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BOOK REVIEW

The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief and the Future of the West, by Alexander C. Karp and Nicholas W. Zamiska, New York, Crown Currency, 2025, 320 pp., $30 (hardback), ISBN 9780593798690

Introduction

'Dear Sundar, we believe that Google should not be in the business of war.'[1] These were the opening words of a brief letter that circulated among Google employees in April 2018. Addressed to CEO Sundar Pichai, it expressed concerns regarding Project Maven, through which Google supplied AI for drones to the US Department of Defense. In concluding the letter, the signatories – almost 4000 employees, including dozens of senior engineers – demanded that Google cancel the project. Further, they implored the company to 'enforce a clear policy stating that neither Google nor its contractors will ever build warfare technology.' In June of that same year, Google announced that it would not renew the Maven contract.[2]

Today, this episode seems almost quaint, given the shifting political allegiances of Big Tech. In 2021, three years after the Project Maven episode, *Wired* noted that Google had again 'cozie[d] up to the Pentagon'.[3] In 2025, the editorial collective of this journal commented on the similarly 'cozy relationship' between Big Tech and the new Trump administration.[4] Indeed, 'Silicon Valley had a front-row seat' at the President's second inauguration, and Pichai was one of the leaders present at that line-up. This 'vibe shift' in Silicon Valley[5] implies a departure from the liberal 'Californian ideology'[6], with key molders of opinion publicly aligning themselves with the right – sometimes far right – of politics. More specifically, this shift has also implied an increased interest in collaborating with defense departments.

In this turning of the tech tide, Alexander Karp – the co-founder and CEO of the software company Palantir – has emerged as pioneer. Since its founding in 2003, Palantir has provided data analysis software for organizations that seek to make sense out of large datasets. However, this AI company has primarily become known as the earliest and most successful example of a tech startup oriented towards the military market. In the recent book *The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief and the Future of the West*, Karp and his Palantir colleague Nicholas Zamiska describe the startup's moment of founding in the following terms:

> The earliest technologists who built the personal computer, the graphical user interface, and the mouse, for example, had grown skeptical of advancing the aims of a nation whose allegiance many of them believed it did not deserve. The rise of the internet in the 1990s was as a result co-opted by the market, and the consumer was hailed as its king. […]
>
> It was against this backdrop that Palantir was founded and set out working for American defense and intelligence agencies in the years after the September 11 attacks.[7]

This origin story encapsulates the basic argument of Karp and Zamiska's book. 'Silicon Valley', they proclaim, 'has lost its way'.[8] Big Tech, startups and venture capitalists have collectively failed as caretakers of the computer revolution. 'A generation of founders cloaked themselves in the rhetoric of lofty and ambitious purpose […] but often raised enormous amounts of capital and hired legions of talented engineers merely to build photo-sharing apps and chat interfaces for the modern consumer.'[9] In so doing, Silicon Valley has taught us to limit our expectations of what engineering and technology can offer to the world. For Karp and Zamiska, the act of founding and operating Palantir stands in opposition to this directionless state of tech affairs. It signifies an elevated ambition for what technology can do: Instead of pandering to the short-termist and

nihilist imperatives of the market, it may serve a higher purpose. For the authors, this higher purpose is the one of militarily safeguarding the American republic – and indeed the West as a whole.

Thus, Karp's status as a pioneer stems from his track record of having blazed a trail currently followed by Big Tech, startups and venture capitalists. Still, in certain respects, Karp also swims against the mid-2020s tech tide. Rather than gravitating to the (far) right, he presents himself as a 'progressive' who leans towards 'populist-left politics'.[10] *The Technological Republic* does in part read as a cultural critique of present-day technoscientific capitalism. This system produces a 'misdirection […] of capital and talent to the trivial and ephemeral'[11], with companies solely 'dedicated to sating the often capricious and passing needs of late capitalism's hordes'.[12]

Notably, Karp's left leanings stand out in comparison with the well-documented right-wing orientation of venture capitalist Peter Thiel, with whom he co-founded Palantir. The pair have commented on how – as fellow students at Stanford Law School – they immediately hit it off over heady discussions on politics and philosophy. Afterwards, Karp went on to complete a PhD in social theory.[13] This intellectual flair has sparked a scholarly interest in the worldviews of these tech luminaries. Particular attention has been placed on Thiel[14], in part because he has become an exceptionally influential donor. Nevertheless, it is also believed that by studying the philosophies of the tech oligarchs, we may get a better understanding of the futures they seek to build.[15]

Still, it is rare to find long-form expressions of the worldviews of the tech titans. Thiel's 2014 *Zero to One* is a poor substitute – more than a decade has passed since its publication, and it does not engage with issues beyond the immediate concerns of the ambitious entrepreneur.[16] *The Technological Republic* is therefore somewhat unique, given that it purports to spell out what a tech oligarch really thinks about the world.

That being said, a 'suspicious'[17] reader may point out that the book may be more than just a sincere expression of a true belief. What if Karp's writings are simply a reflection of his business interests? In the summer of 2019, in the aftermath of the Project Maven episode, Karp published a *Washington Post* op-ed which presaged the themes of *The Technological Republic*. It too was a critique of the 'almost monopolistic power' of Silicon Valley and its 'unelected engineers running global businesses in a precious corner of a Golden State'.[18] Specifically, it targeted Google's 'small group of executives' which tried to 'impose their moral framework on America' by backing away from Project Maven. Further, the op-ed signaled Palantir's 'commitment to helping those on the front line'. Half a year later, media reported that Palantir had taken over Google's contract with the Department of Defense. Again, this begs the question: Is Karp's own 'rhetoric of lofty and ambitious purpose' merely a cloak that hides the fact that Palantir is just another company following a late capitalist logic?

In the next section, this essay will continue this line of analysis and deploy a 'symptomatic reading'[19] of *The Technological Republic*. The book needs to be placed in a context – not least a historical one – with a view to disclose the kind of society the book is a symptom of. Here, the essay seeks to interpret the book by paying close attention to what it does *not* say about its place in the world. However, it is equally productive to perform a less suspicious 'surface reading' of the book. Thus, the third part of this essay will suggest that *The Technological Republic* successfully brings several important concerns into public view. These include the social legitimacy of the tech sector, the instrumentalization of engineering education, the place of the humanities in such education, and the ongoing militarization of engineering. The essay ends with a brief conclusion.

The passions of the tech oligarchy

Karp is by no means unique in authoring work that legitimates and serves his business interests. However, there is a deeper meaning of *The Technological Republic*, which may be gleaned from a symptomatic reading. Fredric Jameson's version of this approach presupposes that a text contains 'some mechanism of mystification or repression'[20] that obscures some deeper truth about the world. The task of the reader is to interpret the text by seeking 'a latent meaning behind a manifest one'. In the case of Karp and Zamiska, this latent meaning concerns the place of the tech oligarchy in the present configuration of politico-economic relations.

Jameson famously compels the analyst to 'always historicize'[21], and in seeking to heed this call one could do worse than starting by unpacking the term 'oligarchy'. As Andreas Kalyvas points out, 'oligarchy' is one of the oldest political concepts, featuring prominently from Herodotos, Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle, all the way through to the premodern era.[22] What's more, throughout this period – from Greek theory until the 18th century – 'the term enjoyed a remarkable definitional stability', denoting 'the rule of the few rich'.[23]

However, following a broad 'conceptual and semantic transformation set in motion in the 18th century', the concept 'almost disappeared from the modern political lexicon'.[24] Yes, you read that right – on Google Ngram, the relative frequency of the term 'oligarchy' peaks in 1833. Towards the end of the 1800s, the emerging modern social science had reduced the term to mean the rule of the few – not the *wealthy* few – thus downplaying the connection between wealth and power. So, ironically, the modern age

> of manufactures and industry, world trade, luxury, and arts, the age of the global division of labor and the wealth of nations, of *doux commerce* and the birth of political economy, an age proudly proclaimed as the 'liberty of the moderns,' is paradoxically also an age relatively oblivious to or uninterested in oligarchy.[25]

Today, the term is back in vogue, increasingly used in the context of the tech oligarchy. However, it is absent from *The Technological Republic*, despite its critique of capitalism and Silicon Valley. Karp and Zamiska are instead incensed by the fact that popular culture 'almost snickers at Elon Musk's interest in grand narrative, as if billionaires ought to simply stick in their lane of enriching themselves'.[26] This statement may seem innocuous – isn't it nice when billionaires pursue aims beyond enriching themselves? However, in celebrating the grand ambitions of Musk, they also celebrate the connection between wealth and power.

More fundamentally, this hints at a shift away from the received pro-capitalism wisdom. In some accounts, capitalism was designed precisely to shield the political sphere from economic might. This, at least, is how Albert O. Hirschman recounts the story of 'political arguments for capitalism before its triumph'.[27] For him, the rise of capitalism should be understood as the outcome of governance ideals emerging from Machiavelli. In true republican fashion, these ideals proposed that the good society can be achieved by pitting different sources of powers against each other. If economic actors are compelled to channel their diverse, unruly and unpredictable 'passions' into single-minded, economic 'interests', then economic power could be pitted against political power.

Thinkers of the French and Scottish enlightenment played a crucial role in establishing this ideal. Montesquieu's contribution involves the hope that a *doux commerce* – gentle commerce – may have civilizing effects. Though it may be the case that humans possess 'passions [which] may prompt them to be wicked', commerce ensures that they have 'an interest in not being so'.[28] Similarly, Scottish economist James Steuart suggested that the modern economy 'is the most effectual bridle ever […] invented against the folly of despotism'.[29] As long as billionaires focus merely on enriching themselves, they will at least not become political despots.

These political arguments for capitalism went on to shape the capitalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and remained central for capitalism's staunchest defenders. For instance, one finds it in the work of Milton Friedman:

> The kind of economic organization that provides economic freedom directly, namely, competitive capitalism, also promotes political freedom because it separates economic power from political power and in this way enables the one to offset the other.[30]

What *The Technological Republic* suggests, but does not state explicitly, is an abandonment of this longstanding dream of capitalism. Karp and Zamiska's celebration of Musk's grand ambitions may be read as a tacit acceptance of the impossibility of separating economic power and political power. Further, one may suggest their position is more realistic than that of Friedman: Actually existing capitalism has never managed to shield political power from economic power.

Still, this is not the full unspoken message of *The Technological Republic*. There is a more specific latent meaning that lurks behind the manifest meaning of this book – one that illuminates what is specific about the social place of present-day tech oligarchs. One thing that separates the likes of Karp, Thiel and Musk from Carnegie, Rockefeller and Vanderbilt is how their technologies undermine of the fundamental monopolies and capacities of the state. Starting with Musk and Thiel's PayPal venture, there has been an increasing tendency to challenge states' control over 'monetary capacity' (that is, the ability to issue and manage the supply of money). At times, states have had to act forcefully to stave off such challenges: Witness how Meta's attempt to launch a cryptocurrency via Facebook was torpedoed by US regulators.[31]

Similarly, the tech oligarchs influence on military matters poses a serious threat to states' monopoly on violence. This holds true for Musk's paramount influence on 'new space' endeavors, as well as for Karp and Thiel's influence via Palantir. In the wake of Palantir's pioneering work, other startups will follow: Aside from Karp and Zamiska, venture capital firms like Andreesen Horowitz are also cheerleading the tech sector's onslaught on the established military-industrial complex. This transformation is increasingly welcomed by what is now called the Department of War, through a new tech- and startup-friendly acquisition strategy. However, as shown by the Meta/Facebook cryptocurrency debacle, the tech oligarchy's march into the Pentagon can only continue if politicians and citizens can be convinced that it comes with good intentions. Karp and Zamiska's near 300-page long pledge of allegiance is the perfect ideological supplement to this emerging relationship between Big Tech and the military.

This, then, is the latent meaning of this book: At the present juncture, pure economic interests can no longer quell the unruly political passions of oligarchs. Instead, we are entering an era when the rest of us – politicians, citizens – are asked to trust that the oligarch's sincere belief in the ideals of the West will countervail any tendencies towards wickedness and despotism. Thus, the irony of *The Technological Republic* is that despite frequent references to hard power, it ultimately offers a naïvely idealistic view of power relations in technoscientific capitalism – one that is strangely at odds with the republican tradition it seeks to honor.

Re-imagining engineering and technical education

So far, this essay has mobilized the key binary oppositions of symptomatic readings – that is, present versus absent, manifest versus latent, and surface versus depth.[32] Evidently, *The Technological Republic* seems to lend itself well to being interpreted as a symptom or index of the emerging power relations of contemporary technoscientific capitalism.

However, what if we – instead of probing the deep, hidden meanings of the book – simply conduct what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus call a 'surface reading' of it?[33] What if we, as Rita Felski suggests, 'allow ourselves to be marked, struck, impressed by what we read'?[34] If

we stop 'looking behind the text – for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives – we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible.' In fact, when read in this way, the book *does* call forth a series of themes that the engineering studies community should be discussing. For instance, as noted above, Karp and Zamiska's message is in alignment with theme of critiquing 'meaningless technology held up as successes by big tech'.[35] Beyond that, the book engages with further themes, such as the social legitimacy of the tech sector, the instrumentalization of engineering education, the place of the humanities in such education, and the ongoing militarization of engineering.

Karp and Zamiska's argument partly hinges on an idea that they inherit from Karp's one-time PhD supervisor, Jürgen Habermas. This suggests that 'a failure by leaders to deliver on implied or explicit promises to the public has the potential to provoke a crisis of legitimacy for a government'[36]. In Habermas' original version of this argument, he suggested late capitalism is based on a premise in which political leaders promise that the Keynesian welfare state will provide steady, equitable growth.[37] If leaders failed to make good on this promise, they (and the polity as a whole) would be facing a legitimation crisis.

Recent work in sociology suggests that this model of crisis can be transposed onto the 'promissory' aspects of present-day technoscientific capitalism[38], and *The Technological Republic* is in alignment with this argument. In this new capitalism, the state funnels great resources into the tech sector – not least via the STEM-based educational sector – based on the promise that technoscience guarantees economic growth, national competitive advantage, and long-term economic sustainability. Beyond those promises, technoscientific capitalism also promises that further technological progress will save us from ecological ruin.[39] On their part, Karp and Zamiska add that a legitimation crisis can be sparked by a failure to provide national sovereignty. In other words, 'the willingness of the engineering and scientific communities to come to the aid of the nation has been vital not only to the legitimacy of the private sector but to the durability of political institutions across the West'.[40]

Irrespective of how one reinterprets Habermas' original argument in the context of present-day technoscientific capitalism – emphasizing the economic, social, ecological or security promises – this perspective highlights how engineering does not exist autonomously, somehow removed from political projects. On this point, *The Technological Republic* is in alignment with the engineering studies community's general ambition to place engineering in a socio-political context. In particular, one of its key contributions has been to 'identify the centrality of engineering to nation-building.'[41]

Indeed, in their own way, Karp and Zamiska are critiquing what the engineering studies community regularly discusses as a 'culture of disengagement'.[42] For them, however, this entails a lack of 'engagement with the content of the American national project'.[43] This does of course differ from the kind of disengagement that Erin Cech famously outlined. Still, both accounts involve a critique of 'the broader culture of US engineering', and both are interrogating how this is enacted and perpetuated at the 'organizational level within engineering education programs'[44]

Thus, *The Technological Republic* is critical about how the brightest minds of the finest academic institutions tend not to be inspired to undertake grand projects, and instead end up working within finance and consulting.[45] In particular, the authors take issue with how the 'instrumentalization of American higher education continues apace', pointing to the decline in humanities graduates, and the concomitant rise in computer science graduates. 'We need engineers who are engaged with and curious about the world, the movement of history and its contradictions, not merely skilled at programming'.

In this journal, Louis Bucciarelli and David Drew have suggested that a liberal arts-informed curriculum can counteract the 'absolute priority given to instrumental rationality in traditional undergraduate engineering majors'[46] – a proposition echoed by Karp and Zamiska. *The Technological Republic* favors a practice of 'introducing students to a discrete and curated selection

of work, from Plato and Rousseau to Marx and Arendt'.[47] This approach is not dissimilar from Bucciarelli and Drew's proposed teaching of 'fundamentals' such as 'Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx, and Tocqueville'.[48]

These two pairs of authors do however differ in their analysis of why these classics are not in the curricula. Karp and Zamiska tell the story of 'the canon wars' of the late 1960s, when these classics were taught as courses in Western civilization.[49] The cessation of such educational activities was, the authors suggest, chiefly the result of an intellectual reassessment of 'the West', partly set in motion by Said's *Orientalism*.[50] For Bucciarelli and Drew, the problem is more one of the epistemic culture of engineering. These authors also expect different outcomes from the teaching of classics. Karp and Zamiska hope that they can re-instil a sense of shared national purpose. Bucciarelli and Drew have a more modest aim, that of helping 'students acquire a language and a framework for analysis and evaluation'.[51] Rather than forging patriotism, fundamentals train judgment.[52]

In this way, *The Technological Republic* is a book best read as a series of discussion-worthy propositions, whose underlying motivations one may sometimes choose to ignore. We may all agree on the fact that there are good reasons for engineering students to read classics in the humanities and social sciences. Still, if we are to adhere to the classical German tradition of *Bildung*, even the forging of good citizens (nation-loving or not) is an all too instrumentalist educational aim. From such a perspective, teachers' allegiances should always be with the students, not with the companies or states they may end up working for. Moreover, when such idealism is placed to the side, there is a more pragmatic question emerging from Karp and Zamiska's critique of engineering education: Will a more liberal arts-infused education really make engineering graduates more inclined to dedicate their working lives to the national security apparatus?

Karp and Zamiska may nevertheless become vindicated by history on these points. A further deterioration of the present geopolitical situation may render previous convictions obsolete.[53] On this point, *The Technological Republic* is undeniably a timely book. As the editorial collective of this journal points out, it is 'worth remembering that the designation of "civil" engineering was originally necessary to distinguish it from its dominant military applications'.[54] Increasingly, these lines of demarcation between civilian and military uses of technology are blurring. We may not all welcome the militarization of engineering – for some of us it is more a matter of grudgingly accepting a new reality. It is nevertheless the case that as scholars and educators, we need to prepare ourselves and our students for this reality. We urgently need to discuss how to do so.

Interpreting or experimenting?

In summary, the merits of reading *The Technological Republic* depend on how one approaches it. Read as 'a new treatise in political theory'[55], it is less than convincing, offering insufficient illumination on how to govern technoscientific capitalism. If anything, it can be interpreted as an index of the shifting power relations between states and the emerging tech oligarchy. For all their talk about 'hard power', Karp and Zamiska end up suggesting that the balance-of-power arrangements long associated with republics should be replaced by a politics of good intentions. Their ideal polity seems to be one where the political passions of the Musks of the world are unleashed. Such a polity may well be a technological one, but may not remain a republic for all that long.

On the other hand, *The Technological Republic* is also a book which benefits from a different kind of reading – one that suspends the imperative to interpret and 'always historicize', and instead follows Deleuze's proposition: 'Experiment, don't interpret.'[56] If engineering studies

scholars allow themselves to experiment with some of book's propositions, and search for the 'lines of flight' that they engender, they may find it useful. After all, here is a bestseller that contends that engineering must be understood in a socio-political context, that critiques the instrumentalization of technical education, that argues that engineers need to be educated in the liberal arts, and that calls for a debate on the militarization of engineering. Karp and Zamiska have even managed to get luminaries of high finance and international security to endorse that message. Can we make use of it in our tireless attempts to challenge prevailing conceptions about engineering?

Notes

1. Shane and Wakabayashi, "'The Business of War'."
2. Wakabayashi and Shane. "Google Will Not Renew Pentagon Contract That Upset Employees."
3. Simonite, "3 Years After the Project Maven Uproar, Google Cozies to the Pentagon."
4. Smith et al., "We Have Been Here Before," 4.
5. Nolan, "Sam Altman Credits Trump for the 'Vibe Shift' in Silicon Valley."
6. Barbrook and Cameron, "The Californian Ideology."
7. Karp and Zamiska, *The Technological Republic*, 13.
8. Ibid., 3.
9. Ibid., 9.
10. Dowd, "Alex Karp Has Money and Power. So What Does He Want?"
11. Karp and Zamiska, *The Technological Republic*, xiii.
12. Ibid., xiii.
13. Dowd, "Alex Karp Has Money and Power"
14. Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism*.
15. Tutton, "Sociotechnical Imaginaries and Techno-Optimism"; Palmås et al., "Is there such a Thing as a Capitalist Eschatology?"
16. Thiel and Masters, *Zero to One*.
17. Felski, *The Limits of Critique,* 1.
18. Karp, "Stay out of Politics, Silicon Valley."
19. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*.
20. Ibid., 45.
21. Ibid., ix.
22. Kalyvas, "Oligarchy and Political Modernity," 209.
23. Ibid., 202.
24. Ibid., 202.
25. Ibid., 202.
26. Karp and Zamiska, *The Technological Republic*, 49.
27. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*.
28. Ibid., 73.
29. Ibid., 85.
30. Friedman and Friedman, *Free to Choose*, 9.
31. Murphy and Stacey, "Facebook Libra."
32. Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 4.
33. Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading."
34. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 12.
35. Williams, "Cracking the Bro Code," 2.
36. Karp and Zamiska, *The Technological Republic*, 8.
37. Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*.
38. Beckert, "The Exhausted Futures of Neoliberalism."
39. Palmås and Surber, "Legitimation Crisis in Contemporary Technoscientific Capitalism."
40. Karp and Zamiska, *The Technological Republic*, 8–9.
41. Smith et al., "We Have Been Here Before," 4.
42. Cech, "Culture of Disengagement in Engineering Education?", see for instance Özkan, "Sociotechnical Curricular Approaches for a Culture of Engagement in Engineering."
43. Karp and Zamiska, *The Technological Republic*, 73.
44. Cech, "Culture of Disengagement in Engineering Education?," 50.

45. Karp and Zamiska, *The Technological Republic*, 75–76.
46. Bucciarelli and Drew, "Liberal Studies in Engineering – a Design Plan," 120.
47. Karp and Zamiska, *The Technological Republic*, 75–76.
48. Bucciarelli and Drew, "Liberal Studies in Engineering – a Design Plan," 117.
49. Karp and Zamiska, *The Technological Republic*, 88.
50. Said, *Orientalism*.
51. Bucciarelli and Drew, "Liberal Studies in Engineering – a Design Plan," 117.
52. Palmås, "Engineering Judgment and Education."
53. This is of course a matter of perspective. However, from my own Scandinavian vantage point, it seems a further deterioration is sadly not an unlikely prospect.
54. Smith et al., "We Have Been Here Before," 4.
55. Schwartzel, "Alex Karp Wants Silicon Valley to Fight for America."
56. Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 36.

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