

The ideas interview

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‘If we don’t fight back, we don’t have a future’: the journalist taking on the ‘tech fascists’ of Silicon Valley

As Elon Musk, Peter Thiel and their peers have grown richer and more influential, Gil Durán argues they have all but abandoned democracy – and found the perfect government to enable them



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In April, Gil Durán was permanently banned from Elon Musk’s X for posting just two words. Durán was responding to a post from the tech company Palantir outlining its 22-point “technological manifesto”, which praised American “hard power”, western culture and AI weapons, denounced

inclusivity and called for compulsory national service. Durán responded: “TLDR: Fascism” (TLDR is short for “too long, didn’t read”).

Durán didn’t break any of X’s written rules, he points out over a video call from San Francisco - so much for Musk’s “free-speech absolutism”. His ban might just have had something to do with his preceding tweet, showing the cover of his new book, The Nerd Reich: Silicon Valley Fascism and the War on Democracy. The book’s central argument is that big tech is no longer our friend, as many of its billionaire owners have seized economic and political control and are steering the fate of the planet towards their own bizarre, apocalyptic visions.

Fascism is no exaggeration, Durán asserts. He researched multiple definitions - by Umberto Eco, Robert Paxton, Jason Stanley - and decided that Donald Trump’s Make America Great Again (Maga) movement ticks all the boxes. “It’s a cult of grievance that seeks to purge its enemies by demonising them through absurd and surreal propaganda that exploits fears over law and order and gender and sexuality in order to seize power and install a permanent hierarchy that fascists consider the moral order of the world and the universe. In addition, you also have this sort of nationalistic, militaristic vibe.”

By extension, he says, Silicon Valley is fascist “because they have wholly aligned with a fascist movement. That’s their vehicle for gaining power.” Few could dispute this alignment after seeing the bosses of Meta, Google, Apple, Amazon and OpenAI line up behind Trump at his second inauguration, or Musk’s now shuttered “department of government efficiency” (Doge) being given free rein to conduct mass firings of federal employees, or Palantir’s AI-driven surveillance technology enabling deportations by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. It’s a cosy relationship, Durán says: the tech titans have helped Trump and his family become billionaires through cryptocurrency and have been given government contracts and freedom from regulation or oversight.



The man at the heart of Silicon Valley's rightward lurch ... Peter Thiel. Photograph: The Asahi Shimbun/Getty Images

In addition, Durán believes, “Silicon Valley has gone fascist because they have adopted an extreme ideology of tech supremacy.” While Maga promises a return to a mythical glorious past, he says, the “technofascists” are promising a mythical glorious future: “We’re going to be in the stars. We’re going to be in space. And all we need is to get rid of anybody who stands in our way as we seek to accelerate technology toward this speedy, violent, God-like transcendence that we will achieve

if we can only burn enough energy and enough compute to bring our boom loop into existence."

It sounds almost like a conspiracy theory, but Durán is not short of evidence. Musk making an apparent Nazi salute and describing empathy as "the fundamental weakness of western civilisation". Palantir's Peter Thiel writing in 2009 that "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible" and giving a lecture series suggesting Greta Thunberg could be the antichrist. Marc Andreessen, the CEO of the tech investment company Andreessen Horowitz, paraphrasing Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the co-author of Mussolini's Fascist Manifesto, in his "Techno-Optimist Manifesto": "Technology must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man."

Durán, a journalist and former political adviser, lays out the narrative in exacting detail, outlining the connections between these men (and it is all men) and the origins of their often deeply weird beliefs, many of which view everyone outside their circle or opposed to their agenda as expendable.

Unpacking all their overlapping philosophies would take some time, but TLDR: "It's the idea that what matters more is the billions or trillions of people yet unborn in the future. And the only way they're going to get to be born is if this elite group of white tech figures and gazillionaires makes the right decisions to make the human race transhuman and multiplanetary through AI and technology," says Durán. "By becoming a billionaire, they all have this idea that they're superior to everyone else. They are susceptible to this kind of thinking."



Marc Andreessen has said technology must be a 'violent assault on the forces of the unknown'. Photograph: Steve Jennings/Getty Images

Durán, 50, is almost the opposite: the son of working-class Mexican immigrants in California. He was the first in his family to go to college, having grown up in relative poverty: "It made me tough and gave me an unyielding loyalty to regular people over the many rich and powerful people I've spent a lot of my time around."

Durán's book traces the roots of this movement to two important sources. One is the 1997 book The Sovereign Individual, written by the American investor James Dale Davidson and William Rees-Mogg, the former Times editor and BBC grandee (and father of Jacob). Their book prophesied how digital tools such as the internet and cryptocurrency would pave the way for a privatised, corporatised, unregulated, post-democratic future ruled by rich, powerful, unaccountable individuals. Two decades later, this led to the idea of "network states" - digital realms beyond the jurisdiction of nation states - as popularised by Balaji Srinivasan, a former partner at Andreessen Horowitz.

The other source is Curtis Yarvin, a former software developer and armchair philosopher with a penchant for psychedelics, sometimes referred to as the godfather of the "dark enlightenment". In pseudonymous blogs in the late 2000s, Yarvin outlined a worldview in which liberal democracy had failed to deliver

progress, partly because institutions such as education and the media had been captured by what he called “the Cathedral”.

His proposed solution was a mass firing of government employees (he coined the acronym “Rage”, “retire all government employees”) and the installation of a “national CEO, [or] what’s called a dictator”. Yarvin also mused about a “humane alternative to genocide” to deal with unproductive citizens and has had to deny accusations that he is a white supremacist or supports racist ideologies. Scratch the surface, Durán suggests, and Yarvin’s ideas have much in common with Nazi ideologies, “but updated as rightwing dogma for the blogging age”.



Curtis Yarvin has mused about a 'humane alternative to genocide' to deal with unproductive citizens. Photograph: Florencia Tan Jun/Sportsfile/Getty Images

Both of these sources might have languished in obscurity had it not been for Thiel, the man at the heart of Silicon Valley's rightward lurch. He has amassed enormous wealth through a series of investments in tech startups - first PayPal, then Facebook, Spotify, LinkedIn, Palantir and OpenAI, among others. He was the first major tech figure to back Donald Trump, in July 2016, and persuaded others to follow, including

Andreessen, who said he spent half his time at Mar-a-Lago in the month after Trump won the 2024 election.

Thiel liked The Sovereign Individual so much that he wrote a new introduction when it was reprinted in 2020. He has also made steps to found his own network state - first via the ill-fated "seasteading" movement (establishing floating countries in international waters) then via Próspera, a "special economic zone" on an island in Honduras. Incorporated in 2017 with permission from the Honduran government and reportedly co-funded by Srinivasan, Andreessen and OpenAI's Sam Altman, Próspera has sought to attract digital startups with loose regulations (appealing to longevity researchers), low taxes and a crypto-friendly economy.

Other similar projects have sprung up. In 2021, the president of El Salvador, Nayib Bukele, hailed the mooted creation of a "Bitcoin City". In 2023, Trump announced plans to build 10 "Freedom Cities" on government land across the US, with input from Próspera representatives. In 2024, Srinivasan founded a "Network School" in Johor, Malaysia.

Thiel also began to absorb Yarvin's theories about how the political order was preventing progress. In the 2009 essay in which Thiel declared the incompatibility of freedom and democracy, he also said "the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women" made capitalist democracy impossible, which did not win him many mainstream supporters. But Yarvin backed up Thiel and the two became friends and allies. "While The Sovereign Individual provided the foundation for the billionaire's political vision, Yarvin created a blueprint for turning that vision into reality," Durán writes.

Thiel was instrumental in injecting these ideas, and people, into the US government - not least JD Vance, whom Durán describes as "almost entirely a creation of Peter Thiel". It was Thiel who set up Vance as a venture capitalist, giving him a role at his firm Mithril Capital, then investing in Vance's own fund, Narya Capital (Tolkien-derived names are a theme with these people). It was Thiel who backed Vance's move into politics, where he went from condemning Trump as "America's Hitler" to supporting him and parroting Yarvin's ideas. "I think that what Trump should do, if I was giving him one piece of advice: fire every single mid-level bureaucrat, every civil servant in the administrative state, replace them with our people," Vance told the podcaster Jack Murphy in 2021.



'The government created these men and now these welfare kings want to destroy the very system that made them' … Elon Musk. Photograph: Marc Piasecki/Getty Images

Durán had observed this Silicon Valley takeover developing and began writing about it in 2024. “I thought this would be a problem in five to 10 years, but when JD Vance got on the ticket, it suddenly took on a new urgency,” he says. Now, it almost feels too late. In 2025, Bloomberg reported that at least 16 men connected to Thiel and his companies occupied positions of power in the Trump administration, including David Sacks, who is now a special adviser for AI and crypto. Musk’s Doge has swung

its chainsaw at the government, crypto and AI regulation has all but disappeared, the Trump family are now billionaires and the tech oligarchs have become the Republicans' largest donors.

At the same time, they have become substantial beneficiaries of the very government they once sought to dismantle. Palantir has an estimated $13.7bn in US government contracts; last year, its stock price rose more than 90% in six months. Andreessen is backing dozens of defence companies scooping up government contracts and recently joined the Pentagon's advisory board. Last week, Musk's SpaceX received a $1.6bn contract to supply rockets to the US Space Force - on the same day he pledged at least $100m to help Republicans in November's midterm elections.

"It's a severe cautionary tale about the hazards of privatisation," says Durán. "The government created these men, especially Elon Musk. And now these welfare kings want to pull up the ladder, want to destroy the very system that made them. This is a massive failure by the US intelligence apparatus - to not see this threat forming from the inside."

Durán, who worked in communications for Kamala Harris when she was California's attorney general, as well as for the late Democratic senator Dianne Feinstein, blames the Democrats as much as the Republicans. "They have failed tremendously to stand up to billionaire power because the only people as addicted to billionaire money in American politics as the Republicans are the Democrats," he says.

He singles out the California governor, Gavin Newsom, as a prime example of a "Silicon Valley Democrat": "You don't see him criticising these guys. He only goes after Trump, Trump, Trump and Vance, Vance, Vance … You want some viral content? Why don't you go off on Peter Thiel's weird antichrist obsession?" Even if the Democrats take control after the midterms or the 2028 presidential election, Durán is worried that "these tech fascists will win … because Democrats will not hold them accountable".



'Almost entirely a creation of Peter Thiel' ... JD Vance. Photograph: Will Oliver/CNP/Shutterstock

On the plus side, the Silicon Valley takeover has not been going that well lately. Network states around the world are losing ground. In 2021, Próspera's special economic status was repealed by the new president, Xiomara Castro (it is suing the Honduran government for $10.8bn). Two weeks ago, Srinivasan's Network School was ordered to close (Srinivasan says he is moving it to Kazakhstan). Trump's Freedom Cities remain unbuilt.

One saving grace, says Durán, is that “a lot of these people don’t really have a great grasp of on-the-ground realities”. Nobody really wants to live in a soulless network state, he says: “Why would you be in Kazakhstan instead of San Francisco, which is the global capital of tech?” On the other hand, he points out, the tech billionaires have effectively turned the US into a de facto network state.

But they may well have overplayed their hand. “Silicon Valley oligarchs are really vulnerable right now,” says Durán. “People don’t like them. People are starting to rise up against data centres and this vision of an AI apocalypse that kills all the jobs and potentially kills all of humanity. You’re scaring the hell out of people and now they don’t like you. Into that could step a politician to take advantage of that trend and come up with a message that speaks to the concerns of people and against the dark fantasies of the oligarchs.”

The question now, he says, “is how we turn the momentum in our favour and against the billionaires. Because they have a plan to win. They think they’re going to succeed.” This could be a radicalising moment: “In fighting against billionaire power, we find the key to all of our problems. Every moment is an important opportunity to wake people up and to start to fight back.”

If not, he says, we’ll find ourselves in a situation where “we don’t have democracy, we don’t have an economy and we don’t have a future. If that doesn’t radicalise people, then we deserve what we’re going to get.”

The Nerd Reich: Silicon Valley Fascism and the War on Democracy is published on 18 August (Simon & Schuster, £25). To support the Guardian, buy a copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply

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