The Journal of Illiberalism Studies
Vol. 4 No. 3 (2024): 161-180.

Dark Shadows under the Ivory Tower: An Approach to Elon Musk's Ideology

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Abstract

Though he is primarily renowned for his technological ventures, Elon Musk's ideological turn has not gone unnoticed. He advocates a society based on the rule of an entrepreneurial tech-elite. A former progressive techno-libertarian, Musk is radicalizing, undergoing a similar illiberal phase as many political actors today. This ideological maturation is possible due to the patterns shared between Silicon Valley's neoliberal techno-solutionism and illiberalism. At the origin of this transition reside both the crisis of meaning provoked by neoliberalism and the re-politicization of elites' ideological discourse as an answer. To his techno-solutionism, Musk has paired a subset of futurist ideologies asserting that only a group of select individuals can together see far enough into the future of society to guarantee the survival and well-being of humans. Put into practice, this logic aligns with Musk's commercial interests, neglecting major challenges facing humanity like climate change. This vision has a geopolitical dimension too, which has made him sometimes take sides with illiberal governments. This paper delves into Musk's ideology, resorting to political discourse analysis methods, focusing on his ideological imprint as seen in different contexts or online, to explain the implications of it and his radicalization.

Keywords: Elon Musk, illiberalism, neoliberalism, techno-solutionism, longtermism

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DOI: 10.53483/XCRA3585

In recent times, tech entrepreneurs have shed their previous façade of political neutrality, often grounded as it was in claims of rationality and objectivity. Science and technology are not independent from any socioeconomic context or cultural and ideological environment. This is especially true for those leading technological progress, with motivations usually extending beyond scientific development.[1] Economic interests are intricately linked to politics. Within the realm of technoscience, neoliberalism is often justified through lofty rhetoric. Those who benefit from these policies often present them as humanitarian endeavors that will enhance the lives of many and propel scientific progress. However, the underlying ideology guiding their mission is far from a pursuit of the common good. Instead, its purpose is to reinforce an elitist order, based on hierarchies and exploitation. In a moment of withdrawal for technocratic discourses, which rely less on values or civilizational narratives, this order is alluded to more and more explicitly.[2]

This paper elaborates on the ideology of Elon Musk to support this claim. The South African-born tech mogul has gone from voting for the Democratic Party and taking a progressive stance towards technological development, to an illiberal ideological turn, funding Donald Trump's presidential campaign, and encompassing not only a radical techno-solutionism but even a comprehensive conservative and civilizationist vision of reality. This transition was possible due to the common ground shared between technological neoliberalism and illiberalism, both in their economic and political scripts. Far from restraining his commercial activity to mere economic benefits or meeting specific needs, Musk aligns his business with a moral and even messianic endeavor. Partly influenced by a subset of futurist ideologies, he has an expansionist project of space colonization for the destiny of human civilization. Encouraging people, especially social elites, to exponentially reproduce, and using rocket science, his purpose is to colonize outer space and make humans an interplanetary species. Discrediting the gravity of major global challenges by arguing that they fail to be categorized as existential risks to humanity and its interplanetary mission, he argues that AI or the demographic decline are much higher risks to civilization than, for instance, global warming.[3]

Back on planet Earth, Musk's elitist and civilizationist discourse resonates with the various spheres of the global right. What is more, these actors acknowledge him as a member of their cause, as he grows closer and closer to them, spreading their narratives and providing them with a platform online. Particularly after his purchase of Twitter, renamed X following his acquisition, Musk has emerged as a champion of free speech, a common cause defended by right-wing to far-right voices, especially in the US, lifting the ban on several users who had infringed the platform's terms of use because of their discriminatory or abusive behavior. As this paper will discuss, conservative governments like Viktor Orbán's in Hungary or Giorgia Meloni's in Italy had also developed close links with Musk around their common pronatalist stances. Even on the fringes of the far right, in theory opposed to neoliberalism and technological solutionism, neofascist figures like Aleksandr Dugin in Russia, or the flagship of the French New Right, Éléments magazine, openly support Musk. Our

1 Peter Bloom, "How the 'Visionaries' of Silicon Valley Mean Profits are Prioritised over True Technological Progress," *The Conversation*, December 29, 2023, https://theconversation.com/how-the-visionaries-of-silicon-valley-mean-profits-are-prioritised-over-true-technological-progress-219795

2 Marlene Laruelle, "Introduction: Illiberalism Studies as a Field," in *The Oxford Handbook of Illiberalism*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024): 1–42.

3 @parismarx, "He finally came out and said it. Climate change isn't perceived to be an existential risk to the wealthy; they feel they can buy their way out of its worst impacts, and don't care about what it means for everyone else. That's why they push false solutions over real action." X, August 26, 2022, https://x.com/parismarx/status/1563070769340751873.

analysis of this ideological cluster that has developed around Musk contributes to better understanding the nature of illiberalism and its technological conjugation, as well as the dialog it establishes with other ideologies.

After laying out a conceptual base and delimiting the notion of ideology, together with the different subcurrents that compose Elon Musk's cosmovision, we argue that his radicalization has been facilitated by the different bridges that, paradoxically, unite both neoliberalism and illiberalism. Due to his continuous activity on X, Musk's posting on this social media platform provides a primary source with which to study his ideological discourse. Declarations made during interviews, forums, or political events will also be analyzed for the same purpose.

The Ideology in Question

Ideology is indeed a polymorphic concept. In his introductory study, Terry Eagleton even manages to identify up to 16 different but complementary definitions.[4] The common trait that almost all share is the understanding that ideologies are situated practices within a conflict. A narrative, discourse, or even a single word should be seen as a rhetorical action belonging to a larger strategy to assert control in a context of political dispute. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the word "freedom" may carry different meanings when it is pronounced by an anarchist militant or by the current president of Argentina, Javier Milei. In order to grasp the meaning of a particular discourse, to limit the analysis to the words themselves rather than study the social and political context in which they are produced would only provide a shallow, if not false, understanding of a particular ideology.

Like Eagleton, Karl Mannheim's conception of ideology also evokes conflict. According to him, ideologies only reveal themselves in the form of political thought when a dominant worldview is challenged. An established vision of things tends to obscure or distort reality, arousing suspicion among the subalterns of the same social reality depicted by the ideology. Once skepticism corrodes this veneer, the roots of a given social situation are uncovered or "unmasked."[5] In principle, those who benefit from a particular social situation often do not feel compelled to question the ideological system that supports their status. It happens that this socio-cognitive apparatus is so deeply internalized in their subconscious that they scarcely suspect the existence of any alternative logic underlying what they perceive. If the weight of reality, the pressure from those who contradict their version of events, becomes too heavy to ignore, they may make material and ideological concessions to those who challenge their worldview. In doing so, their entire system of thought is never refuted; it survives through adaptation and reformulation.[6]

However, adaptation does not necessarily result from assimilating certain critiques and proposing a compromise. Ideology, in a position of power, can evolve not only by making concessions but also by resorting to other, more drastic strategies. Instead of assimilating the critique, a dominant ideology can defend itself by fighting back. It may attack what it perceives as a threat, either to its material or socio-cognitive integrity. The methods often employed are numerous, including counterargument, delegitimization, distortion of facts, or even pathologization (one could think of

4 Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 1–2.

5 Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1960), p. 225.

6 Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 57–58.

Musk calling wokeness a "mental virus").[7] Alongside the intensity of the discursive confrontation, there is also an escalation in the use of categorical arguments or the appeal towards more reactionary sophisms.

This shift, from a tacit preservation of a certain socio-economic and moral order towards a belligerent defense of an entire system of privileges and hierarchies, can be observed in Musk's behavior. Today, Musk represents the necessity of techno-scientific development and, *in fine*, the dominant ideology, to present themselves not just as a natural project for the common good, but as a bastion to safeguard rationality and progress from relativism and decadence. He frames his mission as a civilizational endeavor, and whether his adversaries are wokeness, the declining birthrates in the West, or figures like George Soros, he is determined to wage an ideological battle against them to preserve his vision of humanity and carry out his elitist interplanetary project.

Neoliberal Foundations

Popular images of neoliberalism depict it as an ideology advocating for minimal state intervention in the economy, promoting unregulated markets and trade, both factors understood as inherent conditions for a genuine liberal democracy. However, as the dominant ideology shaping contemporary capitalism, neoliberalism has garnered significant attention in scholarly research. Neoliberalism and, to a lesser extent, its more radical offshoot, libertarianism, have been thoroughly analyzed across various social science disciplines, including history, philosophy, and political theory.[8] Some studies have confirmed earlier intuitions about these ideologies, while others have challenged common misconceptions.

Contrary to conventional belief, Quinn Slobodian's historiographic work has demonstrated that neoliberalism holds a limited, if not pessimistic, view of democracy. Despite its association with *laissez-faire* economics, neoliberalism has a track record of institution-building aimed at protecting capitalism from the influence of democracy. Having deified market economy and fearing the potential threat that masses could represent for it, key neoliberal thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992) and Ludwig von Mises (1881–1973) argued that democracy is not an ally of the economy but its adversary.[9] As stated by political theorist Wendy Brown, neoliberalism is not an ideology whose aim is limited to organizing the economy in a specific manner. Supporting Slobodian's claims, democracy would be in the process of being "hollowed out from within" by neoliberalism.[10] Human nature, according to Brown, would be dramatically changing, from Aristotle's *zoon politikon* (political animal) to an entrepreneurialist *homo oeconomicus* (economic man), with individuals neglected from the political and submitted to economic rationality. This antidemocratic vision of society, together with Brown's portrayal of the new *homo oeconomicus*, echo on Musk's ideology, wherein elites' will, guided by interest, accumulation and unlimited growth, attempt to overcome democracy.

7 @elonmusk, "The woke mind virus is either defeated or nothing else matters." X, December 12, 2022, https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1602278477234728960.

8 On a variable and non-systematic scale, while neoliberalism advocates for limited but regulated governmental intervention in the market, libertarianism calls for the near-total suppression of the state, giving rise to scenarios without the legal guarantees provided by an institutionalized social organization. See Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018).

9 Slobodian, *Globalists*, p. 2

10 Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), p. 18.

Corey Robin argues, too, that authors belonging to this school of thought—"the most genuinely political theory of capitalism the right has managed to produce"[11]—have attributed substantial ideological leverage to economic elites. For Robin, Hayek was a fervent supporter of economic elites as "legislators of value"[12] (that is, those with a sufficiently comprehensive overview—usually from above—dictate what is value or how to seek it). Furthermore, for Hayek, who serves as the main exponent of the neoliberal Austrian school of economics, value can only be identified and fixed by an elite if it is granted sufficient freedom to do so. In this sense, hierarchies are fully legitimized as "the freedom that will be used by only one man in a million may be more important to society and more beneficial to the majority than any freedom that we all use."[13] This is the main rationale of freedom in neoliberalism: to create the political and economic conditions for elites to emerge and come together as the main driving forces within neoliberalism to identify and manage value. To be clear, value is not only assigned to goods or commodities, but to cultural practices or, more broadly, to a comprehensive morality. Austrian economists such as Mises and Hayek closely relate the market to the rest of the domains of life: if the economy behaves well, it will impact society positively, which will create, in turn, a direct bond between economy and moral duty.[14]

When Neoliberalism Approached Tech

As this paper further discusses, a plethora of names exist to label the different subcurrents that shape the ensemble of Elon Musk's ideology. Nevertheless, its source stems from the encounter of technological solutionism and a more radical neoliberalism that grew steadily from the 1960s onwards in Silicon Valley. Some of the key ideological tenets of what has been called "Californian ideology,"[15] "The Silicon Doctrine,"[16] "Cyberlibertarianism"[17] or "Techno-libertarianism,"[18] appear as a vague commitment to improving people's lives through technology, making societies freer and more open, with limited state regulation but also relying on state funding. It has to be noted that, although academic literature tends to resort to the term "libertarian" to characterize Silicon Valley's ideology, when put into practice, mostly due to its economic reliance on the state, it is actually closer to neoliberalism. Certainly, both ideologies share a common matrix, and Silicon Valley's moguls do not necessarily share neoliberalism's anthropological pessimism. But emotionally loaded narratives, sometimes presented under a revolutionary guise, are fundamentally a vacuous display of ideology. Once the techno-humanist harangue is dispelled, neoliberalism emerges from the very core of the remaining set of ideas.

Initially, Silicon Valley and its then novice tech entrepreneurs were influenced by a progressive approach to digital technologies. Artifacts created in the Valley were sold

11 Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 133.

12 Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, p. 160.

13 Hayek, quoted in Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, p. 159.

14 Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*.

15 Evgeny Morozov, "Critique of Techno Feudal Reason," *New Left Review*, 133/134 (January–April 2022): 89–126.

16 Aitor Jimenez, "The Silicon Doctrine," *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique—Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, vol. 18, no. 1, (2020): 322–336, https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v18i1.1147.

17 David Golumbia, "Cyberlibertarianism: The Extremist Foundations of 'Digital Freedom,' " Department of English, Clemson University, September 2013. https://web.archive.org/web/20191105055842/http://www.uncomputing.org/?p=276.

18 Eric Sadin, *La Silicolonisation du monde* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016).

as a tool to connect the world and make it more democratic. Techno-solutionism, the belief that the world would become a better place thanks to technology, fueled the Valley. The first CEOs to create the major tech companies of today, like the founder of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, who wanted the platform to be a public service,[19] belonged to this progressive techno-solutionism.

But as Evgeny Morozov points out, techno-solutionism quickly became a mere façade due to the development of digital capitalism.[20] For instance, Twitter, which allegedly aimed only to connect people, soon made data extraction their primary source of profitability. The progressive approach to tech quickly morphed into neoliberalism.

Silicon Valley would not exist without substantial support from both the federal government and the state of California, provided through various means such as patent backing and direct and indirect subsidies. As Malcolm Harris details in his work, the Valley began as a state-led experiment that gradually was privatized under a neoliberal logic.[21] The initial boom in Silicon Valley occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, driven by fiscal deregulation that enabled the creation of financial capital, which required constant self-appreciation and increasingly higher risks.[22] It was in this context that venture capital emerged as a key tool in the economy, with billions of dollars being invested in start-ups that were often co-financed by the state through indirect subsidies. With the 2008 financial crisis and the collapse of the housing bubble, capital sought refuge in Silicon Valley's venture capital firms, which, despite being high-risk, promised extremely high and rapid returns if successful.[23] This helps to explain the definitive rise of major companies now forming a near oligopoly in the tech industry, such as Google, Meta, Apple, and Amazon during the post-2008 crisis years.

Hence, Musk's calls for less state intervention in the economy are not rooted in libertarianism, but rather reflect what regular tech companies tend to demand: more public money paired with minimal regulation. Jimenez argues that within Silicon Valley, everybody, from CEOs to aspiring tech entrepreneurs, concurs with a similar approach to technological development.[24] In the name of freedom and innovation, all come together in a call for minimal state intervention to develop digital capitalism with less stringent regulation.[25] However, while tech moguls resort to ideals of freedom and democratization, arguing that technology serves to make any society more horizontal, the lack of market regulations leads to the emergence of monopolies that stifle both competition and people's choices.[26]

Today, according to philosopher of technology Éric Sadin, there is even less need to advocate for reduced intervention and increased public funding, as these ideas have been widely accepted in most socio-liberal democracies. The state, the main institution with any margin to control and regulate the market, not only does not

19 Kurt Wagner, *Battle for the Bird: Jack Dorsey, Elon Musk, and the $44 Billion Fight for Twitter's Soul* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2024), p. 15.

20 Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013).

21 Malcolm Harris, *Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2023), p. 363–439.

22 Jimenez, "The Silicon Doctrine," p. 322–323.

23 Harris, *Palo Alto*, p. 536–569.

24 Jimenez, "The Silicon Doctrine," p. 323.

25 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019), chap. 7, "The Reality of Business," p. 199–232.

26 Jimenez, "The Silicon Doctrine," p. 323, 324, 328.

represent a substantial threat to tech moguls, but supports Silicon Valley and upholds its developments through public subsidies and tax exemptions. In this sense, Sadin asserts that Musk embodies the myth of the 21st-century providential techno-entrepreneur, as his personal endeavor, though often portrayed as the success of a solitary genius, has been actively supported and financially backed by the US and state governments.[27]

Musk's Technological Neoliberalism

Elon Musk's ideology can be traced back to this encounter of neoliberalism and technological solutionism. Following the neoliberal vision of elites as value-seekers, Musk has consistently portrayed himself to the broader public as an eccentric and misunderstood genius. He has been granted the aura of the long-standing, hard-working entrepreneur who achieved success because of his talent and tenacity. He is depicted as a nonconformist, who does not fit in due to his exceptional intelligence and personality, more concerned with the advancement and progress of humanity than his own well-being.[28] However, this public persona has been effectively crafted by Musk himself[29] and, even if he is perceived as someone who does not adhere to the ideological currents prevalent in Silicon Valley, he is not substantially different from other prominent tech moguls.[30]

Musk also pretends to side with regular folk when he states, "I think it's possible for ordinary people to choose to be extraordinary,"[31] forging in him a democratic idea of success, together with the myth of meritocracy. This was acknowledged by *Fortune* magazine, which concluded in 2014: "His brilliance, his vision, and the breadth of his ambition make him the one-man embodiment of the future."[32] However, this image is far from reality. Elon Musk's main firms of his business empire, including Tesla, SpaceX, and SolarCity, have received substantial federal funds in the past. Either to avoid bankruptcy or for the purpose of fostering his start-up model, a common practice between the US government and Silicon Valley, Musk companies had benefited up to 2015 from an estimated $4.9 billion in government subsidies.[33] Besides, it should neither come as a surprise that, when Musk talks about "ordinary people," he is not referring to himself. The South African-born billionaire comes from an already rich family.

Musk's major companies, Tesla and SpaceX, would share a common goal: improving human life and expanding it through technological advancements. But ultimately,

27 Éric Sadin: "Elon Musk personnifie à l'extrême cette idéologie 'geeko-libertarienne,' " *Le Nouvel Observateur*, November 2, 2022, https://www.nouvelobs.com/numerique/20220826.OBS62403/elon-musk-personnifie-a-l-extreme-cette-ideologie-geeko-libertarienne.html; According to an investigation by the *Los Angeles Times*, Musk's companies have received significant subsidies from the US federal government, the state of California, and the state of New York. Additionally, they have benefited from substantial tax exemptions. See Jerry Hirsch, "Elon Musk's Growing Empire Is Fueled by $4.9 Billion in Government Subsidies," *Los Angeles Times*, May, 20, 2015, https://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-hy-musk-subsidies-20150531-story.html.

28 See, for example, the following biographies: Ashlee Vance, *Elon Musk: Tesla, SpaceX, and the Quest for a Fantastic Future* (New York: Ecco, 2015); Walter Isaacson, *Elon Musk* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2023).

29 Agustin Ferrari, "The Elon Musk Experience: Celebrity Management in Financialised Capitalism," *Celebrity Studies* 14, no. 4, (December 2023): 602–619, https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2022.2154685.

30 Lora Kelley, "Silicon Valley's Elon Musk Problem," *The Atlantic*, June 27, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2023/06/silicon-valley-elon-musk-zuckerberg-ceos/674550/.

31 MulliganBrothers, " 'YOU CAN ALSO BE GREAT' - Elon Musk Motivation - Motivational Video," YouTube channel, October 6, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQnzk334PtA.

32 Peter Elkind, "Inside Elon Musk's $1.4 Billion Score," *Fortune*, November 14, 2014, https://fortune.com/longform/inside-elon-musks-billion-dollar-gigafactory/.

33 Clive Thompson, "Can Elon Musk Run a Business without Government Subsidies?" April 30, 2022, https://clivethompson.medium.com/can-elon-musk-run-a-business-without-government-subsidies-3694363c9c9a.

this rationale is only a veneer to justify and legitimize his private interests—and those of Washington. Tesla, for instance, enabled the transformation of the private electric vehicle (EV) industry to ensure its survival. Its goal is not a more sustainable world, as this would be achieved by degrowth and rethinking the future of transportation in terms of the low-carbon technologies that societies have a good command of, like bicycles, buses, and trains, challenging the very notion of the private car.[34] Benefiting from public funds, Tesla allows the industry of the private car to survive, albeit now as an EV industry. SpaceX also exemplifies the values of neoliberal techno-solutionism, although addressing a problem that stems more from Musk's ideological messianism than from society as a whole: making humans a multiplanetary species through the colonization, first of Mars and, afterwards, outer space.[35] For Jason Hickel, SpaceX is nothing but the possibility for capitalism to transcend planet Earth.[36] In pursuit of this goal, SpaceX now undertakes many activities that were once the domain of NASA.[37]

The overlaps and antagonisms that comprise the multiple facets of neoliberalism and illiberalism can be observed in Musk economics. Musk praises capitalism—particularly, a capitalism that combines deregulation of labor practices while benefiting from an environmental alibi to operate freely from governmental checks and balances or legislation—as "not just successful, but morally right."[38] Musk's neoliberal approach also places harsh conditions on his employees, including anti-union practices. Regarding global competition, Musk has to lean on the US government to face strategic rivals, like China in the case of electric vehicles. While in 2011, he laughed at the possibility of being outpaced by Chinese car retailers, today he pleads for trade barriers to protect US companies in this sector.[39] In the end, as he benefited from Chinese state-sponsored support when he opened a Tesla factory in Shanghai, he will need the future president of the US to secure his companies.

From Technological Neoliberalism to Longtermism

In recent years, Musk has coupled his neoliberal techno-solutionism with a subset of futurist, elitist, and climate-change denialist ideologies.[40] Longtermism, a "close match for my philosophy,"[41] according to him, advocates that decisions and actions should be evaluated based on their long-term impact on humanity, even if this means sacrificing short-term welfare. Echoing the role attributed by the Austrian school of economics to elites and inspired by the utilitarian school of philosophy, longtermists

34 Paris Marx, *Road to Nowhere: What Silicon Valley Gets Wrong about the Future of Transportation* (London: Verso Books, 2022).

35 Elon Musk, "Making Humans a Multi-Planetary Species," *New Space*, vol. 5, no 2, (2017): 46–61, https://doi.org/10.1089/space.2017.29009.emu.

36 Jason Hickel, *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (London: Random House, 2020).

37 "Why Do We Need NASA When We Have SpaceX?" Planetary Society website, November 12, 2020, https://www.planetary.org/articles/nasa-versus-spacex.

38 @elonmusk, "This book is an excellent explanation of why capitalism is not just successful, but morally right, especially chapter 4," X, October 23, 2023, https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1716525258956542321?.

39 Barry Gander, "How Elon Musk Drove Off the Cliff and Now Expects Us to Save Him," January 27, 2024, https://barry-gander.medium.com/how-elon-musk-drove-off-the-cliff-and-now-expects-us-to-save-him-e1e5e13c5953.

40 Timnit Gebru and Émile P. Torres, "The TESCREAL Bundle: Eugenics and the Promise of Utopia through Artificial General Intelligence," *First Monday* 29 no. 4 (April 2024), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v29i4.13636.

41 @elonmusk, "Worth reading. This is a close match for my philosophy," X, August 2, 2022, https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1554335028313718784.

are meant to identify value and maximize it in the long run.[42] This implies making decisions that are supposed to have a positive and lasting effect on future generations even if they do not provide immediate or visible benefits today.

Longtermism is closely related to effective altruism, another utilitarian school of thought and movement oriented toward maximizing the amount of value in the universe. Similar to neoliberals, its proponents ground their mission in ethical and moral principles. Effective altruism began as a movement whereby individuals, for the betterment of humanity, chose to donate a significant portion of their incomes to aid the world's poorest. This was the hallmark of William MacAskill, the prominent face of effective altruism. They incorporated longtermism when attributing more value to the exponential good that could be done in the future, through technological development, rather than in the present time. Effective altruism identifies value in the growth projections of population—including humans living in computer simulations or "digital people."[43] Proponents of Effective Altruism include Oxford University utilitarians such as Nick Bostrom, whose Future of Humanity Institute received a £1m donation from Musk.[44]

The message that the problems of humanity could be solved through private initiatives, fundamentally carried out by an oligarchic elite, tackling them with money and technology rather than through policy, quickly gained traction in Silicon Valley. Of course, before effective altruism, prominent CEOs like Bill Gates had already created their own charitable organizations. But effective altruism fit almost perfectly in this late period of the Valley, as it placed its commercial activity and technological development at the source of its ultimate moral duty. In this view, democratic bodies like states or governmental institutions, seen as a hinder to technological progress, become a restraint on the progress of humanity itself.

To secure value, effective altruists argue that all actions taken today should be focused on protecting future humanity from existential risks and increasing, as much as possible, the likelihood of its exponential population growth.[45] Regarding the risks, they have concluded that a highly unlikely yet potentially catastrophic threat involving AI is the most dangerous, as it could completely wipe out humanity from the face of the Earth, or at least endanger the survival of the species. In 2021, the effective altruist organization OpenPhilantropy donated $80 million to projects studying the hypothetical threats of AI, followed by $30 million to the Against Malaria Foundation, an organization fighting a disease that caused 627,000 deaths in 2020.[46] Criticisms leveled against effective altruists also point to their dismissal of climate change as an existential risk to humanity.[47] They neglect the gravity of climate change, since it poses an enormous danger to a significant part of the world

42 Sarah Frances and Dominika Janus, "The Threat of Longtermism: Is Ecological Catastrophe an Existential Risk? Disillusioned Ideals for a Bold, New Future," *FILOZOFIA*, vol. 78, supplement, (2023): 133–148, https://doi.org/10.31577/filozofia.2023.78.10.Suppl.11.asdf.

43 Gebru and Émile P. Torres, "The TESCREAL Bundle," p. #.

44 "Elon Musk funds Oxford and Cambridge University Research on Safe and Beneficial Artificial Intelligence," Future of Humanity Institute website, July 1, 2025, https://www.fhi.ox.ac.uk/elon-musk-funds-oxford-and-cambridge-university-research-on-safe-and-beneficial-artificial-intelligence/.

45 Alice Crary, "The Toxic Ideology of Longtermism," *Radical Philosophy* 214 (Spring 2023): 49–57, https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/the-toxic-ideology-of-longtermism.

46 Olúfẹ́mi O Táíwò and Joshua Stein, "Is the Effective Altruism Movement in Trouble?" *Guardian*, November 16, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/nov/16/is-the-effective-altruism-movement-in-trouble.

47 Sam Shead, "Skype Co-Founder Jaan Tallinn Reveals the 3 Existential Risks He's Most Concerned about," CNBC, December 29, 2020, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/12/29/skype-co-founder-jaan-tallinn-on-3-most-concerning-existential-risks-.html.

population but not to the human species as a whole. MacAskill goes as far as implying that climate change "does not drastically increase the risk of civilizational collapse," and that "even with fifteen degrees of warming the heat would not pass lethal limits for crops in most regions."[48] Besides, the solution they provide to hinder climate change does not envision substantial changes in the current mode of production and relies on technological innovations.[49]

Identifying, categorizing, and weighing existential risks allows effective altruists to prepare the ground for humanity to strive and grow further. Just like Elon Musk's ambitions, effective altruists argue that humanity has to transition from terrestrial to galactic. Only by expanding to other worlds can humanity fully develop, a purpose that legitimizes Musk's plans for his aerospace company, SpaceX, and echoes in the White House too. Mary-Jane Rubenstein points out that the political lines of the Trump administration remained in the Biden administration regarding US space policy, including the settlement of the Moon and Mars, which President of the US Donald Trump called during his first mandate "America's 'manifest destiny' in the stars."[50] For Rubenstein, the use of this lexicon is not casual: the conquest of Mars, one of the main commercial and ideological projects carried out by Musk, with the support of NASA and the US government, follows a very similar logic to that of previous colonial projects. Just like the Christian "doctrine of discovery," that allowed the conquest of the Americas by the Spanish Crown, or "manifest destiny" for white settlers, the colonization of Mars is framed by Musk and his acolytes as "prosperity, destiny, salvation and freedom."[51] These pompous and divine words hide material interests far more profane.

Musk has often justified the colonization of Mars and outer space as a quasi-messianic endeavor, pledging that he will "extend consciousness to Mars and then the stars" and "make all life multiplanetary."[52] Prior to Musk, human expansion into the cosmos had been already envisioned in similar terms by the Russian cosmists, a diverse group of Russian authors —including Fyodor Dostoevsky—, Orthodox priests and Soviet scientists, who in different moments of the 19th and 20th centuries reflected upon and supported the human exploration and colonization of outer space, either for religious or secular purposes.[53] At the 2020 South by Southwest (SXSW) film festival, Musk cited Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the first modern rocket engineer and one of the main scientific leaders of Russian cosmism, saying: "Earth is the cradle of humanity, but you cannot stay in the cradle forever."[54]

48 William MacAskill, *What We Owe to the Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2022).

49 According to Macaskill: "build up options, and learn more—[this] can help guide us in our attempts to positively influence the long term. First, some actions make the long term future go better across a wide range of possible scenarios. For example, promoting innovation in clean technology helps keep fossil fuels in the ground, giving us a better chance of recovery after civilisational collapse; it lessens the impact of climate change; it furthers technological progress, reducing the risk of stagnation; and it has major near-term benefits too, reducing the enormous death toll from fossil fuel-–based air pollution.". See: William MacAskill, *What We Owe to the Future* (New York: Basic Books, 2022), p. #?.

50 Donald Trump, quoted in Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Astrotopia: The Dangerous Religion of the Corporate Space Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), p. 10.

51 Rubenstein, *Astrotopia*, p. 4.

52 @elonmusk, "SpaceX's mission is to extend consciousness to Mars and then the stars," X, May 13, 2024, https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1790118678865838540;"Starship will make life multiplanetary," X, March 14, 2024, https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1768287613570396165.

53 Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism: Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlefields*, BASEES/ Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

54 Michel Eltchaninoff, *Lénine a marché sur la lune: La folle histoire des cosmistes et transhumanistes russes* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2022).

Rubenstein argues that Musk's justification for Mars colonization comes from Robert Zubrin, President of the Mars Society and a connoisseur of Tsiolkovsky's cosmism.[55] Zubrin is not only an enthusiast of space colonization as he also has more down-to-earth political opinions. In his book *Merchants of Despair: Radical Environmentalists, Criminal Pseudo-Scientists, and the Fatal Cult of Antihumanism* (2012, New Atlantis Books), he portrays human nature as essentially developmentalist, concluding that climate defense is part of a larger "antihuman program," just like how Musk calls environmentalists "extinctionists."[56] A right-wing Republican (although a critic of Donald Trump), Zubrin answered in an interview from 2013 that the biggest problem that societies face is "bureaucratization … Society tying itself up in knots with rules that prevent initiative and, ultimately, liberty."[57] In Zubrin's answers, colonization, not only of Mars but in a broader sense, is closely related to innovation and plays an important role in the development of societies, especially in the US:

> The frontier created this incredibly vigorous society in America. People could come here and do whatever worked. They went to a place where the rules hadn't been written yet. And when you had the challenge of the frontier, it both challenged people to innovate and left them free to innovate.[58]

Fertility rates are also a shared concern among Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, effective altruists, or for Elon Musk himself. According to this interconnected nebula, humankind's fulfillment depends on its exponential as well as qualitative reproduction as a species. This reasoning has been labeled "pronatalism," which is also related to certain views of longtermism. Musk synthetizes its own elitist ethos with pronatalism, although reproductive advocacy is also common in Christian and white nationalist ideologies.[59] Silicon Valley's pronatalism urges social elites to have children in order to face up to the demographic decline of the global population.[60] Reproducing historical eugenic logics,[61] this elitist pronatalism ultimately comes down to the idea that wealthy families will provide better material care for their children such that, following a utilitarian philosophical approach, they will produce more value. Musk does not merely advocate for people having more children; following effective altruist Nick Bostrom, he specifically urges rich individuals with alleged intellectual capacities to do so, in order to avoid the collapse of an advanced and civilized society.[62] A father of 10, Musk is a committed pronatalist. He frequently

55 Zubrin resorts to the same quotation from Tsiolkovsky as Musk in *The Case for Space* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2019).

56 @elonmusk, "The true battle is: Extinctionists who want a holocaust for all of humanity. — Versus — Expansionists who want to reach the stars and Understand the Universe," X, May 14, 2024, https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1790391774097088608.

57 Abraham Riesman, "Meet the Right-Wing Mars Guru," Vice News, February 21, 2013, https://www.vice.com/en/article/wnnaj4/the-right-wing-mars-guru-robert-zubrin-interview.

58 Riesman, "Meet the Right-Wing Mars Guru."

59 Samuel L. Perry, Elizabeth E. McElroy, Landon Schnabel, Joshua B. Grubbs, "Fill the Earth and Subdue It: Christian Nationalism, Ethno-Religious Threat, and Nationalist Pronatalism," *Sociological Forum*, vol. 37, no. 4, (December 2022): 995–1017, https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12854.

60 Julia Black, "Billionaires Like Elon Musk Want to Save Civilization by Having Tons of Genetically Superior Kids: Inside the Movement to Take 'Control of Human Evolution,' " *Business Insider*, November 17, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/pronatalism-elon-musk-simone-malcolm-collins-underpopulation-breeding-tech-2022-11.

61 Nancy Ordover, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

62 Julia Black, "Elon Musk Had Twins Last Year with One of His Top Executives," *Business Insider*, July 6, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-shivon-zilis-secret-twins-neuralink-tesla.

shares online his concerns about the "population collapse," even giving some credit to the Great Replacement theory.[63]

From Elon Musk's Techno-Neoliberalism to Techno-Illiberalism

Illiberalism has been mostly studied as a set of political and institutional practices, enacted by certain right-wing to far-right politicians when they take office, in order to consolidate their authority, undermining the very principles of liberal democracy. Over time, the term has evolved, diversifying its interpretations to include not only practices but also ideology. Hungary's Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, who has appropriated the term, sees illiberalism as an answer to the individualism and rootless multiculturalism that emerge from liberalism.[64] Orbán, in particular, seeks to counter this model with his own vision of an organic society, wherein people's value is contingent upon the labor they contribute, in a communitarian environment governed by conservative values.[65]

Laruelle has proposed an operational common ground to study the bases of illiberalism as a "doctrinally fluid and context-based ideology."[66] For her, illiberal forces severely question almost every facet of liberalism, such as politics, economics, culture, geopolitics, and its civilizational dimension, doing so in the name of true democracy and "the people." The *demos* portrayed is articulated as an organic body, culturally homogeneous, organized around traditional and conservative values. Although the predominant geopolitical dimension operated in by illiberal forces is nation-centered, a transnational and civilizational order is also promoted against multilateral and cosmopolitan liberalism. Illiberal politicians and intellectuals also tend to present their own ideological endeavor within a larger geopolitical frame than the national one, mobilizing a common heritage, structured around Christianity or so-called Western values. In regard to Musk, the nation-centric and sovereigntist perspective needs to be reframed in civilizational terms, as he sees humankind as a single body, with a dilated ethno-centric bias.

The margin between illiberal and neoliberal economics is narrower compared to the rest of the facets abovementioned. Laruelle argues that illiberal economics are implemented as a protectionist reaction to the forced liberalization of certain vulnerable economies, especially those with a Soviet background. Some of the main features of economic liberalism, such as the globalization of the economy or free trade, would be rejected in favor of the preservation of a national economy. Nevertheless, illiberal states go through phases of protectionism while implementing neoliberal policies within their borders (just like many self-proclaimed liberal states),

63 @elonmusk, "The problem with 'Great Replacement Theory' is that it fails to address the foundational issue of low birth rates. Record low birth rates are leading to population collapse in Europe and even faster population collapse in most of Asia. Immigration is low in Asia, so there is no 'replacement' going on, the countries are simply shrinking away. If this doesn't turn around, then any countries on Earth with low birth rates will become empty of people and fall into ruin, like the remains we see of the many long dead civilizations," X, April 28, 2024, https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1784388834538762425. On other occasions, Musk has likened migrant rescue operations on the high seas to an invasion: see Antonio Pequeño, "Elon Musk Attacks Germany over Its Migrant Rescues, Cites 'Invasion Vibes,' " *Forbes*, Sep 30, 2023, https://www.forbes.com/sites/antoniopequenoiv/2023/09/30/elon-musk-attacks-germany-over-its-migrant-rescues-cites-invasion-vibes/?sh=4572ce73a16e.

64 Viktor Orbán's speech at the 25th Bálványos Free Summer University and Youth Camp, July 26, 2014, https://budapestbeacon.com/full-text-of-viktor-orbans-speech-at-baile-tusnad-tusnadfurdo-of-26-july-2014/. However, according to Amélie Poinssot, Orbán quickly replaced the term with "Christian democracy." See Amélie Poinssot, *Dans la tête de Viktor Orbán* (Arles: Éditions Actes Sud, 2019).

65 Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction," *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (June 2021): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079.

66 Laruelle, "Illiberalism," p. 2.

with Hungary providing a solid case study in this sense.[67] Therefore, as much as illiberalism represents an answer to neoliberalism, it is not a rupture but a profitable adjustment for national elites and oligarchies. In the eyes of Reijer Hendrikse, "political illiberalization unfolds in a specific context of advanced neoliberalization, where … economic ruptures remain mundane."[68] Therefore, as a predominantly cultural phenomenon, illiberalism is better understood as an identitarian and conservative answer, framed under different geopolitical representations, to the neoliberal "commodification of every aspect of human (and animal) life" that "diminishes citizens' rights and the sense of belonging to a community."[69]

While many tech entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley align with this neoliberal techno-solutionism to varying degrees, not all engage with it in the same manner. It is indeed possible to observe diverse political and economic manifestations within this ideological framework. For example, tech companies have collaborated with the US government for surveillance purposes on certain occasions. Although these practices are often criticized from the left, conservative politicians have also voiced their concerns. Companies like IBM, which contributed to the development of digital vaccine passports during the covid-19 pandemic, were labeled as "corporate communism" by Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Green.[70] These declarations added fuel to an already heated public debate, strongly influenced by anti-establishment conspiracy theories towards covid-19 vaccines. For Taylor Green, corporate communism not only signifies a close collaboration between the US government and major tech companies (a common occurrence in the US), it also depicts an alleged ideological alignment between technology firms and the government, with the former seen as a tool of control over a radicalized Democratic Party, accused of drifting towards communism and totalitarianism.

Conservatives and neoliberal tech moguls express similar concerns regarding free speech online. Within forums linked to the alt-right, such as 4chan or Reddit, the right to freedom of expression has been weaponized to whitewash and amplify discriminatory discourses.[71] Putting in place the illusion that public debate functions as a harmonious and functional market of ideas, they create the necessary conditions to defend anti-egalitarian discourses under the guise of neutrality and competitiveness. On social media, ideas presented as legitimate by right-wing and far-right personalities have been censored, along with their personal accounts, due to their racist, conspiracist, or otherwise reactionary nature. However, even if these suspensions are made on a case-by-case basis and not systemic, as conservatism is still more widespread than progressive voices online, social media companies

67 Jan-Werner Müller, "The Hungarian Tragedy," *Dissent* 58 no. 2, (Spring 2011): 5–10, https://doi.org/10.1353/dss.2011.0048. See also Stefano Bottoni, *Orbán: Un despota in Europa* (Rome: L'Altrosguardo, 2019).

68 Reijer Hendrikse, "Neo-Illiberalism," *Geoforum* (June 2018): 7–10, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.07.002.

69 Laruelle, "Illiberalism"; Wendy Brown describes this downgrading of the human condition resorting to Arendt's "mere life" or Marx's life "confined by necessity." See Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, p. 43.

70 @thehill, "Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene: 'I call it corporate communism. These are private corporations who thrive on capitalism … But yet they are adapting these communist policies, just like the Democrats are.' " X, March 20, 2021, https://x.com/thehill/status/1376980176333070344.

71 Simon Ridley, *L'Alt-Right: De Berkeley à Christchurch* (Lormont: Le bord de l'eau, 2020).

are more frequently accused of having a liberal bias.[72] Free speech is therefore weaponized for illiberal purposes, following what Laruelle calls "competing with liberalism using its own conceptual language."[73]

Elon Musk is both a product and an enabler of this context. During the covid-19 pandemic, in 2022, Musk contributed to spreading disinformation, undermining health authorities and praising popular protests against vaccine mandates as well as digital vaccine passports.[74] He interpreted his own dissent and that of the protesters as a rebellion against tyranny. Just a year later, it was also ostensibly a sense of devotion to the common good that motivated his acquisition of the social media platform Twitter (which he later renamed X). The purchase occurred in the following weeks of a poll published on his own account, where 7 out 10 of the respondents answered "no" to the question: "Free speech is essential to a functioning democracy. Do you believe Twitter rigorously adheres to this principle?"[75] The next day, he cited that same tweet acknowledging the "noes" and posting: "Given that Twitter serves as the de facto public town square, failing to adhere to free speech principles fundamentally undermines democracy. What should be done?"[76] One could argue that he already had an answer to that question. Nonetheless, after acquiring Twitter, Musk has used his advocacy of free speech as a bargaining chip: in India, he recently agreed to allow censorship on X, in exchange for tariff reductions for Tesla.[77]

Allegedly revolting against the political and media establishment on behalf of democracy, Musk's rebellious attitude has conferred upon him the image of a tribune who speaks out for the common people against the government and the state. In recent years, he has been leaving a trail of digital endorsements and interactions with far-right content on social media, mainly concerning the issue of free speech. In September 2023, he propagated antisemitic tropes online and engaged on X with alt-right influencer Keith O'Brien (also known as Keith Woods) to share the hashtag campaign #BanTheADL, a generalized call for action against the Anti-Defamation League.[78] Before that, Musk had already shown support for O'Brien's views online. Additionally, he has participated in live conversations with prominent figures on the far right, including Andrew Tate and Alex Jones, after acquiring Twitter and lifting the ban on their accounts. Even former GOP presidential primary candidate Vivek Ramaswamy participated in these discussions. According to Tate and Jones,

72 Emily A. Vogels, Andrew Perrin, Monica Anderson, "Most Americans Think Social Media Sites Censor Political Viewpoints," Pew Research Center, August 19, 2020, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/08/19/most-americans-think-social-media-sites-censor-political-viewpoints/; Ashley Johnson, "The Facts behind Allegations of Political Bias on Social Media," Information, Technology and Innovation Foundation, October 26, 2023, https://itif.org/publications/2023/10/26/the-facts-behind-allegations-of-political-bias-on-social-media/; Paul Barrett and J. Grant Sims, "False Accusation: The Unfounded Claim that Social Media Companies Censor Conservatives," NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, February 10, 2021, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b6df958f8370af3217d4178/t/6011e68dec2c7013d3caf3cb/1611785871154/NYU+False+Accusation+report_FINAL.pdf.

73 Laruelle, "Illiberalism," p. 9.

74 Grace Kay, "Elon Musk and Trump Praised the Canadian Trucker Vaccine Protest That the Police Say Spurred Investigations into 'Threatening' and 'Illegal' Behavior," *Business Insider*, January 31, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-donald-trump-praised-canadian-trucker-vaccine-mandate-protest-2022-1.

75 @elonmusk, X, March 25, 2022, https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1507259709224632344.

76 Dan Milmo, "How 'Free Speech Absolutist' Elon Musk Would Transform Twitter," *The Guardian*, April 14, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2022/apr/14/how-free-speech-absolutist-elon-musk-would-transform-twitter.

77 Robert Reich, "Elon Musk and Peter Thiel's War on Democracy," Truthdig (website), https://www.truthdig.com/articles/elon-musk-and-peter-thiels-war-on-democracy/.

78 Shane Burley, "Elon Musk Is Now Endorsing German Neo-Nazis and Jews Are Still Excusing Him," *Haaretz,* October 5, 2023, https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2023-10-05/ty-article-opinion/.premium/elon-musk-is-now-endorsing-german-neo-nazis-and-jews-are-still-excusing-him/0000018a-fec8-d12f-afbf-ffddd7580001.

Musk's acquisition of Twitter "cracked the Matrix" and "has broken the back of the globalists" respectively.[79] In these conversations, Musk had the opportunity to discuss some of his preferred topics with them: "I'm generally in favor of civilization and its advancement, and I believe we should always be vigilant against regression. In civilization, you either grow or collapse; maintaining a steady state is virtually impossible." Expanding on this idea, Tate further elaborated: "Just like in business, as you guys mentioned: if you stand still, you die."[80]

While Musk flirts with more outspoken influencers of the far right online, in the physical realm, he interacts with political leaders who may have a more polished public image but share a similar ideology. Obsessed with the civilizational decline of the West and the drop in the birth rate, Musk has shown great interest in Hungary's pro-birth policies. When former Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson traveled to Hungary to interview Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, Musk quoted the video, posting: "Very interesting. Hungary is trying hard to address their birth rate problem."[81] Both the Hungarian government and Musk are equally concerned about the influence of George Soros in the world, woke culture, and immigration. To the post of the Hungarian prime minister: "It's time to face the facts: the Brussels #migration pact has failed,"[82] Musk replied: "Absolutely. It is unequivocally clear."[83] By the end of 2023, relations between the Hungarian government and Musk had grown closer. Hungarian President Katalin Novák traveled to Tesla's facilities in Austin, Texas, at the end of September that year. She met Musk in person, accompanied by his son X Æ A-12. The visit was documented and published on X. On her account, Novák described the meeting as a "#Demographic summit" and an "international pro-family #alliance."[84] Both made public the slogan: "having children is saving the world."

In December 2023, Elon Musk was invited to the annual festival of the ruling Italian political party, Brothers of Italy's, youth section in Rome, hosted by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. He was intended to be the star guest alongside other leaders of the European far right and right-wing politicians, such as the Spanish party Vox's leader Santiago Abascal, and former British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak. The common ground between the institutional far right and Musk lies in shared topics such as woke ideology and the challenges associated with the development of AI.[85] However, pronatalist policies and immigration were the topic of discussion in Rome. Musk, who had previously voiced concerns about Italy's declining birth rates, expressed anxiety about the potential extinction of humanity if birth rates continue to plummet. Regarding immigration, Musk condemned it, advocating instead for the preservation of cultural homogeneity within nations, warning that failing to do so would fundamentally alter the fabric of these countries.[86]

79 Solving the Money Problem, "Elon Musk, Alex Jones, Andrew Tate In WILD Conversation," YouTube channel, December 11, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niOugyy7L3Y.

80 Solving the Money Problem, "Elon Musk, Alex Jones, Andrew Tate In WILD Conversation."

81 @elonmusk, X, August 30, 2023, https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1696665945329037774.

82 @PM_ViktorOrban, X, September 26, 2023, https://x.com/PM_ViktorOrban/status/1706720346970193928.

83 @elonmusk, X, September 26, 2023, https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1706734591074353447.

84 @KatalinNovak_HU, X, September 26, 2023, https://x.com/KatalinNovak_HU/status/1706658111107252404.

85 Javier Salas, "Elon Musk and His Conspiracy-Laden Leap to the Extreme-Right," [*sic*] *El País* (newspaper), English edition, December 18, 2023, https://english.elpais.com/technology/2023-12-18/elon-musk-and-his-conspiracy-laden-leap-to-the-extreme-right.html.

86 The Independent, "Watch again: Elon Musk speaks at Giorgia Meloni's right-wing political festival in Italy," December 16, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=37e6BVnwm4g.

Although their relationship is more ambiguous, Russia's leaders have also benefitted from Musk's high regard. In 2021, Musk invited Russian President Vladimir Putin to join a conversation on the audio app Clubhouse. Putin ended up not attending, even if the Kremlin found the offer interesting and Musk stated to the Russian president, "it would be a great honor to talk to you."[87] After the beginning of the February 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Musk started providing Internet signal for civilian and military use to Ukraine through Starlink, his satellite service, at request of Kyiv. Nevertheless, when the Ukrainian Army planned an attack on a Russian vessel based in Crimea, he shut down Starlink to avoid it, alleging a possible nuclear retaliation from Russia.[88] On some occasions, over the course of war, he has also mocked Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, while asking pleasantly on X of former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, "how's it going in Bakhmut?"[89] This favoritism resurfaces when it comes to proposing peace terms between Russia and Ukraine, giving Moscow an advantageous position over Kyiv.[90]

Apart from alt-right influencers and right-wing politicians, Musk has been recently acknowledged by key neofascist actors. This encounter is particularly improbable: although the gap between neoliberalism, technological-solutionism, and neofascism narrows when studied under certain frames of analysis,[91] their relationship seems quite tortuous. This mutual rejection is partially rooted in the historical—and shallow—critique of liberalism from old fascist and conservative ideologies, which neofascist authors have delved into lately.[92] French ideologue Alain de Benoist has vehemently criticized Friedrich Hayek's thought, whose philosophy he claims would be totalitarian.[93] Russian traditionalist Alexander Dugin goes even further by associating the same Hayek with a "God-hating Satanic ideology."[94] Neoliberal economist Javier Milei, following his election as president of Argentina, has also faced condemnation from neofascist circles. The Arktos portal[95] published an "Against Milei" editorial, signed by former spokesman of the Identitarian Movement,[96] Alexander Markovics,[97] while Keith Woods alerted against "trying to generate excitement for figures like Milei and bring the right back to the low IQ Reaganism."[98]

87 @elonmusk, "было бы большой честью поговорить с вами," X, February 13, 2021, https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1360700181658886147.

88 Claudia Chiappa, "Elon Musk Sabotaged Ukrainian Attack on Russian Fleet in Crimea by Turning Off Starlink, New Book Says," *Politico*, September 8, 2023, https://www.politico.eu/article/elon-musk-ukraine-starlink-russia-crimea-war-drone-submarine-attack-sabotage/.

89 Dave Troy, "No, Elon and Jack Are Not 'Competitors.' They're Collaborating," Medium (website), October 29, 2022, https://davetroy.medium.com/no-elon-and-jack-are-not-competitors-theyre-collaborating-3e88cde5267d.

90 @elonmusk, "Ukraine-Russia Peace: - Redo elections of annexed regions under UN supervision. Russia leaves if that is will of the people. - Crimea formally part of Russia, as it has been since 1783 (until Khrushchev's mistake). - Water supply to Crimea assured. - Ukraine remains neutral," X, October 3, 2022, https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1576969255031296000.

91 Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism* (London: Verso Books, 2023).

92 Alain de Benoist, *Contre le libéralisme: La société n'est pas un marché* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 2019); Aleksandr Dugin, *The Fourth Political Theory* (Budapest: Arktos, 2012).

93 Alain de Benoist, "Contre Hayek,", https://libertas.co/wiki/Contre_Hayek_-_Alain_de_Benoist.

94 AGDchan, Telegram, May 4, 2023, https://t.me/Agdchan/10161.

95 Arktos Media Ltd. is a far-right publishing house based in Budapest, headed by Swedish neo-fascist Daniel Friberg.

96 A network of interconnected organizations, defending a far-right, pan-European, anti-immigration and Islamophobic ideology. See José Pedro Zúquete, *The Identitarians: The Movement against Globalism and Islam in Europe* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018).

97 Alexander Markovics, "Against Milei," *Arktos Journal*, January 25, 2024, https://www.arktosjournal.com/p/against-milei.

98 Keith Woods, Telegram, January 20, 2024, https://t.me/keith_woods/4981.

Techno-solutionism is not very well regarded within neofascism either. Certainly, some approaches to a more sympathetic relationship towards technology have been made by dissident authors coming from the New Right milieu, like the late Guillaume Faye in France.[99] More recent contributions proposed by the Dark Enlightenment's[100] theorists have also contributed to bridging gaps between reactionaries and technology.[101] However, technological progress, especially when associated with a fundamental property of modernity, tends to be condemned or, at least, largely rejected by neofascist authors. Influenced by the techno-skeptical spirit of the German Conservative Revolution of the 1920s (especially by Martin Heidegger's critique of techno-science), techno-solutionism and neofascism could hardly merge. In his work dedicated to Heidegger, Dugin shares the German philosopher's concern about the "technological displacement of nature,"[102] ultimately associating technocracy with Marxism, liberalism and, ironically, Americanism.[103] Also a follower of Heidegger, Alain de Benoist adheres to this same critique of technique, "a blind flight forward that no one can determine anymore."[104]

Musk is close to being the personification of both neoliberalism and techno-solutionism. And yet, he is very much appreciated by the large neofascist movement and the far right. Dugin himself sees in Musk, whom he frequently praises on his Telegram channel, a symptom of an ongoing shift from a unipolar order to his desired multipolar one. After lifting the ban on some far-right influencers on Twitter or attacking OpenAI for producing "politically correct outcomes," Musk has become, for some in the far right, a "truth-seeking crusader."[105] On the white supremacist portal American Renaissance, Musk is not only seen as an enabler for far-right influencers to speak without fearing censorship on X, but also as a member of an elite that is siding with white identitarians.[106] François Bousquet, the editor-in-chief of the French magazine Éléments, the flagship publication of the New Right in France, does not seem bothered when acknowledging this contradiction on the far-right broadcaster Radio Courtoisie: "I like Elon Musk. I can hear the critics from here. What an awful capitalist! What a horrible libertarian! Yes, yes, but I like him."[107]

Bousquet is more cautious when writing about Musk in Éléments, even if the substance of the message remains unaltered. Musk represents for Bousquet the America of the pioneers and the frontier myth. Bousquet fantasizes: "Musk is not a capitalist. He does not accumulate benefits, but energy, just like his electric batteries. What distinguishes him from other billionaires is that he perceives his mission

99 Stéphane François and Adrien Nonjon, "Guillaume Faye (1949–2019): At the Forefront of a New Theory of White Nationalism," *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 2 no. 1 (2022): 17–30, https://doi.org/10.53483/WCJT3535.

100 According to Hermansson et al. the Dark Enlightenment is defined as "a far right, anti-democratic movement that rejects Enlightenment principles and seeks to meld a regressive return to a monarchical past with a fetishised post-human future, all structured within a neo-cameralist state." See Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall, and Simon Murdoch, *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?* (London: Routledge, 2020).

101 Patrik Hermansson, David Lawrence, Joe Mulhall, and Simon Murdoch, *The International Alt-Right: Fascism for the 21st Century?* (London: Routledge, 2020).

102 Aleksandr Dugin, *Martin Heidegger: The Philosophy of Another Beginning* (Arlington, Va.: Radix, 2014) p. 66.

103 Dugin, *Martin Heidegger*.

104 Alain de Benoist, in Pierre-André Taguieff, *Sur la Nouvelle Droite* (Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1994).

105 Arktos News Bureau, "Elon Musk's TruthGPT: Challenging Liberal AI Titans," Arktos website, April 19, 2023, https://arktos.com/2023/04/19/elon-musks-truthgpt-challenging-liberal-ai-titans/.

106 "Elites on Our Side," American Renaissance website, January 24, 2024, https://www.amren.com/podcasts/2024/01/elites-on-our-side/.

107 François Bousquet, "Elon Musk, l'homme qui défie le système," Éléments (radio program), November 30, 2022, https://www.revue-elements.com/elon-musk-lhomme-qui-defie-le-systeme/.

as a 'mandate from heaven.' "[108] In the eyes of Bousquet, Musk is David against Goliath, fighting against "Silicon Valley's institutional wokeness."[109] Echoing the Neoreactionary (NRx) online subculture of Curtis Yarvin,[110] Bousquet concludes his analysis hinting at the model of society he envisions and what role plays Musk in it:

> If the West is indeed metaphysically exhausted, as [Oswald] Spengler already said, what about the Far West, from its Californian epicenter? In this new universe dominated by techno-feudalism, monopolies are the new feudalities with digital strongholds. Will Musk be their overlord? … More than a century ago, America was strong enough to break Standard Oil's monopoly. Today, it's monopolies that break states, or at least divert them to their own ends.[111]

Neoreactionary specters certainly orbit around Musk, but the ideology known as Dark Enlightenment—with its strong antidemocratic stance and eccentricities like advocating a return to monarchy structured around a neo-cameralist state—is not easily identifiable in him. While it is true that he shares in neoreactionaries' elitism, techno-solutionism, and strategic support for Donald Trump, these overlaps are not complete. Peter Thiel, more closely aligned with the neoreactionary movement, has supported Trump since 2016, and Curtis Yarvin, the main ideologue of the Dark Enlightenment, is connected to key GOP figures like former Senate candidate Blake Masters and 2024 vice-presidential nominee J. D. Vance, with the latter calling him "a friend and a mentor."[112] Nonetheless, Musk's willingness to let Thiel—despite their past disagreements over Musk's removal from PayPal—advise him on purchasing Twitter, or the fact that some of his ideas resonate with neoreactionaries, should not be the sole basis for associating him with this ideological movement.[113]

Musk regularly discusses many recognizable issues and symbols of far-right popular culture, even more discernible than simple dog whistles.[114] On several occasions, he has talked about the fall of the Roman Empire, including publishing a meme with an illustration of a Roman soldier staggering and the inscription "Watching the Roman Empire collapse again, but with Wi-Fi and memes this time."[115] Apart from the historical role of Rome within far-right ideologies, today, the image of the Empire's collapse is often invoked by white supremacists and conservatives to draw parallels with current Western civilization "as a warning against some contemporary practice or belief."[116] Musk has also mentioned how he enjoyed reading Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel* (1920), a cornerstone author for neofascist warmongers, yet Musk claims

108 François Bousquet, "Qui est @elonmusk? Allô la Terre, ici Mars," Éléments, no. 207 (April–May, 2024): 76–81.

109 Bousquet, "Qui est @elonmusk?" p. 77.

110 Patrik Hermansson et al., *The International Alt-Right.*

111 Bousquet, "Qui est @elonmusk?" p. 81.

112 George Michael, "An Antidemocratic Philosophy Called Neoreaction is Creeping into GOP Politics," The Conversation (news site), July 27, 2022, https://theconversation.com/an-antidemocratic-philosophy-called-neoreaction-is-creeping-into-gop-politics-182581.

113 Elizabeth Sandifer, "The Strange and Terrifying Ideas of Neoreactionaries," *Current Affairs* magazine, May 30, 2022, https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/2022/05/the-strange-and-terrifying-ideas-of-neoreactionaries.

114 Grant Kien, *Communicating with Memes: Consequences in Post-Truth Civilization* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2019), p. 173.

115 @elonmusk, X, September 25, 2023, https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1706178349268103182.

116 Curtis Dozier, "Hate Groups and Greco-Roman Antiquity Online: To Rehabilitate or Reconsider?" in *Far-Right Revisionism and the End of History. Alt/Histories*, ed. Louie Dean Valencia-García (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 253.

that he does not see any glorification of war in it—"definitely not!"[117] Linked to the German Conservative Revolution, a current of thought critical of democracy and advocating a hierarchical organization of society, Jünger's work also provided a conservative answer to the problematic relation between humans and technology.

Conclusion

Elon Musk has undergone an ideological evolution which bears similarities with the illiberal impulse that the world has experienced globally in the last decade. As Musk himself has often stated, he began by voting for the Democratic Party, identifying with the progressive liberalism of the early stages of Silicon Valley. In principle, he was driven by progressive values and the hope of changing the world through technology. It was after the electoral victory of Donald Trump in 2016 that Musk began to tweet more about politics, increasingly showing an illiberal ideological leaning. Since then, he has landed along the spectrum of the American radical right, funding Trump's 2024 campaign while harshly criticizing the Democrats and the woke left. Weaponizing his illiberal turn, Elon Musk has also established his own corporate identity, as a CEO different from the rest, rebelling against the alleged woke atmosphere reigning in Silicon Valley.

Elon Musk's transition from a kind of neoliberal techno-solutionism to techno-illiberalism was eased by these ideologies' shared economic matrix. When confronted to the possibility of the late growing union wave in the United States reaching Tesla, Musk stated that he did not want to create a "lords and peasants" situation—as if this situation did not exist already and he was just another worker on the assembly line.[118] Musk thinks that his companies should function in an organic and natural manner, based on commitment and hard work. As mentioned above, this vision is scarcely different from the one that, for instance, Orbán has of Hungary. Both illiberal tech moguls and illiberal heads of state share a similar goal: preserving the well-being of the elite to which they belong, recurring to neoliberal policies within their own sphere of influence and resorting to protectionism against global competition when it is required.

To preserve their position of power, they defend certain values, related to a concrete cosmovision. They affirm that their designated enemies, whether it be wokeness or multiculturalism, go against the national interest in the case of illiberal states or even the destiny of humankind in the views of illiberal tech entrepreneurs. Both can gather around a manipulated vision of Western culture and establish themselves as fighters against civilizational decay. This reaction is provoked by the internal contradictions of neoliberalism (enduring social hierarchies, hegemonic crisis, financialization, deindustrialization, and so on)[119] as well as because they benefit economically and politically from the defense of this ideological order. In the end, Elon Musk's shift toward techno-illiberalism, much like the illiberal turn of former neoliberal politicians such as Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán, demonstrates how neoliberalism defends not only an economic order but also a moral and political one. The opposition between neoliberalism and more extremist shades of the right

117 Mathias Döpfner, "Elon Musk Discusses the War in Ukraine and the Importance of Nuclear Power — and Why Benjamin Franklin Would Be 'the Most Fun at Dinner,' " *Business Insider*, March 26, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-interview-axel-springer-tesla-war-in-ukraine-2022-3?r=US&IR=T.

118 CNBC television, "Elon Musk: I Disagree with the Idea of Unions," November 30, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sctgA2qa-rA&t.

119 Nancy Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to the Politics of Its Collapse* (London: Verso, 2022), p. #?.

is relative, as neoliberalism can smoothly slide into reactionary positions, given their shared economic, hierarchical, and elitist foundations.