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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Corporate Utopias: The Tech Elite's Visions and the Global Crises of Democratic Problem-Solving

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that the utopian novels of the past have given way to corporate visions. Those who today challenge the dominant structures of power through radical reengineering of systems are tech CEOs and investors. The article examines Soylent Inc., SpaceX, and the Seasteading Institute and argues that their corporate visions, defined here as "corporate utopia," align their authors with a motley group of utopian thinkers who view national governments as inadequate in solving problems for all of humanity. I argue that the capacity of these corporate utopias to capture the global imagination is indicative of a general dissatisfaction with national governments' ability to tackle issues like climate change, poverty, and food security. This, I suggest, is currently leading to a concentration of global problem-solving in the hands of tech entrepreneurs and investors who are increasingly able to rally economic and political support across a broad ideological spectrum.

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Revolution in a Bottle: Rob Rhinehart and the End of Agriculture as We Know It

In January 2017, the number one grocery product sold through Amazon was a meal replacement drink called Soylent, produced by a company of the same name (Watson 2018). In February 2023, it was voted product of the year in the category Meal Replacements (PRNewswire 2023). Soylent has been engineered to offer "all of the same nutritional benefits as a complete meal" (Soylent 2019a). It consists of liquidized soy protein, slow-burning carbs from beets, oleic sunflower oil, and "26 important vitamins and minerals" (Soylent 2019a). These sources of nutrition have been chosen in an attempt to achieve the best possible nutritional value using as little farmland, water, and fertilizer as possible.

The founder of Soylent, Rob Rhinehart, got the idea for Soylent in 2013 when, as a young software engineer, he was preoccupied primarily with work. Regarding cooking and eating a time-waster, he would live largely on a diet consisting of "frozen meals and ramen noodles" (Soylent 2019b). While this was a cheap and quick solution to the bother of having to eat at all, it was also poor in nutrition. Soylent Inc., therefore, started out as an attempt to engineer an equally cheap and fast, while also nutritious, alternative. However, when Rhinehart started to compose his meal replacement shake, he realized the potential of his innovation. Situated in the Silicon Valley tech environment, his backdrop for action was one in which the current state of world affairs was generally understood as a burning platform for technological innovation. The world, as Rhinehart understood and approached it, was one characterized by "a rapidly growing population, and rapidly diminishing resources" (Soylent 2019b). His mission was, therefore, not only to "sell the best meal replacement shakes," but to "help bring an end to food voids, hunger, and food insecurity" (Soylent 2019c).

> The Soylent homepage states:
>
> Earth's population will reach 9.7 billion by 2050, and feeding that many people will require a 70% increase in food production. With 38% of land already used for agriculture and 41 million people in America alone struggling with food insecurity, finding solutions to our food access concerns cannot be ignored (Soylent 2019b).

To Rhinehart, these facts render it impossible to object to the idea of engineered food. Farming as it is currently practiced, he argued in a 2014 interview, is wasteful in terms of its resource usage and ought to be more, not less, industrialized (Widdicombe 2014). For Rhinehart, then, it was

imperative to "change how the world thinks about food" (Widdicombe 2014), and, from the beginning, he made a point out of stating that the company Soylent is pro-science, pro-gene modification, and pro-sustainability. Against the backdrop of population growth and planetary over-exploitation, Rhinehart argued, it is unethical to be in favor of organic farming. While he granted that organic farming might be good when viewed in isolation, it remained a wasteful approach to the problem of gaining nutrients, he argued, if your outlook is the whole of humanity and the entire planetary ecosystem (Soylent 2019a).

How are we to approach, analytically, a positive vision for the future in which factories and laboratories have supplanted green pastures and golden fields? A future in which we down a bland and bottled shake on the go instead of gathering around candlelit tables to share homemade, organic meals made from local produce? How should it impact our analysis that this vision is being promoted by a tech entrepreneur from Silicon Valley who is upfront about his desire to make money and take advantage of global market opportunities? What should we make of the fact that Rhinehart has named his product after the dystopic science fiction novel *Make Room! Make Room!* from 1966 in which people in an overpopulated future survive on Soylent – a mixture of soy and lentils (Harrison 1966)? And what of the fact that Rhinehart is fully aware that most people will associate the name with the 1973 movie adaptation *Soylent Green* which has added the twist that human flesh becomes a key ingredient of Soylent introduced as the oceans die and harvest fails due to global warming?

In this article, I analyze Rob Rhinehart's vision for a highly engineered future food production alongside Elon Musk's vision for colonizing Mars and Patri Friedman and Joe Quirk's case for commercializing citizenship. I argue that it is analytically productive to regard these visions as belonging to the utopian literary genre with its centuries-old tradition for political critique and tongue-in-cheek seriousness. In the early decades of the 21st century, I will reason, the beautifully crafted, satirical novels and thorough political programs of the previous centuries have been replaced by power-point slides, business cases, and mission statements – what this article calls "corporate utopia." The utopian dreamers of the 21st century are not radical politicians, courtiers, social reformers, or esteemed intellectuals, but equally powerful CEOs and investors who, like their utopian predecessors, are troubled by contemporary modes of problem-solving and claim to have the plight of humanity of heart.

With this focus, the article adds to a growing scholarship across the social sciences, which specifically examines the utopian aspects of the corporate visions of tech companies (for instance, Andersen 2023; Bech forthcoming; Gebru and Torres 2024; Jönsson 2016; Rubenstein 2022; Tjalve 2024; Tutton 2021). These studies form part of a broader

examination of the implications of the large tech companies' corporate practices and ideological underpinnings (among others, Barbrook and Cameron 2007; Harrison and Burrows 2021; Helmreich 2001; Koycheva and VandenBroek 2024; Turner 2009). The article will add to these studies by inserting the corporate visions of Soylent Inc., SpaceX, and the Seasteading Institute in the utopian genre's a century-long tradition for political critique and will use them to diagnose a set of contemporary grievings with the current distribution of powers which goes beyond the confines of the utopian writer's – here the tech CEO's – own vision. The three companies I focus on in the article have been chosen because they simultaneously are indicative and formative of a shift from democratic to corporate engagement with problems related to food insecurity, population growth, and climate change.

Utopian Writing and Its Legacy as a Vehicle for Political Critique Since Plato

The narrative genre of describing ideal societies in which poverty and injustice are things that people do not have to contend with abounds throughout human history. Early examples in Gregory Claeys and Lyman Sargent's *The Utopia Reader* (2017) include the various poems and tales of gardens of Eden, golden ages, and Paradise (see also Coverley 2010). However, by the time Plato wrote *The Republic* approximately 375BC, the genre had developed into a distinct mode of presenting political critique. Plato's original title for his book was "Politeia" which made his contemporary readers recognize it as belonging to a genre of literature that dealt with the administration of government or a society's constitution (Lane in Plato 2007: xv). In *The Republic*, Plato (2007) comments on what he identifies as Athenian society's destructive lack of specialization among those in power, including the elite's pursuit of their own interests at the expense of the general population. Disguised as a dialogue between Socrates and a number of his acquaintances, Plato's book presents the social structure and ways of life in the fictitious city of Kallipolis, which is selflessly governed by a league of philosophers resulting in stability, unity, and individual well-being for all.

The Hellenic tradition for presenting political critique through fictional dialogue was developed and popularized by Thomas More in his novel *Utopia*, published in 1516. More wrote his political satire in the heyday of European humanism and social upheaval. He was a contemporary of Erasmus of Rotterdam, Martin Luther, and Ulrich Zwingli, and he moved in intellectual circles where budding social reform and the secularization of poor assistance were being discussed, attempted, and evaluated (Vives [1526] 2010; Ypres [1531] 2010; see also Salter 1926). The first part of *Utopia* is a discussion of the various existing forms of government known to More at the time and written as a

dialogue between Thomas More, Peter Giles (a known humanist and close friend of Erasmus of Rotterdam), and Raphael Hythloday. Hythloday is a fictitious philosopher who has recently returned from a voyage as part of Americus Vesputius' explorations of the new world (More [1516] 1901). During this trip, the traveling philosopher Hythloday visited a place – the island state of Utopia – which he claims to be superior to any known state in terms of "being better governed and living happier" (More [1516] 1901: 39). The second part of *Utopia* is a monologue by Raphael Hythloday in which he accounts in detail for the ways in which people in Utopia manage interpersonal relationships, including family life and sexuality, economic redistribution, agricultural production, labor and leisure, and political decision-making.

The fictional societies presented by both Plato and More act simultaneously as critiques of, and solutions to, the problems of injustice and inefficiency which they both observed among the ruling classes and sovereigns of their respective times. With the creation of Kallipolis and Utopia, both Plato and More found their solution in a radical rejection of existing structures. They did not tinker with adjustments or reforms, but created new societies through detailed social engineering from the bottom up. In summary, both novels were essentially concerned with presenting a positive vision to end poverty and injustice. Secondly, they were expressions of total systems in that they radically redesigned the entire system they targeted. Thirdly, they diagnosed what their authors identified as the biggest challenges of their times and acted as critiques of the distribution of powers in their contemporary societies. These three aspects of their writing remained defining characteristics of utopian literature throughout the following centuries.

Historical Critiques of Distributions of Power

As time and social conditions changed, so did the key problems addressed by utopian novels. In Francis Bacon's *The New Atlantis* from 1626 ([1626] 2009), a ship full of sailors on their way from Peru to China is tossed around by the capricious winds of the South Sea and ends up on the coast of an unknown land. Over the following six weeks, local interlocutors introduce the narrator (an anonymous sailor) to the native population's superiority and advances in the natural sciences, engineering, healthcare, and medicine. Most importantly, we learn that societal progress has been achieved due to their systematic use of experimental scientific practices. Bacon's novel was published at a time when European universities concerned themselves primarily with passing on existing and dogmatic knowledge and where experimental science was highly controversial. In the early decades of the 17th century, numerous secret brotherhoods and scientific societies were formed among scholars in Europe in order to facilitate exactly the free exchange of novel ideas based on empirical

research (Dickson 1998). These brotherhoods and societies were testing ways of reconciling religious doctrine with the experimental knowledge of the natural world, which they felt would improve human life (Dickson 1998: 4). While many of these brotherhoods modelled their practices on the ideas expressed in Bacon's novel, Bacon's novel became successful at the time, because it tapped into an already existing and widespread dissatisfaction with the dogma of the church.

In Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* from 1735 ([1735] 2017), one of the topics that Swift explored through Gulliver's stay with the horse people, the Houyhnhnms, is how human greed and reluctance to share one's riches lead to conflict and warfare ([1735] 2017: 159f.). In Louis Sébastian Mercier's *Memoirs of the Year Two Thousand Five Hundred*, published in 1770 ([1770] 2017), the whims of greedy and self-serving monarchs have been replaced by rationality and the rule of law in the service of the general population ([1770] 2017: 178f.). The backdrop of both these novels was a Europe in which sovereigns seemed endlessly engaged in wars of succession and battles for influence and power at the great expense of their subjects.

The 19th century, in particular, saw a flurry of utopian literature that dealt largely with two related topics: labor relations and gender relations. One set of books imagined different ways in which labor could be organized with a view to creating a more stable and just society. This subset of the utopian genre became known as utopian socialism. Many of the key novels in this genre were written by men who were primarily interested in industrial production (for an overview, see Claeys and Sargent 2017; Moore 1990). The book that founded this genre and coined the word "socialism" was the Welch industrialist Robert Owen's *The Book of the New Moral World* from 1844. Here, Owen presented a detailed plan for how a prosperous and peaceful world society could be achieved (1844: 65). Owen's proposal was to divide all humans, regardless of gender, race, or family background, into eight classes of people determined only by their age (1844: 65). Each group would have special obligations. For instance, between the ages of five and ten, a "second class of people" would be acquainted with the lighter operations of businesses and trades. This should be done through "personal inspection of objects, and familiar conversation with those more experienced than themselves" (1844: 68). Owen's vision is one in which every individual on Earth would be given the same chances in life through exposure to proper food and education, a benign and well-informed pedagogy, and an upbringing in a favorable physical environment where they could blossom and work. The book was a harsh critique of the British class system in which some were born into privilege and could expect other people to work for them while harvesting the profit of their work.

Another influential book in the utopian socialist genre was *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*, published by Edward Bellamy in 1888. In

this book, Bellamy's protagonist Julian West falls asleep and wakes up a good hundred years later in the year 2000. Here, he meets the Leete family and, through conversations with the various family members, he learns what has happened in the intervening 113 years: Following a bloodless revolution, all industrial production has been nationalized and is controlled by the government of the United States. By using centralized and systematic collections of data and applying statistical analysis, the government departments overseeing the industries are able to plan the production of food and goods flexibly, responding immediately to meet new demands and sharing produce equally between all inhabitants (Bellamy 1888). Bellamy's novel was an explicit contribution to contemporary discussions and concerns regarding monopolies and syndicates. As such, the novel was a proposal for how to deal with questions such as how to attract and educate a qualified labor force, how to set just prices and wages, and how to manage supply and demand through the careful application of statistics.

In a second set of utopian books emerging in the late 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century, the role of women in society took center stage (for instance, Ilgenfritz-Jones and Marchant 1893; Gilman 1915). In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* from 1915, three young men find themselves plane-wrecked in an undiscovered valley populated only by women. These women's isolated existence in the valley has developed over the course of 2,000 years since a calamity of war and volcanic eruption sealed the valley off from the surrounding world with no men remaining. Here evolved a society of women who conveniently become spontaneously pregnant at the age of 25. Over the centuries, they have lost all trace of the manners that their three male visitors associate with femininity. Through conversations with the local women, the young men are forced to consider questions of nature and nurture and the contingencies of their expectations of women and their abilities (Gilman [1915] 2019). *Herland* was published at a time marked by rapid industrial development and the expansion of basic rights. What was, then, referred to as the "woman question" included discussions of women's legal status and their role in business and government. While the dismantlement of the nuclear family was a central means through which utopian socialist novels also worked (cf. Moore 1990), in feminist novels the distribution of legal and social powers between men and women was the central topic discussed by their protagonists.

Common to all these novels and foundational for their widespread success was not their ability to provide attractive blueprints for social engineering (see, for instance, Coverley's analysis of Fourier's imagined society "Harmony" in Coverley 2011: 83ff.), but rather the circumstance that they gave voice to already existing and widespread dissatisfaction with the current distributions of power and influence and with the way in which core problems in their respective societies were being handled.

The End of Utopia and Its Rise Again: Corporate Utopianism

From the middle of the 20th century onwards, a consensus emerged among academics that the era of utopian thinking had ended. Daniel Bell published *The End of Ideology* in 1960 ([1960] 2001) arguing that utopian thinking could no longer be the source of political inspiration for those who wanted to see the growth of a freer polity and a more just and prosperous society. He was joined in his analysis by academics ranging from Herbert Marcuse (1967) and Leszek Kolakowski (1968), to Francis Fukuyama (1992), Russell Jacoby (1999), and John Grey (2007). After half a century of totalitarian governments, during which period technological development, centralization, and social engineering had been put to use for horrendous purposes, it seemed to authors and political intellectuals writing in the decades following the second world war that the idea that humans were progressing towards ever more freedom, prosperity, and equality could no longer be sustained.

Two decades into the 21st century, however, the sentiment that the best way of solving our problems does indeed reside in a total scrapping of existing systems in order to design them all over again has reemerged with renewed force. Utopianism can be found in the literary genre of ecotopianism, where authors explore worlds – post-climate change – in which new and more sustainable forms of sociality and economy emerge. The most notable example in the genre is Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020). We continue to see the formation of numerous micro-societies experimenting with work-life balances, financial independence, and alternative models for economic sustainability. We also find the utopian systemic engineering in the renewed global interest in radical policy ideas such as Universal Basic Income (for instance, Bregman 2017) and in the mantra of "radical innovation" or "missions-oriented innovation" (Mazzacato 2018), which are examples of the most recent attempts to think radically different about how our societies might be managed through policy (for instance, OECD 2021). Alongside these trends, utopian thinking is emerging in a corporate genre.

One example of such a corporate utopia is the vision of Rob Rhinehart to end hunger and planetary exploitation by means of his meal-replacement product Soylent. Rhinehart's vision does the same work as the utopian novels of the previous centuries. Firstly, it acts as a positive vision to create what the author believes to be a better society. Secondly, it acts as a critique of the political status quo. Thirdly, it acts as a radical solution to the problem it identifies through a radical redesign of the system that it seeks to revolutionize (in this case food production). Soylent purports to be a total solution not only to the problem of low-quality replacement meals, but also to a wider set of global relations. At

the same time, Soylent can be distinguished from other movements and businesses seeking to reform the agricultural sector through, for example, organic farming, perma-cultural techniques, or lab-grown alternatives to industrial meat production. Rhinehart, through Soylent, does not seek to change or adapt food production, but simply rejects everything that we have come to take for granted about what food is and how it comes about. Soylent, then, is a rejection of the entire global status quo in a plastic-bottled and multi-flavored liquid acting as a critique of the failure – amidst the wealth and awareness of the 21st century – to provide basic food security for the whole of humanity in a way that is sustainable for our planet in the long term.

In the following section, I will provide two further examples of corporate visions that display similar utopian traits. One is a vision to end global exploitation by commercializing citizenship, advocated through the non-profit organization, the Seasteading Institute, founded by Patri Friedman and Peter Thiel in 2008. The other is a vision to safeguard the existence of humanity by expanding human civilization to Mars as pursued by Elon Musk through his private space agency, SpaceX, founded in 2002.

Combating Climate Change and Social Injustice by Means of Micro-Nations

"Seasteading" refers to the dream of creating new nations or city-states in international waters outside of national jurisdiction. Well-known examples of seasteading include the Principality of Sealand, founded on an oil rig off the shore of Harwich in 1967, and the Republic of Minerva, which claimed a reef in the Pacific Ocean between Fiji and Tonga in early 1972 (Strauss 1999). The former still exists and occasionally makes the headlines, while the latter was forcibly removed after a few days of existence (Trumbull 1972). Seasteading had a revival when, in 2008, a network of architects, tech entrepreneurs, and money-men organized themselves in the Seasteading Institute, founded with financial support from tech entrepreneur Peter Thiel. Thiel has since donated over two million US$ to researching "the engineering, legal, and business challenges involved with creating politically independent floating cities" (Quirk with Friedman 2017: 29).

The Seasteading Institute's corporate vision is presented in the book *Seasteading* (Quirk with Friedman 2017), written in collaboration between the Seasteading Institute's founder Patri Friedman and the journalist Joe Quirk. In terms of genre, the book reads like a very long business case seeking to convince a potential investor. The book is structured around a series of concise statements, which are developed through various techniques such as fact sheets, allegories, case studies, and Q&A sessions. The book's fourth section is called "Freedom." In this

section, Quirk and Friedman explain "why floating societies will likely be more peaceful than continental governments, simply because fluid mobility will revolutionize the incentives by which individuals interact" (2017: xv). In a classical utopian conversational style, the authors here preempt key critiques, including such questions as "Aren't seasteads for the rich people only?" and answering "No, seasteads will, in fact, be for the poor." The new city-states and nations constructed in international waters, the authors explain, will have no native or natural populations and will need to compete for a labor force. Why, they ask rhetorically, should any individual person want to go to anyone Seastead unless the living conditions there were better than where they came from? Continental governments, Quirk and Friedman argue, can continue to exploit their populations only for as long as people have nowhere else to go, putting the sovereigns and governments of the world in an ideal position to exploit the poor and marginalized. In Quirk and Friedman's particular version of liberalism expressed in the Seasteading Institute, it is not a capital investment that needs protection and freedom of movement; it is the poor and the exploited individual. Seasteading is the means, so they argue, to grant the individual freedom from exploitation (Quirk with Friedman 2017).

What distinguishes the vision of Quirk and Friedman from earlier instances of wealthy and influential liberalists trying to establish tax-free havens in international waters (for an overview, see Strauss 1999) is its declared global scope. Something has to change, Quirk and Friedman argue, "if 9 billion of us are to survive in 2050" (2017: 5). For Quirk and Friedman, building more nations at sea is the solution to what they term the "six moral imperatives" with which humans are faced: Putting an end to hunger, poverty, sickness, and the destruction of our natural environments, finding sustainable energy sources, and achieving global peace. They reject the notion of citizenship as we have come to think of it through a radical commercialization of the relationship between a territory and the people who at any one moment choose freely to inhabit it. In their global vision, no one needs to risk their life crossing borders on land or at sea to reach countries that do not want them. In the vision they present in the book, people are no longer subjects bound by their birth to particular states; they are consumers of governance moving freely to the place which they find offers them the kind of life and governance that they want. With this vision and much in the spirit of the utopian novels that precede *Seasteading,* the Seasteading Institute acts less, I will argue, as authors of a feasible blueprint for development than as authors of a targeted critique of what is identified as the lack of capacity or willingness among contemporary governments to offer prosperity and safety to anyone but their own populations – and, most often, Quirk and Friedman argue, not even that (2017).

Safeguarding Humanity by Making Life Multi-Planetary

SpaceX is a commercial space company based in Hawthorne, California. Founded in 2002 by Elon Musk, it designs and manufactures rockets and spaceships. SpaceX makes its money by providing services such as the launch and delivery of astronauts and satellites into low Earth orbit and, since 2020, through the provision of satellite-based internet service enabled by its private fleet of satellites, Starlink. SpaceX became world-famous for a series of "firsts." In 2008, SpaceX became the first privately owned company to develop and successfully launch a liquid fuel rocket into orbit (SpaceX 2022). In 2015, SpaceX managed to safely launch and land its Falcon 9 rocket, after it had delivered its cargo into orbit. With this achievement, SpaceX introduced an almost fully reusable rocket to an industry based on build-and-discard, thereby cutting the costs of launch to a fraction of any competitor. As a result, low Earth orbit became accessible to private businesses and countries with more moderate economies than the United States, Russia, or China. By 2023, Starship, a fully reusable launch system and spaceship, has been developed to the stage of test flight and is projected to have the capacity to carry 100 people from Earth into low Earth orbit and onwards to the Moon or Mars (SpaceX 2023).

From the onset, the long-term goal of SpaceX has been to develop the technology and to cut the costs of space travel to the point where it becomes logistically feasible to establish a human civilization on Mars (SpaceX 2022). For Musk, SpaceX is a means to ensure that humanity will not become extinct. Given his insistence on being driven in his business development by a concern for humanity, Musk is frequently confronted with the question of why, then, he would want to spend his fast-growing fortune on endeavors in outer space rather than on addressing questions of economic injustice or poverty on Earth. His reply has invariably been that, in the event that something catastrophic should happen (such as Earth being hit by an asteroid or a cosmic flare), being poor or having a disease would be irrelevant because, as he reasons, "humanity would be extinct" (Musk in Andersen 2014: 3). Musk argues that to really safeguard humanity, we need to become a multi-planetary species. In his calculations, this specifically means that we need one million people who are willing to settle permanently on Mars and sustain themselves locally to "form a sustainable, genetically diverse civilization" (Musk in Andersen 2014: 3).

SpaceX's corporate strategy can be read as utopian rather than merely capitalist and opportunist partly due to the unwavering corporate commitment to future-proofing humanity and partly because the means through which SpaceX works is a radical disruption and reinvention of the "system" that comprises the established space industry. However, there is more to it than this. With SpaceX, Musk launched an attack on the political status quo in the United States, and he did so strategically by

structuring his company as an exemplar of "vertical integration" – a business model in which a company controls most parts of its supply, production, and distribution chain. In the case of SpaceX, this includes control of the launch site, launch rockets, upper stages, the payload itself (space capsules, astronauts, satellites), and reception and distribution centers on Earth (through mutually beneficial collaboration with Google and Microsoft data centers around the globe). When NASA therefore, in 2021, awarded SpaceX what at the time was the only contract to develop a new human landing module for its Artemis mission, it happened to the discontent of many American politicians. What troubled them was that SpaceX's lunar landing module, Starship, once fully functioning, would be more powerful and much cheaper than anything currently on the market. Furthermore, Starship would be able to fly with a far greater frequency and flexibility than NASA's own space launch system, SLS. Starship would essentially make the latter superfluous before it had even been put to use. This, in turn, would become a problem for the national economy because a whole set of products, businesses, subcontractors, employees, and local communities economically tangled up in the SLS system would become expendable. From the politicians' point of view, SpaceX's vertically integrated solution might be cheaper, more widely accessible, and sustainably set out to secure the future of humanity as a whole, but it also endangered the national domestic economy.

The critique and argument embedded in Musk's corporate strategy is that you cannot begin with national interests if your aim is to develop solutions that work for all of humanity. It is this diagnosis and implicit critique of the political status quo, I propose, that makes SpaceX and its achievements resonate far beyond those who share in Musk's vision for what a future good and just society ought to look like.

Of What Is This a Case: Elitist Detachment, Techno-Optimism, or Political Critique?

In his article "Of what is this a case? Analytical movements in qualitative social science research," Christian Lund (2014) reminds us that one of the most central decisions we take as analysts involves choosing how to write our empirical data into cases *of* something. The analytical category in which we place our "edited chunk of empirical reality" determines the features that "are marked out, emphasized, and privileged while others recede into the background" (2014: 224). Proceeding to understand and write about the critique of national government inherent in the corporate utopianism of Rhinehart, Friedman and Quirk, and Musk involves editing, contextualizing, foregrounding, and omission. These analytical decisions determine the results produced by our analyses, academic discussions

into which we may enter, and the questions and future research to which our publications might give rise.

A Case of Elitist Detachment: Foregrounding the Ideology of the Companies' Founders

The sociologists Harrison Smith and Roger Burrows (2021) identify a kinship between the cluster-like vision of sovereign seasteads expressed by the Seasteading Institute and the data management set-up built into the alternative internet structure Urbit. According to Smith and Burrows, Urbit's code-writers propose to "reinvent the internet through a clean-slate data architecture complete with its own operating system, kernel, network protocols, programming language, and digital identity" (2021: 144). Smith and Burrows focus their analysis on documenting the ideological entanglement of the Seasteading Institute and Urbit with what they term "post-neoliberal politics of exit" (2021: 143). What they identify as the key themes across the various phenomena that they place in this analytical category are sovereignty, mobility, and the liberty of anyone "unit" – be it human or digital – to "exit" any unwanted relationship of dependence and control. They ask that we recognize the privileged position and neo-reactionary "mind-space" of, on the one hand, the people who have the capabilities to write and adapt the code on which Urbit is based and, on the other, the people who have the means to set up seasteads and decide which type of government to put on offer (2021: 158). The argument that follows from their analysis is that the state critique embedded in these structures is an elitist project for those who can afford to "exit" as soon as conditions become unfavorable to business or capital investment (2021: 157; for a similar argument, see Rubenstein 2022: 17f; Tutton 2021: 428).

Were I to adopt the analytical approach of Smith and Burrows, an analysis of Soylent, SpaceX, and the Seasteading Institute would pay attention to the political and ideological agendas of their founders, including tracing the invisible structures of power in what presents itself as politically neutral and egalitarian. For instance, we might choose to explore Rhinehart's political affiliations and map out the activity of him and his closer associates on social media. Or we could emphasize that, while SpaceX's satellite constellation Starlink brings affordable connectivity and potentially education and work to remote and poor areas of the planet, it simultaneously facilitates rapid stock exchange potentially further accumulating economic wealth in the hands of established bankers. Or we might, as Richard Tutton (2021) does in his examination of "outer space utopia" of Silicon Valley and beyond, look at the labor condition of the workers in SpaceX factories (2021: 425) and ask if, perhaps, Musk is more committed to humanity in the abstract than humanity in the concrete (for a similar case from Silicon Valley, see

Helmreich 2001). Finally, we might also delve into the role of Starlink in enabling military communication and surveillance in Ukraine or examine what SpaceX stands to gain through Musk's recent political affiliations.

A Case of Blind Tech-Enthusiasm: Foregrounding the Socio-Political Context of the Companies

One might also choose to emphasize analytically that the three corporate visions presented in this article share a common origin in Silicon Valley. The visions of Rhinehart, Quirk and Friedman, and Musk share a belief in the benign potential of engineering and technology to solve the problems caused by the engineering and technological evolution of previous eras. What I have called corporate utopianism could, therefore, be analyzed as examples of the particular kind of techno-optimism identified and defined by media theorists Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron (2007) as "the Californian ideology" (see also Turner 2008). Writing in the mid-1990s, Barbrook and Cameron (2007) were concerned with the emancipatory role accorded to the internet. At the time, many optimistically emphasized the internet's ability to transform economic activity, education, and commerce while challenging established institutions of power such as banking, education, and wage work (2007: 1-2). This optimism was particularly pronounced in California, they argue, where it grew out of "a bizarre fusion of the cultural bohemianism of San Francisco with the hi-tech industries of Silicon Valley," resulting in a "common interest in disrupting the establishment and Big Government" (2007: 3-4; see also Turner 2008).

Barbrook and Cameron's analytical approach highlights how many of the business ventures, which were most vocal in their critique of the national government, owed their corporate existence to government subsidies and had largely depended on contracts with public agencies, at least in the early stages of development. Analyzing the state critique embedded in corporate utopianism from the perspective of Barbrook and Cameron would want us to recognize these links and examine what they take to be contradictory impulses of social and economic liberalism intertwined in these corporations.

From this perspective, the interesting thing about companies such as Soylent and SpaceX, as well as CEOs such as Rhinehart and Musk, would be to recognize how their particular approach to doing business draws on the dual heritage of the community activism of the hippies in the 1960s and the laissez-faire economy of the conservatives. This analysis could emphasize the particular history of sector cooperation that characterizes the American space industry, and it could examine how SpaceX throughout the company's growth and consolidation phases has benefitted from government contracts and public financial support (Tjalve 2024; Tutton 2021) while the company in turn has enabled a new

and growing low Earth orbit economy (Vohnsen 2024) which benefits the domestic economy of the United States in particular (Tjalve 2024).

The analytical approaches of Smith and Burrows and Barbrook and Cameron shed light on core ideological trends and corporate conditions of a predominantly North American society. In delimiting their analytical scope to treat their cases against the backdrop of relatively recent ideological developments within the United States, they understand the phenomena they examine as something originating within a particular political-ideological current or from a particular geographical-cultural tradition. I suggest that, instead of classifying the corporate visions by their authors' ideological or geographical origins, we foreground the utopian aspects of these visions because doing so allows us to recognize a much longer intellectual lineage to which they also belong.

A Case of Utopian Writing: Foregrounding That Which Is Critiqued

The preference for "clean slate architecture" and cluster-like autonomous units, such as those Smith and Burrows associate with a "post-neoliberal politics of exit" and the critique of a nationally oriented or centralized government, have a much longer history and, curiously, one which can be traced to some of the first socialist thinkers of 19th century Europe. In 1844, Robert Owen identified the largest obstacle to overcome, before his socialist vision in *The Book of The New Moral World* could be achieved: the power of prejudice forced into the minds of humans by virtue of the place they were born. Attachment to local habits and values, he wrote, turned the human being into a "localized irrational man" (Owen [1844] 2017: 259). In the place of government organized around territorial interests and national "habits," he proposed instead a series of self-governing, cooperative units organized and liaised around a shared commitment to truth, well-being, and technological advancement for all of humanity. Such preferences for smaller self-organizing and loosely associated units or cooperative structures and the critique of the territorial state were integral to a number of socialist utopian visions of the 19th century, including those of French Charles Fourier and Austrian Theodor Hertzka (cf. Claeys and Sargent 2017). In the 1960s, the American architect and inventor Buckminster Fuller ([1969] 2019) was preoccupied with optimizing habitation and mobility for ordinary people. Fuller's inventions included concepts for portable houses, floating modular cities, and a transportation system which could both fly and drive. These inventions would accommodate, he argued, the fluid nature of human sociality and constituted an explicit critique of the tendency of governments to fix subsets of the human population to landlocked modules; that is, states. Referring to our planet as "Spaceship Earth" and driven by a concern for the limited resources of our planet, Fuller called

attention to the shared human predicament and departed from the premise that any sustainable solution to problems related to poverty, equality, and ecological sustainability could only be found by taking a global perspective and approach ([1969] 2019).

Placing the corporate visions of Soylent Inc., the Seasteading Institute, and SpaceX within this utopian tradition makes it clear that the critique of a nationally oriented government as an imperfect unit for solving problems is not something exclusive to the conservative or libertarian right in the United States, but has emerged at different moments in time as a by-product of the attempt to solve problems at a global scale.

Utopia, *Inc.*: Global Problems Cannot Be Solved by Actors Pursuing National Interests

If we approach the corporate visions of Soylent Inc., the Seasteading Institute, and SpaceX as cases of utopian literature, we can use them as optimal lenses through which to identify and explore tensions in our contemporary society. In granting that they, like the utopian projects before them, constitute a medium for social critique, we may ask of them: What is the contemporary problem that these visions are pointing at? Which current distribution of power do they mean to challenge? How might we – through them – examine core power struggles in our contemporary society? If we were to ask these questions of the three corporate utopia presented in this article, they would inform us that the primary battle for power and influence in the early 21st century is a battle between the corporate sector and the various nation-states or leagues of nations. The visions of Soylent Inc., the Seasteading Institute, and SpaceX do not reiterate discussions of the previous centuries about who is better when it comes to managing industries, responding to new demands, ensuring quality in service and products, or setting just prices and wages. The key discussions in which their founders and CEOs, and indeed a great many tech entrepreneurs all over the world, partake revolves around contemporary questions such as: Who is better when it comes to ensuring that the fundamental needs of the world's population are met? Who is better when it comes to ensuring that nobody goes hungry? That everybody has access to healthcare and education? That the Earth is not over-exploited? That we get universal access to clean energy? The main critique levered by these corporate utopia is that a national government is fast becoming a highly ineffective unit of organization because the problems that we increasingly face in our contemporary world need solutions which are global in scale and need fast acting.

In this article, I have proposed that we understand this critique not merely as proper to their authors, but as a diagnostic of broader societal tensions (for similar argument, see Helmreich 2001; Tutton

2021). This will direct our gaze toward the wider political landscape and attune us to the circumstance that, at present, the questioning of national governments' capacity to deliver in key areas currently is being voiced by people across the ideological spectrum.

In 2019, Dutch historian Rutger Bregman achieved world fame by taking a stab at billionaire tax avoidance in Davos while simultaneously arguing for removing all borders and securing universal freedom of movement in order to eradicate global poverty (Bregman 2017). In 2022, Bill Gates picked up Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* and emphasized the argument that, if climate change is to be properly addressed, the world's political institutions must act in the interest of future generations rather than their current constituents and national subjects (Gates 2022). Also in 2022, the Secretary General of the UN, Antonio Guterres, identified what he termed the "global problem solving-paradox" (Guterres 2022). Writing about the failure to provide vaccines worldwide in the face of the COVID-19 epidemic, he called out the weakness of international institutions to deliver solutions to key global challenges. He argued that national sovereignty was the key obstacle to solving acute global problems with poverty, pandemics, and climate change. National interest, he observed, often trumps the global good (Guterres 2022).

To fully understand the impact and success of the corporate utopia of the tech elite, it is not the individual visions or corporate conditions of SpaceX, Soylent Inc., or the Seasteading Institute that we should examine, but what they might indicate about a general shift in where global problem-solving is headed. I suggest that the current ability of corporate visions to capture, not just the attention of a community of the like-minded, but the global popular imagination is indicative of a widespread exasperation with our democratic institutions' capacity for solving fundamental global problems.

The three examples of corporate utopia included in this article have succeeded in garnering attention and supporters far beyond their own epistemic communities precisely because the concerns they address are globally shared across the political spectrum. The Seasteading Institute might have been founded with money from libertarians like Peter Thiel and imbued with libertarian thinking, but the different companies, people, and movements which have intersected with the Institute at one time or another extend far beyond anything which might reasonably be classified as libertarian. As Lasse Bech (forthcoming) describes in his work on Dutch engineers who design and promote floating cities worldwide, those who today most actively pursue seasteading share in the concern for democratic institutions' capacity to solving problems related to population growth and climate change, but they have long since adapted the idea of seasteading to fit their own agendas and political projects, regarding themselves as heirs instead to

the Metabolist movement of the 1960s or to the amphibious architecture of Buckminster Fuller.

The corporate realm of synthetic food production or engineered food is also expanding rapidly and is projected to almost double its market share in the United States within the next seven years (Business Research Insight 2024). Here too, we may observe a "giving up" on the idea that democratic institutions can come up with solutions and a turning to corporate solutions. In Wyatt Galusky's article "Technology as Responsibility" (2014), he proposes that we regard in vitro meat production – what is popularly called lab-grown meat – as a new ethical position in which people get to remain carnivores while the problems with meat production, animal welfare, and resource intensive agriculture are engineered away (2014: 935; see also Jönsson 2016).

The realm of space companies is perhaps the industry most heavily imbued with utopian schemes to serve humanity, with many of the visions accompanied by imagery lifted more or less directly form the pages of science fiction novels (Andersen 2022; Tutton 2021). Here, we see a rapid growth of privately funded companies addressing issues such as wildfire detection, developing weather resistant crops, delivering internet connectivity to remote areas, and monitoring of space debris. Many of the new space companies which are founded today have visions that go beyond merely serving their costumers and growing their share of the market. These young CEOs want, heavily inspired by SpaceX and the general tech community of Silicon Valley, to use their skills and expertise to solve some of the pressing issues relating to population growth, food scarcity, the development of renewable energy sources, and mitigating climate change.

At present, the inability of national governments and international institutions to come up with a shared response and global solutions to contemporary key problems makes tech entrepreneurs of all sizes and ideological bends turn to themselves for solutions to these problems. Meanwhile, the success of some of the huge tech companies in delivering solutions to some of the problems reinforces the idea that the tech industry is indeed where money should be put and talent ought to be channeled. This, in turn, enables smaller tech companies to gain economic support from governments and venture capitalists worldwide (see, for instance, Tjalve 2024). One might say that, currently, all these factors come together in a globally co-created "sociotechnical imaginary" (Jasanoff 2015: 332), in which the dissatisfaction with current democratic institutions' ability to deliver for the great good, the regular displays of spectacular achievements of the tech industry, and an increase in government funding of the tech industry all combine to allow the tech elite to present their projects as not only commercially viable, but morally necessary. It is this broader displacement of talent, money, and capacity for global problem-solving from institutions working under democratic

oversight to private corporations that we ought to turn our attention as analysts.

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