation and gave them a talk. He said, when we get to America, we will be as a city upon a hill; the eyes of the world shall be upon us. Silicon Valley has done a very good job depicting itself as a city on a hill, building the future and drawing all the eyes of the world to it. People inside Silicon Valley, even though they are not religious, still very much act out the Puritan drama of salvation through wealth. That is the style of Silicon Valley. What is new in the Texan case is that it is a kind of Baptist vision, much more closely aligned with Christian nationalism. It is not just individual salvation, but a nationalist ideology, and it is much more devoted to seeing the physical land itself – the resources, the water, the electricity – as God's gift to us to build the nation that He demands of us. It is a much more Christian-warrior kind of model.

> MARTINA LEEKER: I would like to come back to the political aspects and intentions of the 1960s counterculture. They estimated their ideas as: anti-bourgeois, against bureaucracy, against institutions. This attitude resulted in a form of society as BE-IN, trying to reach out through technology and living in the communes as a new form of resonating consciousness and an entangled being together with everything. Isn't this a form of politics – and the political – as well?

FRED TURNER: When I was taught the history of the sixties, I was taught that there was one counterculture. It was against the war, marched against the war in the morning, took LSD at night, woke up in the morning and did it again. That was the model I was taught. When I started researching my book, I found that in fact there were two very different countercultures, and they did not like each other very much. One was based in Berkeley: the New Left, doing traditional, institution-based party politics to change American politics. The other, in San Francisco, were the New Communalists, doing culture, doing domestic work, trying to change themselves and change their society in order to live differently. They were the ones who built the communes. I want to be a little bit careful here, because the ones who went back to the land, who were the commune builders, said they did not want to do politics, meaning they did not want to do institutional politics. They were against bureaucracy. They were against rules. They depicted themselves, in some sense, as a kind of new species, free to live wild and open in the land. But while they did that, they actually replicated the norms of bourgeois America. They literally created micro-suburbs in their communes. They recreated American misogyny: men were almost always in charge. They were deeply racist without having to be explicitly so. They just turned out to be white. How did that happen? As one of my informants said, because 'it is easier to work with your own people.' Think about that for a minute in a country like America: 'It is easier to work with your own people.' It is a horrible thought. So the communalists would have presented themselves as anti-bourgeois, but they were populated mostly by middle- and upper-middle-class people who could go back to college or had money if they needed it. They had the resources to drive a truck out into the middle of the land, buy a

piece of land, and live there. And when they lived there, they lived a very bourgeois life, albeit one that was sort of handmade.

> MARTINA LEEKER: Before "The Texan Ideology", you published a text about the idea that the counterculture and Silicon Valley enabled the *type* of Trump. You unfold the idea that the linking concept is the reference to the individual (Turner 2016). Applying this concept to Trump means to generate him as the kind of hero, making politics and taking care of it. In the communes, as, for example, the USCO performance group gathering around Gerd Stern, these leaders also became like heroes, gathering other men and women around them. It must be said that the communes trigger the question of white exclusiveness. Do we encounter another figure in the Texan Ideology: the patriarch?

FRED TURNER: In the counterculture, they would not have used the word patriarch. That would have been uncool, though people were, of course, functioning like patriarchs all the time. In Texas, they use the word patriarch with pride. Patriarchs are the old men of the Bible. Patriarchs are what you aspire to be. Patriarchy is the goal, with all that that implies about the roles and relationships between men and women, what family should be like, and whether anything other than traditional heterosexual relationships are possible or allowed. You know from the paper that Texas has put the Ten Commandments in every classroom. They are required to be a certain size, and they are required not to have commentary.

> LAURA HILLE: Something like this must be state led.

FRED TURNER: And this is where things get interesting in Texas and different from California. In Texas, the current governor and his regime are very tightly coupled with a series of donors who are deeply invested in Christian life. Tim Dunn is the most important of these. He is an oil man and a radical right-wing Christian. He builds Christian schools. He has built a family compound behind his Christian school; his children are building houses on the compound. He literally looks like, and I think thinks of himself in part as, a contemporary Moses figure, leading his people out of a land of sin into a land of prosperity. In that context, drilling for oil and mining the social world for social data – using all the resources that God has given us to make the patriarchs strong – is the mission, because the patriarchs are serving God in their own imagination. Tim Dunn is very explicit about that. He says, 'I serve God; everything I do, I do for God.' If you think you are serving God, and you give contributions to a politician who serves you, well, that gets pretty interesting. Suddenly, it is a divine mission. You are not just doing governance; you are fighting sin.

> LAURA HILLE: In this issue a lot of analysis is about Big Tech, Elon Musk, and all of these figures. Some of the texts are more abstract,

> some of them are very direct in naming people. It is interesting that you are focusing not only on democratic politics and individual entrepreneurs, and the relationship to the state, but also on the relationship to religion. We know that fascism always likes to be coupled with those three institutions: the state, the church, and capital.

FRED TURNER: And patriarchy is a central part of it. I am really excited to see the issue, because Germany has a more fine-grained understanding of fascism that America lacks, and I think that is important. I want to note one thing for an academic audience. Sometimes in our field, we get fascinated by what is happening on the screen and by the powers of the technologies themselves, and we tend to underestimate the importance of the actors who are using the technology, telling us stories about it, deploying it, and the institutions that are a little less visible. The church is very powerful. Southern Baptists are very powerful. Politicians are very powerful. The sales teams inside tech firms are, in some ways, sometimes more powerful than the CEOs. That is what I would like to say to my fellow scholars: by all means, yes, the screen; yes, platforms; but also people.

> LAURA HILLE: If you think about Silicon Valley and only think about the CEOs, Musks, and Thiels, and so on, you are not seeing who is actually doing the work in Silicon Valley. Looking at tech fascism through all the Musk figures and Peter Thiels of this world is important, obviously – that is why we are doing an issue on it – but it always goes back to the question, 'Is this actually what is happening in Silicon Valley?' I see the book cover from *Seeing Silicon Valley* (Meehan and Turner 2021) on my desk all the time, because for me it is always the reminder to think about the people who are actually doing the work and are actually living in the region.

FRED TURNER: Martina knows this: The book came in part out of our conversations a long time ago. Martina always inspired me to pay attention to people on the ground and to get out of my head a little bit.

> LAURA HILLE: Maybe we could talk a little bit about the 'vibe shift' – not only in the employee-engineer scene, in the companies, but also in the state, in the U.S. and around the world. The escalation, maybe even the acceleration, of things we have already been seeing and critiquing over the last years, but which are really coming into fruition now? This right-wing shift is happening all over.

FRED TURNER: I think the first thing to acknowledge is that Silicon Valley is not a unified political space. The CEOs and their marketing teams are much louder than almost everyone who lives there. Because they are so loud, the vision that we have of the Valley comes primarily from them. The idea that the Valley is a site of inno-

vation producing the future is a marketing and promotional line that has been promoted for fifty years. It is a marketing line. If you actually live in Silicon Valley, as I do – I live about two miles from Google headquarters – you have a more complex view. First, politically, the men at the top may often be quite far to the right, but most Silicon Valley workers are liberal Democrats and have been for a very long time. The second thing you notice about Silicon Valley is that it is actually extremely polluted. This is not something we talk about outside the Valley a lot. It is hard to see because it is such a beautiful place, right? It is sunny all the time. It is green all the time. But when I was looking for a house, I looked in the town of Mountain View, where I live now. They advertised these townhouses and said, 'You will love these townhouses.' They have above-ground basements.' The above-ground basement was, I think, five feet – like two meters – above the ground, and then you would have your first floor. I did a little digging, and it turns out the reason they have that basement above the ground is that there are chemicals in the ground. The chemicals are leaching gas, and the gas loses its poisonous effect about three feet, or one meter, off the ground. It allows them to build over a toxic plume. Santa Clara County, where I live, is either the first or the second most polluted county in America based on the number of Superfund cleanup sites. It is incredibly polluted; just to get that on the table. The other thing about Silicon Valley that is very important is that it is racially very diverse but also very stratified in terms of class. You know the numbers from the book, and I do not want to repeat them because I may get them wrong, but a large number of pregnant women do not have sufficiently nutritious food when they are having babies. That is insane. This engine of great wealth leaves pregnant mothers underfed? You will see other figures like that in the book. The point is that when we did *Seeing Silicon Valley*, we wanted to try to make visible the world that tech was actually producing on the ground, not the world they were producing in their stories. This is work that I think we all still need to be doing. We need to be looking again at the ground. The stories are very compelling. They are beautifully crafted. They speak to some of our deepest myths and our deepest hopes. But the world we are actually building is one that is polluted, class-riven, racially divided, and more difficult to live in than it needs to be.

> LAURA HILLE: My last question asks something very simple and very hard at the same time: but what to do? This also connects to Martina's question about how we can care in this situation of crisis. Especially in the U.S. I have listened to your podcast episode with Lee Vinsel (2026) and Paula Bialski, where you were saying that you need to have an idea of what to do if the United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) comes to campus. That is definitely something that we in Europe, or at least privileged white people in Europe, are not in a situation to encounter right now. Or yet? These things are not that far away from us either. So maybe you could talk about what we, as researchers, writers, teachers, and educators, can do in this situation, and how we can care for the world we are living in.

FRED TURNER: I think the first thing to do is to care for each other in person. So much of the tech world works on the mythology of disembodiment, the fantasy that we can just turn our lives into information and our lives will improve. Well, no. When we turn our lives into information, the information is resold for profit, and that profit does not come back to us. So that is not what we need to do. We can all take a lesson from Eastern Europe in the 1980s as they freed themselves from the Soviet Union: act with your friends, reach out to people who are different [from] yourself, stage protests, make art, and do not forget to have fun every time you protest. Fun is absolutely key. For teachers and scientists and others: be vocal, be visible, do not keep your head down. One of the things I am finding most painful in the U.S. right now is seeing, even at fancy schools like mine, a lot of people just coasting: 'Maybe it is not that bad. I will just keep doing my work and this will blow over.' I do not think it is going to blow over. I think we are in a forest fire, and if everybody focuses just on saving their one tree, the forest will burn, and then their tree will be alone and it will die. That is exactly what we cannot do. Reach out to your friends. Make noise. Protest. If Trump continues to escalate the war in Iran, we are going to have to see protests in the street. Universities need to protest. I was at Columbia last week for a conference on technofascism. I was proud to be there, by the way, and the campus is completely locked down. Completely locked. You cannot get onto the university campus because of a series of Trump moves early on, and they have not dismantled that. There should be protests in the street until that is dismantled. When America becomes a place where its leading universities are locked to the public, locked away and guarded by police, then we have gone to a place we should never be. Another challenge for us is to find institutions where we can work with people who are different from ourselves. I am a member of something called Glide, which is a radical, formerly Methodist church.

LAURA HILLE: I went twice.

FRED TURNER: Very good. The fact that you went twice tells me what you think about it. I have been a member of Glide for fifteen years, something like that. Glide is a place where people of all colors and all beliefs are welcome. When you do the hugging in the service, sometimes you will turn to the person next to you, who has been out in the street for three days and smells pretty bad, and you still hug them. That is what we need. We need places where we can talk to people not like ourselves, and those places have to be in person. Sometimes my European visitors come, and they say to me, 'Fred, is it as bad in America as everybody thinks?' They see the news accounts of controversy and fights. One of the funny things about America is that it can be that way in the media and public discourse, but sometimes underneath that there is a baseline ordinary friendliness that really runs across the culture, even in places where politics are very contentious. I spend a lot of time in northern Maine with some very conservative rural folks. We do not talk about politics, but when we do, we do it with great respect and a lot of care. That respect and care – to your point, Martina, the care for difference, the care to be kind to

one another even though we disagree – is the interpersonal foundation that lets us build institutions, that lets us have democracy.

> MARTINA LEEKER: To go further with democracy: You told me that you are planning a book about democracy in the 1970s and 1980s. This reminds me of Berlin at that time, which had the so-called "alternative culture" with self-organized and ecological infrastructures, like a bio-bakery, a kindergarten, or workshops. It had been a time experimenting with equality; for example, different work assignments, such as kitchen duty, organizational tasks, or management, were rotated, and everyone received the same pay. There was this idea of basic democracy, of redefining institutions, focusing on self-organization. Today this is still [alive] in a way. But the alternative culture is a big business – healthy food, like Whole Foods, and so on, very beloved in Silicon Valley, or urban gardening. You describe this as taking care of each other. When students ask me at the university what we can do about all the nasty things in today's conditions, my answer is: do something; organize yourselves basically democratically in communities. But when we talk today about the loss of institutions, what kind of institutions do we need? You named the church as an institution, but at the same time: the ground is polluted by chemicals, but religion is polluted by old narratives. Is basic democracy a kind of solution, or a problem?

FRED TURNER: Let me address the alternative culture, because I think you have got your finger on something important. There is a very important difference between the German alternative and the American counterculturalists. As you know, Martina, I spent time in Germany. I lived there in 1985 and 1986, in Berlin in a *Wohngemeinschaft*. My experience of the German world was that people were caring for each other but not stopping there. They turned their affection into processes, into house rules, into ways of living together that structured respect for each other. That is what I mean by an institution. You cannot just stop with: I feel good about you; do you feel good about me? That is not going to work. What you have to do is take the next step and say: okay, I respect you, you respect me, we have some differences. What are some rules we can put in place? What are some structures we can put in place in our group home, on our street, on our block, and build up from there? That is my idea of bottom-up democracy. One of the things that I think is happening in America right now is a fascination with feeling good about each other, but not with building institutions. There is all this attention to: do I like you, do I not like you, how do I feel about you? A lot of this is amplified by the media, whose job it is to keep your attention at all times. They are constantly attaching to your feelings. But what needs to happen is not about how I feel; it is about how I work with people, including people I feel badly about. Glide, our church, had a thing for a while, for a few years in the first Trump administration. It was a group of five Glide people, very radically left, meeting with five Baptists every

week to talk it out. They eventually broke up; it was a very difficult conversation, but they had the difficult conversation. I think that is really key. My daughter is a social worker now. She was trained partly at Glide, in their harm-prevention program, and she works closely with police, with many police folks who have very different views than she does. But they are able to work together because they talk about what they want to do that is good for the community, and how we do that and negotiate that. Those are the kinds of conversations that we need to have. But to have those conversations, you need structures. You cannot just be sitting around. If you are just sitting around talking, as I learned when I studied communes, what you get is the charismatic, powerful, culturally powerful people taking over. All the stereotypes come rushing back in: men get loud, women get quiet and go back to the kitchen. It is awful. What you need are structures. Martina, that is the key thing I want to stress as we talk: yes, care; but from care, community, and from community, institutions. You have to move that all the way through. I think the alternative culture did that, and that is why it was so effective: grocery stores, health centers, even really basic stuff like living in a group house, which is not obvious. Before the group house, you have a husband and wife and some kids; that structure is a given. You know how to do that. You do not know how to live as single people, men and women, in a group house. What are the rules around that? You have to talk that through, and that is something that I think Germans have done very well. Germany has an advantage, a strange advantage, because you went through fascism and because so much of the German landscape was destroyed. You had a chance to rebuild it in a very intentional, direct way, with a kind of rigorous democracy that is still very German: very dramatic in a rule-oriented, explicit, verbally explicit, rational kind of democracy. I love it. I love the clarity of it. I can go to Germany and talk to someone about the rules, and it is clear. It is not personal. In America, everything is personal. It is like, I could bend the rule for you, because I have this special feeling for you. What I want to say when I am in Germany is: look, we brought you democracy in 1945; it is time for you to return the favor. I believe that right now. I know you have the AfD, and I know there are problems. It is not perfect. But when you arrive in Germany as an American, you feel the emphasis on citizenship, on process. When you visit the Reichstag, the thing you see right next to it is the parliament, and the HKW, you see these institutions of collective good. In America, you see a dictator trying to build up a personal ballroom in what was the people's house.

> LAURA HILLE: You brought it with bombs. Which needed to be done, we are all clear on this. Maybe we can find a less destructive way to bring some democracy back.

FRED TURNER: Sometimes I get asked: how can we bring a democratic mode of computation back into being? There is another myth left over from the counterculture and from the 1990s in computing. The myth goes that there was once a benevolent social internet where we all just shared things together, and it was taken

over by large corporate or state actors – such bad people; how could they do that to us? – and we need to get back to our original happy home. I think that is all nonsense. What we need to do is use the legal, embodied powers that we have always had to resist this effort to turn our lives into disembodied information and profit. What we are looking at with the internet is something a lot closer to the oil and gas industries of the nineteenth century or the early twentieth century than something futuristic. We restrained them, and we can restrain these guys now. From Germany, yes, you cannot control American law, but you can control German law. Germany is a pretty good market, and you can enforce German law. France can enforce French law, and the next thing you know, you have European law, and that is a big market. American firms need to respond somehow to that pressure. So I say: use every lever that you can.

> LAURA HILLE: We already have democracy established, so we can use the democratic institutions that we have, for example, the law. One of my favorite examples is California Forever, the city-building project outside San Francisco. The tech bros pumped millions into it, and it got stopped by what in Germany would be the *Gemeinderat*, the county council, established by a few people who decided, in their free time, they are going to sit there and debate the politics of where they are living. And they decided: no, you cannot build it here; we are not going to change the zoning laws. That is it. We have the last word on this, and it is done. This is an institution that has been established and has been doing that work for years. It is already there. They can stop it.

FRED TURNER: It is the rule of government that the counterculture pooh-poohed that is so important. One of the darkest legacies of the Vietnam era in America is that many elite anti-war people who went to college came to loathe the government. They came to see the government as the enemy. This is as true on the left as it is on the right, and it is such a mistake. The government is largely populated by civil servants trying to do the right thing. You might disagree about what the right thing to do is, but mostly they are trying to do the right thing. When they do the right thing, they are doing it on behalf of the people who pay their salaries through taxes. The government is very often the last defense of the people against autocrats, against corporate barons, against corporate thieves. We are living in a time of kleptocracy, a time when people are trying to steal public resources. Government is one of our weapons. We need to use it. I grew up during the Vietnam War. I never thought I would find myself defending the FBI.

> LAURA HILLE: For me, it is the same with the university. I am scared of losing positions, or possibilities for voicing my critique of the institution. And those jobs will be even more scarce in the future, especially if you do critical analysis. I have critiqued the working conditions at universities for a decade, and now I say: God, please save the university.

FRED TURNER: One of the legacies of the counterculture that I take up in the new book, and that has been bothering me quite a lot, is this turn in the 1980s toward subjectivity and the self as the center of politics. It is really a mistake. It makes it difficult for us to talk across all the differences that we have, and we really need to find a way to talk across those.

> LAURA HILLE: You'll say in the book that this is kind of due to French theory, right?

FRED TURNER: But it is not only due to French theory. What happened was that there was this beautiful fit between French theory and the needs of some social movements in the U.S. As they found each other, each of them legitimated, justified, and promoted the other, and that is how we ended up where we got.

> MARTINA LEEKER: What I have been thinking about in my own research these days is linked to research in education studies, looking for new models of subjectivity and communities in digital cultures. They become – due to technology – more entangled, more posthuman, more relational. At the same time, there is an education needed against biases in technology. Referring, e.g., to the research of Wendy Chun (Apprich et al. 2018; Leeker 2017), it becomes important to bring more diversity into prompting artificial intelligence. I'm astonished because some research approaches take decolonial projects and methods of indigenous communities in order to install diversity sensible AI (Jörissen 2024). This may be a problem, because there is another history. Is it *OK* to take indigenous attitudes and say, now we make it only on a formalist level? Therefore, I think it is so important to rethink institutions, laws, and government. If Trump is still in government, then this could mean a form of government [aimed at] destroying government and using it for this aim?

FRED TURNER: This is the problem of formalism. Engineering worlds in particular want to map out patterns of behavior and then govern on the basis of pattern, as if there were no history, as if patterns were not also living in actual organic bodies. On the left, I think some of the projects in favor of individualism – the decolonial project is one of those projects – are really aimed at opening up restrictive histories and giving people space to live different lives in the present, and I support that. I celebrate that. The trouble is that if you only do that and stop there, you have a bunch of liberated individuals without institutions through which to navigate and negotiate their differences. What we call that is a war of all against all, and a war of all against all is what democracy is designed to prevent. The problem is, institutions and laws are boring, but they are incredibly important. They are not nearly as sexy as dancing in the streets, but they really, really matter.

> LAURA HILLE: Now we are defending the state, but to get back to Martina's question: what, right now, is the state of government? When state power and political power come together with authoritarian surveillance technologies, which is what we can see happening right now, especially in AI and the hype around it. This is interesting because there is something very important in "From Counterculture to Cyberculture" that does not get mentioned that often: Silicon Valley came out of war technology and had a war mindset as well. Other scholars are taking this up too, but it is not a story Silicon Valley wants to tell about itself. Now this is coming back. You can see this right now in the whole debate about Meta, OpenAI, and Anthropic, and how they are going to use government contracts, which parts of the government contracts will be military, and which ones will be security technology. Could you say more about this role of Big Tech, which has always worked for the military, and how they are using this now – maybe opportunistically, and not really that much ideologically?

FRED TURNER: The military-industrial complex is where Silicon Valley comes from, and so it would like to deny its roots in that space, because it would like to sell a lot of consumer technologies. At the same time today, I think very much opportunistically, tech firms are seeing military contracts as their bread and butter. The other thing tech firms are seeing, especially in the AI space as they rush toward market dominance, is that they want to be deregulated. If you can do a favor for Donald Trump, you will do the favor for Donald Trump, because he will deregulate you, and your politics go right out the window, if you even have any. When I look at our tech leaders today – Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, Sundar Pichai from Google, most people, probably not Anthropic, but most of the others – what I see are people like IG Farben, Krupp, and Thyssen: all the German industrialists of the early 1930s who rushed to Hitler's side because they realized that is where the profits were.

> LAURA HILLE: They were right, right? They became or stayed very wealthy and well-established companies in Germany and are still part of the military-industrial arm.

FRED TURNER: I do think digital technologies have different capacities. They can be surveillance technologies in new ways, and that is important. But the driver of the fusion of the technological and the authoritarian is a marriage of needs. The authoritarians want power, and technology people want profit. Boy, are they made for each other. To change that system is not necessarily to change the digital technology itself; it is to change who is in power, and to change how we regulate those who are seeking profit. We sometimes think the fight should be at the interface in

terms of design: we need new security protocols, we should fight at the protocol level. I think that is fine; great, go for it. But that is not where the real action is. The real action is at the political level and the commercial level, where it has always been. We have done this before. We did this with the oil industry; we broke up the oil cartels back in the day. We have done this with safety in automobiles. You have seat belts in your cars today because somebody fought those fights in the law. It would have been more profitable to make cars without seat belts. Sure, some people would have died, bad, but so what? We can fight this.

> LAURA HILLE: Especially in science communication I am talking a lot about the big names – the Peter Thiels, the Elon Musks – because it works, and people want to hear those talks and ask questions about those people. But as a sociologist, you always get the comment: you are personalizing this and giving them too much power. Could you say a little bit – especially as someone who maybe made Stewart Brand that big for us in media studies – about how we counter this? It is partly useful, not only for science communication, to have big figures to talk about.

FRED TURNER: This is a really deep problem here which I have been thinking about for a long time, and it is actually a problem of storytelling. I used to be a journalist. The very first thing I ever wrote was an essay. I brought it to my editor, handed it to her, and she laughed. I said, 'What are you laughing at? I am very proud of this.' She said, 'You have brought me a thumb-sucker.' A thumb-sucker was a story that started without a person. It started with an idea. Journalists know that in order to get people to read things, you tell them stories about people. The problem, of course, is that if you focus on people, you miss patterns, you miss trends, you miss the architecture of firms, and you miss forces that are not personal but actually have a great deal of impact. We may be doing some of that now. I think the characters who lead Silicon Valley are almost mythological figures, and they take great care to depict themselves as such. They come from an economy that is built on grabbing attention, and that is what they do. They run the world through attention. Donald Trump is our first social-media president, really and truly focused on keeping our attention at all times. He is almost unconcerned with the material impact of his stuff. He cannot even tell the difference between the lies he tells and the bombs he drops, and that is astonishing. That is the new condition. Our job as sociologists is to see that, recognize it, and try to take it apart. I may have helped make Stewart Brand a figure, but I hope that what I showed by doing that was how he came to the power that he had. In the social sciences I have used Ronald Burt's idea of the network entrepreneur (2000) to show how Brand worked, and I hope the social sciences will find some value in that. People do us a favor. They let us see things and follow ideas that are hard to see otherwise. When Elon Musk promotes the idea of a startup king, you do not have to know that that idea has been floating in Silicon Valley blogs for ten years; you can just pin it on him. That is convenient.

The downside is that you do not see the people behind those people. That is why we did our book *Seeing Silicon Valley*. Martina knows this: we could not publish that book in the United States for two years. We published it in France first, and it was only after it came out in France and an editor changed jobs that we were able to publish that book in English. What English publishers told us was: that is not Silicon Valley; where is Steve Jobs? Where is Mark Zuckerberg? What we said was: that is the whole point. This is Silicon Valley; those guys are just a handful of people. I think that is a global challenge for all of us. How do we stop staring at the people who have appointed themselves dictators and saints, and start looking around at each other and saying: what kind of community do we want to build? How do we become more like the alternative culture, where we go and build community and build rules, build houses, build city governments, build state governments, build the institutions that will keep us safe together? That is what I want to say.

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EXTRA

WORKSHOP REPORT

Basic Concepts of the Broligarchy (5-6 February 2026, FernUniversität Hagen)

THORBEN MÄMECKE

Since the symbolic celebration of the alliance between Big Tech and the far-right administration during the inauguration of the current U.S. president – and the rapid sequence of events that followed – a vibrant public discourse has emerged that seeks, in particular, to articulate the novelty and specific characteristics of this cultural and political shift. In this context, a growing web of terms is also emerging that is becoming increasingly difficult to decipher. Examples include: ultra-libertarianism, national protectionism, right-wing populism, autocracy, extrastatecraft, post-democracy, democratic fascism, Californian ideology, silicon ideology, digital fascism, techno-fascism, hyper-racism, Trumpism, transhumanism, TESCREAL (extropianism, singularitarianism, cosmism, rationalist ideology, effective altruism, and longtermism), surveillance capitalism, solutionism, technocracy, neo-imperialism, effective accelerationism, dark enlightenment, machinic desire, manosphere, misogynistic inceldom, Gamergate, broism, fratriarchy, neo-reactionism, neo-feudalism, tech-feudalism, tech bros, tech oligarchy, and broligarchy.

As part of the workshop *"Basic Concepts of the Broligarchy,"* organized by Thorben Mämecke as a collaboration between the Working Group "Data and Networks" of the GfM and the research cluster *digital_culture* at the FernUniversität in Hagen, the analytical and empirical validity of selected terms within this discourse was discussed over the span of two days. The discussions focused on their respective historicity and how they relate to more fundamental and long-established concepts such as capitalism, fascism or patriarchy.

Like the focus of this special issue, the workshop sought to enhance conceptual clarity within this multifaceted discourse in order to enable a more systematic scholarly debate on its specific aspects. In doing so, it highlighted not only commonalities but also differences.

The term "broligarchy" was chosen for the workshop as an umbrella concept intended to encapsulate the various problem areas. This shifts the analytical focus slightly away from the term "techno-fascism." The general shift toward authoritarian, elitist, and reactionary worldviews among influential figures and communities in the tech sector is accompanied by the additional argument that this shift is strongly characterized by gendered dynamics. The neologism combining "broism" and "oligarchy" is intended to denote this concept while also addressing both the notion of oligarchy and the self-image of many prominent figures in Big Tech, which is grounded in a rationalist and solutionist shift in power.

1. WORKSHOP PART I

Undoubtedly, Silicon Valley has always been male-dominated. CEOs like Safra Catz (Oracle), Sheryl Sandberg (Meta), and Ginni Rometty (IBM) are among the few women representatives of the largest Big Tech companies in the US. Thus, the term *"broligarchy"* describes not only a powerful network of Silicon Valley CEOs, but primarily a male-dominated power clique. This all-male network has been associated with a pronounced rightward ideological shift in the Californian tech sector in recent years. In her presentation, the sociologist and media scholar Laura Hille (Siegen) showed how toxic masculinity and the figure of the "tech bro" have become increasingly intertwined over the past decades. To illustrate this, she drew on empirical research and popular mapping projects like the "authoritarian.stack," "the Technofascism Network," and her own "Tech Bro Map."

In his presentation, Gerko Egert (Bochum) drew on the concept of the *"Californian Ideology"* as a point of departure for analyzing the evolving relationship between public self-representation and the economic and political practices of Silicon Valley. His talk focused on the justificatory frameworks through which technology companies increasingly involved in weapons development have sought to legitimize their activities. During the 1990s, a notable tension existed between the sector's discursive self-image, epitomized by slogans such as Google's "Don't be Evil" and its material dependence on substantial funding from the United States defense budget. In contrast, contemporary corporate ideologies are increasingly shaped by an explicit alignment with the dynamics of a global technological trade conflict, as well as by references to forms of fundamentalist Christianity. Egert highlighted how entrepreneurs such as Trae Stephens, co-founder of Anduril Industries, draw a distinction between technologies serving "good quests," including weapons development and those associated with "bad quests," such as social media platforms or consumer-oriented applications. This indicates a broader process in which specific technologies are differentially elevated or devalued according to their perceived contribution to geotechnological competition and ideological dominance.

Armin Beverungen (Lüneburg) sought to apply Keller Easterling's concept of *"extrastatecraft"* to the current intertwining of the activities of far-right tech oligarchs and state power. In doing so, he examined concepts such as "zoning," drawing on approaches such as the "Network State."

Easterling's concept is well-suited to reflecting on the relationship between the state and the economy, Big Tech and the Alt-Right, as it highlights the various ways in which sovereignty is enacted, particularly through infrastructure and in dynamic relation to the art of statecraft. Easterling's concept may seem outdated in many respects today; nonetheless, it has often been used over the past two decades to inform many analyses of the global entanglements between corporations and state power (c.f. the work of Ned Rossiter, Brett Nielsen, and Orit Halpern). To further explore the complex relationship between the modern state and Big Tech companies today and the question of whether and how authoritarianism arises from

neoliberalism, Armin Beverungen used Amazon and its CEO Jeff Bezos as illustrative examples.

The term *"singularitarianism"* refers less to a practical field of research than to an extropian movement based on the belief that the creation of an artificial superintelligence will happen in the near future. The belief in this so-called "singularity" is one of the popular contemporary ideologies of Silicon Valley and its internal mechanisms of power. With that in mind, Thomas Nyckel's (Regensburg) contribution analyzed the core concept of the "broligarchy" by examining the characteristics of "singularitarianism" – focusing especially on its entanglements with the AI discourse. Starting with the historical roots of "singularitarianism," his talk provided a diachronic overview of the concept of singularity, highlighting the technical, ideological, and political delineations of the respective contributions and ideas and their implications for current debates on AI.

While Big Tech companies, whose CEOs often more or less openly espouse anti-democratic or even fascist ideas, extract a great deal of personal data from the users of their social media and AI platforms, the New (far) Right, in particular, is organizing itself in the post-digital space and is deliberately exploiting the right to informational self-determination for its own ends. In this context, there has been a rise in so-called *"Alt Tech"* platforms in recent years. In her lecture, Laura Niebling (Regensburg) showed how the New Right (re)interprets data protection for its own purposes in the context of Big Tech. She also demonstrated that the actual data protection policies of "Alt Tech" platforms follow exactly the same principles as the Big Tech platforms from which they seek to distinguish themselves. In fact, these platforms even engage in the collection of personal data that is, in some cases, even more extensive – all under the premise of decoupling from state surveillance.

In his talk, Jens Schröter (Bonn) pointed out that the personalization of capitalist structures – whether in the form of "the rich," "the elites," or "the speculators" – often risks devolving into a simplistic or even antisemitic critique of capitalism. In this regard, skepticism is also warranted concerning the emergence of new oligopolies centered on "the bros" and their exorbitant market power, as well as their sometimes ostentatious lifestyles, which are often described today as a kind of "neo-feudalism." The same applies to notions of "parasitism" in the context of what has been described as *"surveillance capitalism."* Rather, capitalist accumulation is utterly excessive and the pursuit of absolute informational transparency (except in cases like business secrets, etc.) has been the telos of the capitalist market economy from the very beginning.

The term *"manosphere"* is a portmanteau derived from the word "blogosphere," thereby situating its origins in the online media environment of the late 2000s and early 2010s, when it first came to prominence as a network of anti-feminist blogs. Felix Raczkowski's (Bayreuth) contribution considered the "manosphere" as a composite term for various anti-feminist online subcultures and movements that are rarely mentioned in today's discourse without also bringing up its different elements, usually groups such as Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), Men Go-

ing Their Own Way (MGTOW), Pickup Artists (PUA) as well as dating coaches and incels. The relevance of these various groups for the "manosphere" has shifted over time as has the use of the term "manosphere": from a self-attribution to an ascription by critics, journalists and researchers.

Since platforms like YouTube, Instagram and TikTok function differently to Web 2.0 services like blogs, this accounts for some of the transformations shaping the subcultures of the "manosphere," like emerging influencers or popular figures (e.g., Andrew Tate). The question remains whether this should also be reflected by resorting to different terms in research contexts, for example, discussing platforms rather than spheres.

A video message from researchers Stacy Gillis (Newcastle) and Gareth Longstaff (Newcastle) opened up further avenues. They presented a current call for papers titled *"The Broligarchy: Cultural Politics, Masculinities, and the Manosphere"* and proposed ideas for collaborative projects at the intersection of gender politics and Big Tech.

In addition to identifying particularly influential discursive concepts and their significance in the analysis of new power structures at the intersection of Big Tech, the New Right, and "broism," the workshop also explored conceptual and substantive interactions between progressive and anti-humanist theoretical factions. In the realm of the most popular and powerful players in Big Tech and politics, many philosophical thought leaders, bloggers, and consultants are actively involved in the promotion, development and discursive consolidation of right-wing worldviews. Paradoxically, they also draw upon authors who have primarily been received within left-wing and poststructuralist contexts.

Why is this the case? Is this simply an attempt to appropriate progressive theories for New Right social diagnoses, which can be explained by a fundamental lack of genuinely right-wing theories? Or are right-wing worldviews simply so deeply embedded in certain poststructuralist works that they should have been read more critically in the past?

As Felix Hüttemann (Bonn) demonstrates, Nick Land uses the concept of *"machinic desire"* to develop a radically anti-humanist ontology of capitalism – drawn in part from Lyotard – which must be understood as a key influence on accelerationism and its various forms. In doing so, Land adopts Lyotard's idea of conceiving capitalism as a mechanism for the distribution of intensities but radicalizes it and shifts Lyotard's conceptual topology toward a media-technological dynamic. His "machinic desire" describes a media-technological continuum in which algorithmic systems, cybernetic feedback loops, and capitalist acceleration processes are expressions of one and the same ecology. Mediality is thus no longer understood as mediation, but as an immediate operation of intensities that must be instrumentalized for a new authoritarian techno-fascist social structure.

2. WORKSHOP PART 2

Such radical theoretical advances and the associated breaking of taboos are ultimately also a proven strategy for generating attention and artificially inflating the significance of what are essentially marginal, fragmentary theoretical elements. Accordingly, the workshop also addressed the question whether a public discussion of authors such as Nick Land or Curtis Yarvin is even justifiable, given that it could inadvertently strengthen their discursive power.

In this context, there was an opportunity for a discussion – moderated by Katja Grashöfer (Paderborn) and Marcus Burghardt (Paderborn) – of a correspondence between Dietmar Dath and Philip Theison, who had texts by Nick Land translated into German and published them jointly just a few years ago. Dietmar Dath participated in the workshop via video message, in which he clarified the motivations for the publication. According to his argument, the dangers posed by the dissemination of right-wing authors are negligible. Rather than viewing their ideas as infectious, he believes in the readers' capacity for reflection. Especially so as he separates the level of arguments and thoughts – in a classically materialist interpretation – from the level of action. Following his reasoning, right-wing thinking does not lead to right-wing actions; rather, the relation is the reverse. Accordingly, close observation of authors such as Land or Yarvin would also make it possible to predict the next steps of key figures of the New Right, since the narratives and justifications for these actions are formulated early on by authors like Yarvin. These positions have been the subject of intense debate.

The workshop was regarded as a productive exchange, not only because of the interesting presentations but also due to the insightful contributions from all participants – the speakers and the other guests alike. The attendees expressed their intention to continue both networking and thematic discussions at a follow-up workshop.

ABSTRACTS

ARBEITSKREIS UNI GEGEN FASCHISMUS /
WORKING GROUP UNIVERSITY AGAINST FASCISM

Tech Fascism and the University: Analyzing Conditions and Organizing Solidarity in the Time of Broligarchies

This text examines the role of the university, and specifically media studies, in the process of fascistization. It contextualizes discourses on cyberlibertarianism and relates them to the role of "tech bros" in the de-democratization of society. Based on this discussion, a call to action for anti-fascist media studies is proposed. We thus view the university as a key institution at the center of struggles to preserve democracy. The working group understands media studies as an investigation into anti-fascist practices, particularly because digital media have become integral to fascistization. In doing so, we advocate for digital sovereignty as well as for the communization of our means of media production.

FELIX MASCHEWSKI, ANNA-VERENA NOSTHOFF, ANNA PUZIO

Make Merit Great Again: The Anti-Democratic Meritocracy of Techno-Fascism

This article examines the contemporary revival of meritocracy within the political imaginary of Silicon Valley's Tech Right and argues that meritocracy has become a central feature of techno-fascism. The article traces how figures such as Alex Karp, Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, Marc Andreessen, Curtis Yarvin, and Nick Land mobilize the language of merit, excellence, intelligence, and efficiency to reject egalitarian values and recast democratic institutions as obstacles to technological progress. In this discourse, meritocracy appears as an antidote to "wokeness," diversity, democratic regulation, higher education, and egalitarian politics. We argue that meritocracy increasingly functions as an anti-democratic and techno-fascist dispositive: an ideological camouflage through which elite rule, social hierarchy, and democratic dismantling are legitimized. Instead of being understood in the liberal sense – as a principle of individual achievement, fairness, or equal opportunity – it is mobilized in the context of a broader hierarchical, and autocratic vision of social order. We therefore conceptualize this formation as an "anti-democratic meritocracy."

Keywords: meritocracy, democracy, fascism, techno-fascism, Tech Right, politics

LUKE MUNN

Approaching Technofascism

In headlines, op-eds, and viral posts, the growing convergence between technical and political elites increasingly finds a single label: technofascism. And yet this term is deployed with a wave of the hand – a sweeping gesture that enfolds aggressive founders, AI models, and military parades. What are we talking about, when we talk about technofascism? Drawing from fascist studies, media studies, and real-world examples ranging from AI-driven deportation raids to Great Replacement myths, I argue that technology carries out three key functions. Technology *augments*, providing a practical outworking of fascist visions by operationalizing difference and domination. Technology *alienates*, creating a vacuum of meaning that is filled by powerful mythologies which address grievances and reimpose order on the world. And technology *manipulates*, creating environments that leverage desire while cultivating fascist ideologies over time. This analysis shows how technology and barbarism reinforce each other and provides a heuristic for better understanding the fascist formations that increasingly pervade the present.

Keywords: fascism, authoritarianism, artificial intelligence, reason, mythology, barbarism

JILLIAN (LEE) CRANDALL

Tech Fascism and Antifascist Abundance

In this article, I conceptualize "tech fascism" not as a historical analogy, but as an ongoing convergence of venture capitalism, crypto-colonialism, and anti-democratic political and spatial plotting. I contextualize tech fascism within longer histories of racial capitalism, colonialism, and capitalist accumulation. From Charter Cities to Network States to the centrist liberal Abundance Agenda, land and lives are actively being reconfigured with power concentrated in the hands of venture capitalists and techno-optimists. Through a critical theory lens, I situate the Frankfurt School alongside thinkers in the Black radical tradition, for whom fascism in the *longue durée* has always been technologically mediated. Accelerationism, cyber-libertarianism, crypto-anarchy, neoliberal special economic zones, and startup nations converge in this project. Both far-right reactionary and centrist liberal technological imaginaries find resonances under capitalism. A common ground is technological totalitarianism – the reification of technology and the market as supreme political, economic, and social authorities. Against this tendency, there is a need for the negation of technological reification, a need for the cultivation of alternative understandings of technology rooted in collective flourishing, democratic self-de-

termination, and ecological care for lives beyond individualism. Genuine abundance must necessarily condition a new reality principle that makes settler colonial extractivism and death-dealing instrumentalization unimaginable.

JAMIE VAN DER KLAAUW AND RYAN KOPAITICH

The Fascism Farce:
A Case for Neofeudalism

This paper will make the case that there is no such thing as 'technofascism'. Rather, we are witnessing the emergence of a new political-economic constellation, described as neofeudalism in contemporary political theory by the likes of Jodi Dean, Cédric Durand, and Yanis Varoufakis. To do so, we will quickly look at conceptions of 'traditional' fascism, sketching out what made fascism 'fascist' in the first place and tracing some political dynamics that followed. Second, we look at the contemporary claim of technofascism and the mystifications that accompany such a diagnosis. Finally, we present a typology of the royal court of late feudalism that, in our view, has explanatory power for the contemporary political constellation, and more accurately gets at the ideological drive that certain political actors today are hoping to realize. Insofar as there are fascists then, they are subordinated to the neofeudal courts, and they do not serve as the impetus for mobilization, as in 'traditional' fascism.

GUSTAVO ROBLES

Technofascism North and South:
Cyberlibertarianism and Its Latin American Translations

This article traces a genealogy of the political imaginaries surrounding digital technology: from the techno-optimism of the 1990s, through the techno-feudal hypothesis, to techno-fascism as the operative rationality of contemporary digital capitalism. Techno-fascism is understood not merely as a right-wing discourse on technology, but as a political rationality emerging from the convergence of technological accelerationism, economic rent-seeking, and cyberlibertarianism into a project hostile to democracy. The article then examines how this rationality takes a specific form in the capitalist periphery, analyzing two cases from Latin America: the crypto-utopian experiments of Nayib Bukele in El Salvador and Javier Milei in Argentina, and Argentina's failed ambition to become a global hub for artificial intelligence. It argues that peripheral techno-fascism does not fantasize about escape from the

existing world order but offers dependent territories as sacrifice zones for global techno-capitalism.

ANTHONY BURTON

First principles and algorithmic reason in technofascism

This article defines technofascism as a political epistemology in which power and domination derive from the operations of computation itself. It analyzes this through Silicon Valley's attachment to "first principles thinking," a mode of reasoning that treats complex social and political problems as computational puzzles solvable through axiomatic logic. The article traces this epistemology through its philosophical roots in Aristotelian metaphysics, its computational foundations in axiomatics and computability theory, and its contemporary articulation by figures like Elon Musk, Peter Thiel and Curtis Yarvin. What distinguishes technofascism from mere authoritarianism is that its mode of domination is immanent to computational logic. It does not use technology as an instrument of power but derives its conception of power from the operations of computation itself. From this epistemology, the social world becomes a set of computable problems awaiting optimized solutions, with democratic deliberation rendered as bureaucratic obstruction. This computational authoritarianism operates through a Manichean division of the world into the computable and incomputable, rational and irrational – where that which falls outside the axiom is rendered as waste to be eliminated.

LAURA NIEBLING

States of Glass:
Metaphors and Agents of Medical Informational Self-Determination in West Germany's 'Long 1970s'

Is the democratic state a shield against technofascism – or its inevitable enabler? This article traces the origins of that question to West Germany's 'long 1970s,' when the computerization of public administration was first perceived as an existential threat to democratic freedom. Through the lens of medical data politics, it shows how the living memory of bureaucratically enabled mass violence produced data protection laws, independent oversight institutions, and the metaphor of the "glass citizen" as instruments of democratic self-defense. The gradual rebranding of the glass metaphor – from surveillance nightmare to technological promise – is read as an early signal of the convergence between state power and private digital infrastructure that makes technofascist governance possible today.

FRED TURNER, MARTINA LEEKER, LAURA HILLE

Twenty years after "From Counterculture to Cyberculture"
Fred Turner in conversation with Martina Leeker and Laura Hille

Twenty years after the publication of *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, this interview returns to Fred Turner's account of the uneasy traffic between counterculture, cyberculture, and Silicon Valley. Turner reflects on how the countercultural aspiration to transcend politics through technological interconnection continues in today's authoritarian tendencies in digital capitalism. He argues that the rejection of institutions, bureaucracy, and democratic mediation has inadvertently enabled charismatic leadership, patriarchal power, and anti-democratic politics. Expanding this analysis through his concept of the "Texan Ideology", Turner identifies a shift from networked utopianism to extractive digital economies, closely aligned with Christian nationalism, resource exploitation, and authoritarian governance. Throughout the conversation, Turner emphasizes the value of institutions capable of mediating social differences and closes with a call for more care, collective action, and institution-building as essential responses to the convergence of technological power, capital accumulation, and authoritarian politics.

THORBEN MÄMECKE

Workshop Report:
Basic Concepts of the Broligarchy (5-6 February 2026, FernUniversität Hagen)

In February 2026, scholars from the fields of media studies and sociology gathered at the FernUniversität in Hagen for the workshop "Basic Concepts of the Broligarchy," to collaboratively identify concepts particularly suited to exploring the connection between Big Tech, gender, and the rise of fascism in western democracies. This workshop report provides a general overview of the key elements involved in describing and theorizing about specific concepts within the phenomenon we have tentatively termed "the broligarchy." Since all participants would like the intensive discussion to continue, there will be a follow-up workshop in early 2027.

BIOS

Anthony Burton is a postdoctoral researcher and docent in Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam and a member of the Open Intelligence Lab. He completed his Ph.D. at Simon Fraser University as a Mellon-SFU Data Fluencies Fellow. He works across critical theory, digital methods, and STS to examine the links between digital culture, social theory, and contemporary political dynamics.

Jillian Lee Crandall is a PhD Candidate in Geography at University of California, Berkeley, and a Graduate Affiliate with the Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies and Berkeley Center for New Media. Through the lenses of settler colonialism, capitalism, and fascism, their research examines the effects of blockchain, cryptocurrency, and digital technologies on lands, and lives. Previously, they practiced as an architect for over ten years in NYC and Puerto Rico; and taught as a Lecturer in Architecture and Urban Theory at RPI.

Laura Hille is a sociologist and media scholar who writes and speaks about all things digital. She is currently a research associate at the University of Siegen. As part of the SFB 1472 "Transformations of the popular", she researches algorithmic governance and regulation on streaming platforms and the future of generative AI video content. She studied Sociology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Hamburg and completed her PhD at Leuphana University Lüneburg, where she was involved in projects at the Centre for Digital Cultures (CDC). Her dissertation explored the changing relationship between humans and machines through biohacking and examined how cybernetic forms of biopolitics have come to shape everyday life. Her teaching focuses on the darker sides of our digital day to day and the power relations shaping it. Over the last years, she has followed a rabbit hole into the dystopian and utopian futures envisioned by Silicon Valley.

Felix Hüttemann, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Bonn. He is the Head of the Volkswagen Foundation-funded project "The Computerized Palate: Digital Technologies and the Lower Senses." Previously, he was a researcher on the DFG project "Installation of the Computer: On the Relationship Between Computers and Dwelling" at the Institute for Media Studies at the University of Paderborn. He earned his Ph.D. at Ruhr University Bochum in the DFG Research Training Group "The Documentary. Excess and Withdrawal" with a thesis on "The dandy in the smart home". His research focuses on media aesthetics and theories of sensory perception, cuisine and wine in relation to sensoric mediality and AI, as well as the history of ideology in Silicon Valley thought and its philosophy of technology and media.

Ryan Kopaitich is researcher and lecturer in Political Theory at Erasmus School of Philosophy. His work focuses primarily on political economy, democracy, political composition, and philosophy of language. He attained his PhD from the University of Bern, Switzerland in 2018, with a thesis focusing on the intersection of meaning and collectivity. After many years studying literature, one of his primary interests is the role of language and meaning in politics. He is also part of the Desire + Capital working group and the Erasmus Institute for Public Knowledge.

Martina Leeker Martina Leeker is a scholar in theater studies and media studies, as well as an artist in lecture performances. She has held various visiting professorships and teaching positions. Until 2018, she was a senior researcher at the "Centre for Digital Cultures" at Leuphana University Lüneburg; since fall 2021, she has been an adjunct professor of Aesthetic Theory and Practice at Art and Art Theory at the University of Köln. Research interests: Digital cultures, theater and digitality, art and technology, criticism, mimesis, aesthetic education, care and digital care, artistic research, research using performative methods in speculation labs and lecture performances. In summer 2021, founded "The Respectful Nettheatrechannel" for theater/performance and digitality. Since summer 2022, teaching and research project: Care Research Lab. 2023 – 2026: Interview series about Art and Research (aAaR) at University of Köln.

Thorben Mämecke is managing director of the research cluster *digital_culture* at the FernUniversität in Hagen. He earned his Ph.D. with a dissertation titled "The Quantified Self – A Genealogy of Self-Tracking" at the research training group "Automatisms – Cultural Techniques for Reducing Complexity" at the University of Paderborn. Previously, he worked on the "Numerical Inclusion" project within the DFG SPP "Mediatized Worlds."

Felix Maschewski is a literary and media theorist (with a background in economics), a teaching fellow at the university of Oldenburg and Co-Director of the Critical Data Lab (HU Berlin/ University of Oldenburg). Currently he is also affiliated researcher at the Institute of Network Cultures (Amsterdam). Prior to that he held visiting and teaching positions at FU Berlin, University of Basel and at Princeton University. Apart from his academic writing (such as in Behemoth, Leviathan, Thesis Eleven, Digital Culture & Society, Philosophy & Social Criticism and other journals), he regularly writes essays for Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung, Republik Deutschlandfunk Kultur, WirtschaftsWoche, Philosophie Magazin, Die ZEIT among others. His most recent book is Die Gesellschaft der Wearables (co-authored with Anna-Verena Nosthoff, Nicolai 2019).

Luke Munn's work explores the digital cultures that increasingly shape our lives, combining a deep understanding of technical logics (code, infrastructures, architectures) with a critical awareness of race and class, gender and labor, epistemologies and ecologies. His work, including six monographs with leading presses such as Automation is a Myth (Stanford), Technical Territories (Michigan) and Red Pilled (Transcript) and 45 articles in high ranked journals, informs contemporary debates on AI, automation, work, hate, radicalization, and politics, appearing in The Guardian, the Washington Post, and Scientific American.

Laura Niebling is the Executive Director of DIMAS and a postdoctoral researcher in media studies at the University of Regensburg. After completing her undergraduate studies in Bochum and earning her doctorate in Bayreuth, she held various positions in Potsdam and Weimar, among other places. Her research focuses on network cultures and post-digital, transcultural media narratives; the cultural history of data protection and informed consent; and methodological debates in media studies. Publications include: with B. Burkhart/A. v. Keeken/C. Jost/M. Pfleiderer: Audiowelten (Waxmann 2021); with S. Stollfuß/F. Raczkowski (eds.): Handbuch Digitale Medien und Methoden (Springer, forthcoming), "Consent Capital" (New Media & Society, 2025), with J. Zündel/K. Pauliks/T. Heilmann (eds.): Moving Image Memes (meson 2026).

Anna-Verena Nosthoff is junior professor of philosophy and digital ethics at Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg and Co-Director of the Critical Data Lab (HU Berlin/ University of Oldenburg). Prior to that, she held fellowships, teaching and research positions at Princeton University, the LSE, the Weizenbaum Institute for the Networked Society, the University of Vienna, FU Berlin and the University of Basel. Anna has published on the digital transformation of the public sphere, the power of Big Tech, the politics of social media, the platform economy, as well as critical theory, the philosophy of technology and the history of cybernetics, in international journals such as Cultural Politics, Culture, Theory & Critique, Philosophy & Social Criticism, Thesis Eleven, Digital Culture & Society, Critical Research on Religion, Jahrbuch Technikphilosophie, Leviathan, Behemoth, Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft and various edited volumes. Her most recent book is "Kybernetik und Kritik. Eine Theorie digitaler Regierungskunst" (Suhrkamp 2026).

Anna Puzio is an Advanced Postdoctoral Researcher based at the universities in Bern and Vienna. As an ethicist and philosopher, her work focuses on AI ethics, Big Tech, and techno-ideologies such as transhumanism. Previously, she held further academic positions at the universities of Münster, Munich, Frankfurt am Main, Oxford, Cambridge, Berkeley and Twente. She is also affiliated with the research programme Ethics of Socially Disruptive Technologies in the Netherlands and the Crit-

ical Data Lab at Humboldt University Berlin. She is the author of "Über-Menschen: Philosophische Auseinandersetzung mit der Anthropologie des Transhumanismus" (2022). Her further research interests include robot ethics, medical technologies, gender and diversity, new materialism, synthetic biology, and the intersection of environmental ethics and the ethics of technology.

Gustavo Robles is a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Gerda Henkel Foundation at the University of Passau and a Research Fellow with the International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counterstrategies (IRGAC, University of Potsdam/Rosa Luxemburg Foundation). He holds a PhD in Philosophy from the National University of La Plata (Argentina), where he served as an Associate Professor. His research focuses on critical theory, authoritarian and far-right politics, and digital capitalism.

Milan Stürmer is a postdoctoral researcher at the Erasmus School of Philosophy in Rotterdam, where he coordinates the Erasmus Institute for Philosophy and Technology. His research develops a process-philosophical critique of the political economy and political epistemology of automation, drawing especially on the work of Alfred North Whitehead. Since 2023, he has served as vice president of the European Society for Process Thought. In his forthcoming book co-authored with Mark Carrigan, he examines the social ontology of large language models in the context of terminal platform capitalism.

Fred Turner is Harry and Norman Chandler Professor of Communication at Stanford University, where he studies the impact of new media technologies on American culture since World War II. He is the author of five books, including most recently, with Mary Beth Meehan, "Seeing Silicon Valley: Life Inside a Fraying America". He has been a Guggenheim Fellow, a LeBoff Distinguished Visiting Scholar at New York University, a Beaverbrook Visiting Scholar at McGill University, and twice a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford. Before becoming a professor, he worked as a journalist for ten years. He continues to write regularly for newspapers and magazines in America and Europe.

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University Against Fascism is a working group that provides a platform for networking, exchange, and peer consultation in the field of media studies, with the aim of defending the university against attacks from the far right and anti-democratic forces.

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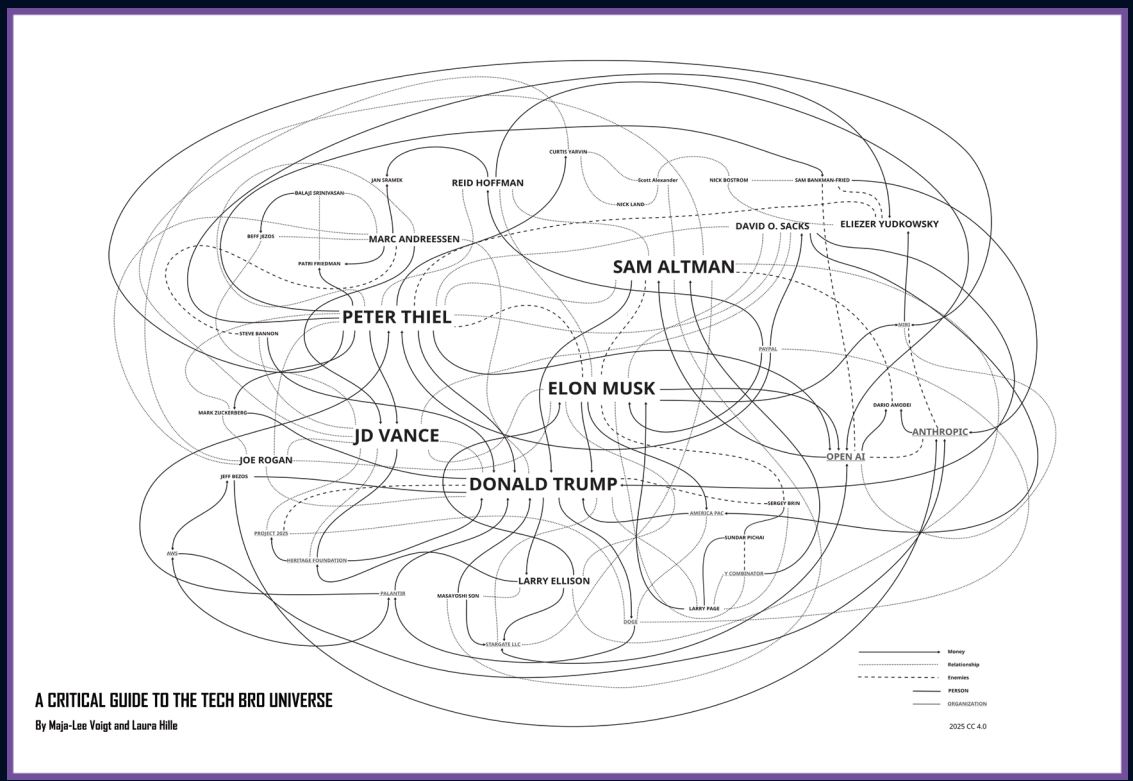
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