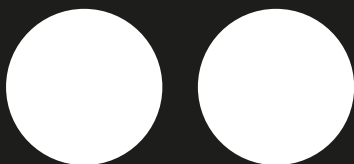




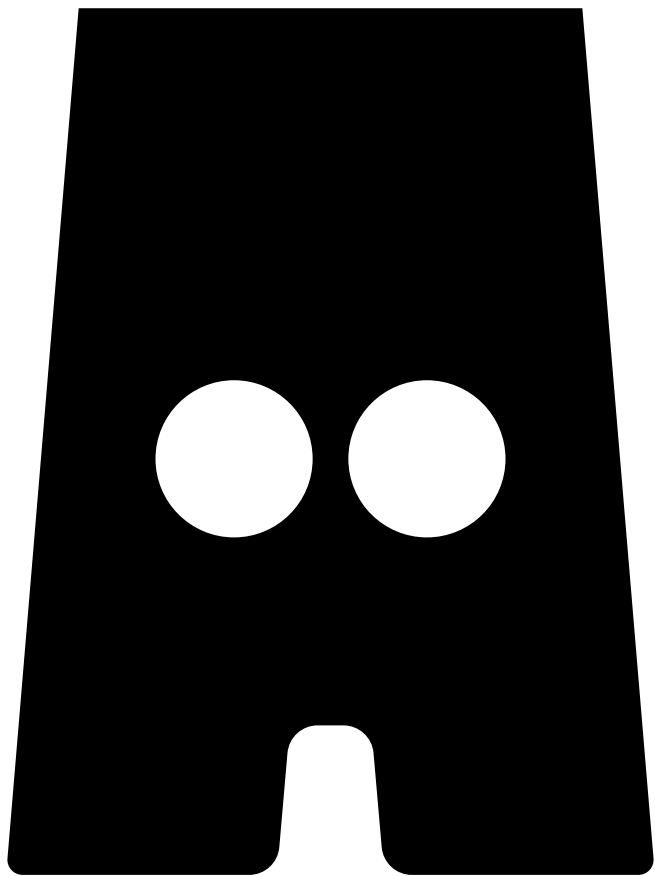
Alberto Toscano

**They Build to Dominate,
or Fascism in the Age of
Its Digital Reproducibility**



Excerpt from

**Are You
a Software
Update?**



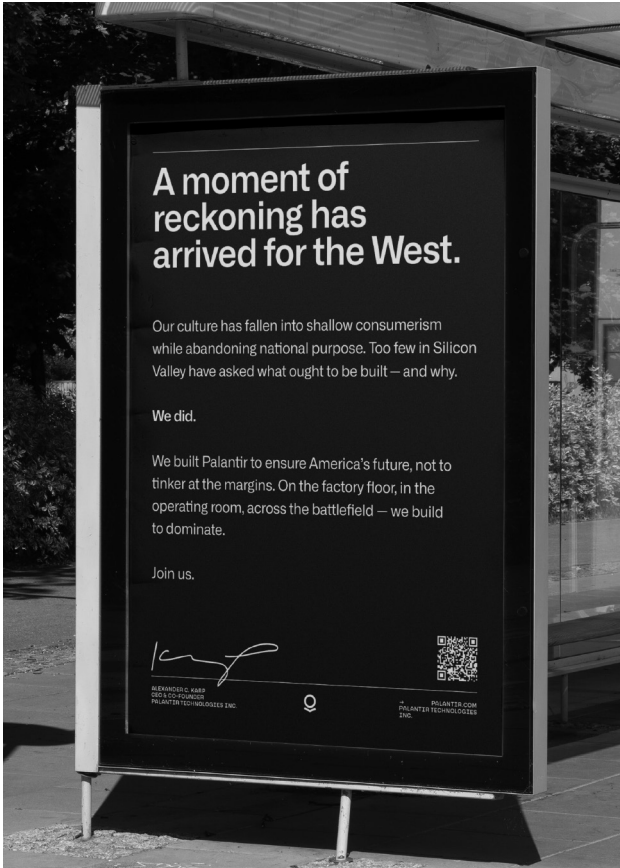
Alberto Toscano

**They Build
to Dominate,
or Fascism
in the Age of
Its Digital
Reproducibility**

In April 2025, the data-analysis defence contractor Palantir launched an ad campaign on elite US campuses. The posters, signed by Palantir CEO Alex Karp, featuring a QR code and designed with a kind of minimalist martial aesthetic, were headed by the ominous call “A moment of reckoning has arrived for the West”.¹ The micromanifesto went on to reword a claim that has been at the centre of Palantir-founder and venture capitalist impresario of the far-right Peter Thiel’s decades-long ideological crusade ever since he co-founded the *Stanford Review* and co-wrote the screed *The Diversity Myth* against multiculturalism and affirmative action in higher education.² This is the idea that Silicon Valley, in cahoots with liberal academic elites, has generated a risk-averse and social-justice-oriented culture that has systematically avoided and even sabotaged tech’s true vocation, namely putting its engineering culture of radical innovation at the service of the project of US and Western supremacy, as in the halcyon days of World War II and the Cold War. This is reactionary nostalgia indeed (their slogan could be Make Tech Great Again, or maybe Make Tech *and* War), but a nostalgia for a virtuous fusion of state, engineering and capital in the pursuit of military-led global supremacy. And, as Laleh Khalili has acutely argued, it is a longing tethered to the prosaic and fabulously profitable domain of government defence contracting, where the Silicon Valley upstarts are trying to displace the five main aerospace and defence contractors – Lockheed Martin,

- 1 MacColl, M. (2025, April 18). “Skip the indoctrination”: Palantir invades elite colleges with militant recruiting campaign. The San Francisco Standard. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://sfstandard.com/2025/04/18/palantir-woos-elite-college-students-and-theyre-feeling-the-vibe>
- 2 Sacks, D. O., & Thiel, P. A. (1999). *The Diversity Myth: Multiculturalism and Political Intolerance on Campus*. Independent Institute.

Boeing, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon and General Dynamics – and in the process reboot the military-industrial complex to their own ends.³



3 Khalili, L. (2025). Collective Property, Private Control. *The London Review of Books*, 47(10).



Palantir
@PalantirTech



Skip the debt.
Skip the indoctrination.
Get the Palantir Degree.

College is broken.

Admissions are based on flawed criteria.

Meritocracy and excellence are no longer the pursuits of educational institutions.

And chaos has ensued on university campuses.

Starting today, Palantir is launching a Fall fellowship for the best and brightest graduating high school students.

Based solely on merit and academic excellence, students will be invited for interviews.

Select applicants will receive an internship offer at Palantir. Upon completion, successful interns will be offered a full-time role.

Apply today.

2:03 PM · Apr 11, 2025 · 5M Views



828



3.2K



18K



3.7K



A Palantir recruiting post, 2025.

Source: Palantir Technologies on X. Credits: © Palantir Technologies. Used for criticism.

Previous page: Palantir's campus billboard, 2025.

Source: Palantir Technologies on X. Credits: © Palantir Technologies. Used for criticism.

In the Thiel and Palantir lingo, MAGA translates into the deliberately disturbing slogan “We build to dominate”. This recruitment drive has been flanked by a related effort to get high-performing high school students to avoid college altogether, the Meritocracy Fellowship, launched with another ad which reads: “Admissions are based on flawed criteria. Meritocracy and excellence are no longer the pursuits of educational institutions. And chaos has ensued on university campuses.”⁴ This is a pithy encapsulation of the Trump administration’s no-holds-barred attack on “DEI” and the Palestine solidarity encampment movement (Palantir also launched a special recruitment programme for students allegedly driven out of elite institutions by antisemitism).⁵ It is striking that Palantir, a self-conscious spearhead of the tech-right, is not only presenting itself as a crucial component of a radically upgraded military-industrial complex, but also takes pride in fully integrating the repressive (surveillance, targeting) and ideological (propaganda, pedagogy) facets of the US state apparatus.

Aside from its fealty to Thiel’s narrative pitting tech-nationalism against “woke capital”, bellicose realism against consumerist effeminacy – all undergirded by the racist narrative of diversity destroying merit – Palantir has solid reasons to be on a recruitment spree. Though there was some gloating among critics after its stocks briefly plummeted in the wake of Trump’s tariff announcements, its market capitalisation,

4 Davis, E. (2024, April 14). “Skip the Debt”: A \$200 Billion AI Company Launches a Fellowship for High School Grads to Avoid the “Indoctrination” of College. *The Entrepreneur*. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/palantir-launches-recruiting-campaign-saying-skip-college/490002>

5 Posted on Palantir’s “X” account on December 7, 2023 (<https://x.com/PalantirTech/status/1732777139039068361>).

having now experienced a “near-parabolic ascent” since the beginning of 2023,⁶ is currently at over 400 billion dollars – leading *The Economist* to muse on whether it could turn out to be “the most overvalued firm of all time”.⁷ What is more, no doubt in part thanks to a remarkable ability to cultivate contacts in the state’s repressive and ideological apparatuses (including far-right former Obama appointees Michael Flynn or Tom Homan), it is experiencing a veritable bonanza in government contracts that are tightly enmeshed with the United States’ authoritarian acceleration. In April of this year, it partnered with Musk’s SpaceX and the AI and robotics contractor Anduril (which is headed by far-right entrepreneur Palmer Luckey and, like Palantir, draws its name from *The Lord of the Rings*, i.e. *Flame of the West*) on a bid to build Trump’s “Golden Dome for America”,⁸ a super-sized sequel to Israel’s Iron Dome (after Trump’s public break-up with Musk, SpaceX seems to be out of the picture).⁹ Palantir was also reported to be working with Musk’s DOGE to design an application programming interface (API) for the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) – this effort to make access to taxpayer data easier came on the heels of the resignation of

- 6 Williams, S. (2025, August 14). *Palantir Is Now the 19th Largest Public Company. Is This House of Cards About to Come Crashing Down?* The Motley Fool. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://www.fool.com/investing/2025/08/14/palantir-is-this-house-of-cards-come-crashing-down>
- 7 The Economist (2025, August 12). Palantir might be the most overvalued firm of all time. *The Economist*. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2025/08/12/palantir-might-be-the-most-overvalued-firm-of-all-time>
- 8 Stone, M., & Taylor M. (2025, April 17). *Exclusive: Musk’s SpaceX is frontrunner to build Trump’s Golden Dome missile shield*. Reuters. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/musks-spacex-is-frontrunner-build-trumps-golden-dome-missile-shield-2025-04-17>
- 9 Stone, M. (2025, August 12). *Exclusive: Pentagon Golden Dome to have 4-layer defense system, slides show*, Reuters. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/pentagon-golden-dome-have-4-layer-defense-system-slides-show-2025-08-12>

the IRS acting chief after the US Treasury had struck a deal with Homeland Security to allow access to undocumented taxpayers' info as part of the current mass deportation campaign.¹⁰ Karp's company has long prided itself on working with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the military, and police departments (including on "predictive policing"),¹¹ and on making no concessions to tech workers who've organised against Silicon Valley's work with all facets of the repressive state apparatus. It has now won a \$29.8 million contract with ICE to enhance its "Immigration Lifecycle Operating System", which would provide "near real-time visibility" on self-deportation and create an integrated, extremely granular system for monitoring, detaining and expelling people. The contract

*"tasks Palantir with tweaking ICE's Investigative Case Management system (ICM) to allow for the 'complete target analysis of known populations.' /.../ The ICM allows agents to sort people by 'hundreds of highly specific categories' /.../ These include physical traits like race, eye color, tattoos, administrative data like social security numbers, employment address, and bankruptcy filing, as well as port of entry and resident status, in addition to 'hundreds more' criteria."*¹²

10 Marsh, R., & Cohen, M. (2025, April 9). Acting IRS commissioner resigning after agency reaches data-sharing deal with immigration authorities. CNN. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://www.cnn.com/2025/04/08/politics/melanie-krause-acting-irs-commissioner-resigning>

11 Katz, Y. (2020). *Artificial Whiteness: Politics and Ideology in Artificial Intelligence*. Columbia, pp. 134–152.

12 Cox, J. (2025, April 16). ICE Just Paid Palantir Tens of Millions for "Complete Target Analysis of Known Populations". 404 Media. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://www.404media.co/ice-just-paid-palantir-tens-of-millions-for-complete-target-analysis-of-known-populations>

Palantir's work is hardly limited to the US, and the company and its CEO have been extremely vocal about their ideological and material support for Israel as it carries out its genocide in Gaza. The company does not just "stand with Israel" as the full-page ad it took out in *The New York Times* declared. On January 24, it held an extraordinary board meeting in Tel Aviv in solidarity and touted its strategic partnership with the Israeli Ministry of Defence, providing it with battle tech, including its Artificial Intelligence Platform. As Spencer Ackerman has suggested in an article on the corporate beneficiaries of the war against the Palestinians of Gaza, this is not just data mining but *death mining*.¹³ Western supremacy is defined for Palantir as for much of the global far-right by an intransigent defence of Zionism abroad as well as by the war on dissent at home. To enable full-spectrum domination and impunity for Israel as it perpetrates its genocidal siege and destruction of Gaza, the suppression of internal opposition is critical. Israel's supremacy is presented as intimately linked to the fate of the "West", just as educational institutions are envisioned as a kind of fifth column, contaminating the young with anti-Western critique. As Karp expounded in an interview with CNBC at Davos last year: "It's not just about Israel. Do you believe in the West? Do you believe it is, as created, a superior way of living? Are you willing to admit you believe that?"¹⁴ And Palantir's founder, Thiel, questioned about the use of artificial intelligence (namely the "Lavender" and "Where's Daddy" programmes) in the

13 Ackerman, S. (2024, July 9). *These Corporations Are the True "Winners" of the War on Gaza*. The Nation. Retrieved August 12, 2025, from <https://www.thenation.com/article/economy/gaza-war-profiteers-corporations>

14 Palantir. (2024, January 24). *Palantir CEO Alex Karp on Israel, AI and Outlook | CNBC at Davos 2024* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNKpPVYagRc>

bombing of “targets” and their families in the Strip, echoed: “I defer to Israel.”¹⁵



Palantir advertisement in The New York Times, October 2023.
Credits: Hamutal Meridor (@hamutalm) / X. Used for criticism.

Arguably far more than in Musk’s “dark MAGA” trolling, Nazi salutes and natalism, it is in a company like Palantir that we can track and anatomise the material and symbolic trajectory of tech-supremacy as it moves across the spectrum of tech-nationalism, tech-national-conservatism and tech-fascism. Technology scholar and critic Jathan Sadowski put the matter starkly: “From inception, Palantir’s purpose has been to provide the data infrastructure for fascism. They create the ‘ontology layer’ of fascism – helping to give its ideological goals

15 Vlahos, K. B. (2024, July 24). *Peter Thiel: “I defer to Israel”*. Responsible Statecraft. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/peter-thiel-israel-palantir>

a material reality. For decades, Palantir has been working toward this moment.¹⁶ From a complementary perspective, media scholar Moira Weigel, who has written illuminatingly about Karp's perverse appropriations of critical theory (he was once a PhD student of Jürgen Habermas)¹⁷ has rightly pointed out that the kind of tech power embodied by Palantir is different in kind from that of companies like Google or Amazon, it is a kind of "ontological power".¹⁸ We could say it is building software to cognitively map and logistically integrate apparatuses of domination (which is also to say of tracking, detention, exclusion, repression and killing).

One of the methodological and political conundrums that bedevils anti-fascist theorising, especially acute in a period when the concentration and personalisation of power has reached such absurd, grotesque peaks (what Mike Davis has termed "the nightmare edition of Great Men Make History" in his last essay),¹⁹ has to do with the relative weight to be accorded to the more strictly ideological dimensions of contemporary fascist phenomena – the mentalities, intellectual influences, pet theories, court philosophers or world views of our reactionary "masters of the universe". The case of Palantir (and the indissociable one of Peter Thiel) is interesting because the contribution to the infrastructure of

16 Posted on Jathan Sadowski's "X" account on April 16, 2025 (<https://x.com/jathansadowski/status/1912721570151510445>).

17 Weigel, M. (2020). *Palantir Goes to the Frankfurt School*. b2o: boundary 2 online. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://www.boundary2.org/2020/07/moira-weigel-palantir-goes-to-the-frankfurt-school>

18 Future Histories Podcast. (2020, November 29). *Moira Weigel on Palantir, Tech Nationalism & Aggression in the Life World | Future Histories S01E42* [Video]. YouTube. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWF7qopz-yA>

19 Davis, M. (2022, March 7). *Thanatos Triumphant*. Sidecar. Retrieved August 14, 2025, from <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/thanatos-triumphant>

late fascism is here accompanied by a wish to legitimise it at the level of discourse. So, accompanying the company's Trumpian windfall, we have Alex Karp's *The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West*, co-written with Palantir operative Nicolas W. Zamiska (though apparently, ChatGPT detectors note an 85% possibility of AI enhancement, which is par for the course). It is adorned by blurbs from pro-colonial historian Niall Ferguson, JP Morgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon, Gen. James Mattis and former NATO head Anders Fogh Rasmussen. It's a weird and prolix book – replete with often inconclusive and anecdotal references ranging from Habermas to Jackson Pollock, René Girard to David Graeber, and so on. In the end, *The Technological Republic* is an improbable but symptomatic mash-up of neo-conservative tract and company brochure. The campus poster I cited at the beginning is basically its abstract, as it tries to combine a commitment to a moral and material rearmament of the nation-state (and the “West” more broadly) with an effort to sing the praises of an engineering culture based on risk, non-conformity and forms of experimentation that draw from avant-garde art as well as ethological studies of swarm behaviour in animals. In Karp's tract, selling and legitimising Palantir are one and the same, and the book manages to both advertise and obfuscate – with aesthetic-intellectual ornamentation and talk of Western “freedoms” – the company's material commitment to the US imperial machine.

But most relevant in terms of gauging its techno-fascist proclivities is its particular inflection of the counter-revolutionary motif. The thesis it shares with so much of the MAGA nebula, including Christian social conservatism and

Bannonite populism, is that a kind of liberal elite compact between Silicon Valley, elite academia, the Beltway establishment and the media has led to a risk-averse cancel-culture-hampered consumerist nihilism which is sapping the moral conviction and technological dynamism of the West as it faces the challenges of the AI revolution and emergent Chinese hegemony. It's a MAGA message for tech engineers animated by intellectual aspirations and academic resentment. What is particularly symptomatic is that in misnaming mainstream liberalism as "the left", it can't identify an actual left – one with the kind of convictions, substantive conceptions of the good and visions of the future it allegedly demands – except by way of grotesque misrepresentation. After having lambasted university administrators for "systematically punishing anything approaching moral courage and incentivising its opposite" (very true, but not in the way he intends), Karp – the CEO of a company that profits massively from surveillance and data mining systems tasked with the deportation of dissidents and the undocumented – writes:

"Amid the campus protests across the United States in 2024 following Israel's invasion and bombardment of Gaza, a growing number of student protesters began concealing their faces with scarves and masks. Their rationale was that exposure of their identities would jeopardize their futures, from depriving them of job opportunities to facing criticism on social media. A student protester /.../ told a reporter /.../ that the potential costs were too great to risk being identified. 'If I give my name, I lose my future,' he said. But is a belief that has no cost really a belief? The protective veil of anonymity may instead be robbing this generation of an

opportunity to develop an instinct for real ownership over an idea, of the rewards of victory in the public square as well as the costs of defeat.”²⁰

This is from the same book that, in a variation on the “cultural Marxism” conspiracy theory, depicts Edward Said’s *Orientalism* as the principal culprit for the emasculation of an academic world built around “Western Civ”. As Karp declares, Said’s book destabilised “an entire academic mode of being across the university establishment”, it was “the vehicle through which academia would be remade”.²¹

Thinking through, and countering, the role of a company like Palantir in welding together racial supremacy (over Palestinians or over migrants and dissidents) with tech supremacy means reckoning with the fact that the infrastructure facilitating and enhancing fascist processes and potentials is enmeshed with a very deliberate “discursive struggle” – as well as realising that this is also always a sales pitch, hype. Tech power is about building the infrastructure, the logistics of domination, but it’s also about making its speech acts lucrative, about profiting not just from fear (of migrants, of AI, of the coming war with China) but from discourse itself. As is true of most tech firms, but even more so in this case, Palantir’s market valuation, after all, is highly disproportionate to its revenue, and that gap is bridged not only by networks of power but by words.

The infrastructure and the ideology of an increasingly fascistic and bellicose tech sector are both interlocking and asymmetrical – while the infrastructure strives for fungibility

²⁰ Karp, A. C., & Zamiska, N. W. (2025). *The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West*. Crown Currency, p. 87.

²¹ Karp & Zamiska, 2025, pp. 90–91.

and homogeneity (say, between ICE and the IRS), the ideology shows its seams, its contradictions far more readily. It is tempting to overemphasise the importance of the discourse of the tech-right, not least because the “ontology layer” of late fascism, so to speak, has been built across “liberal” and “conservative” US administrations (unlike his friend Peter Thiel, Karp backed both Biden and Kamala Harris). We should not ignore ideology-critique, but this must always be subordinated to the abolition of the infrastructure of domination. If we want to build to liberate, there’s much that demands not just to be defunded but abolished. Many, perhaps most of the instruments – legal, logistical, lethal – of contemporary fascism had already been here before the latest reactionary political cycle and already at work, if sometimes more surreptitiously. We forget that at our peril. What is changing is the articulation, the configuration, the assemblage.

As with other strands of the debate on fascism’s history and its recombinant, recursive dispositions, when it comes to the nexus between fascism and technology (or “tech” as a voluble mix of speculative finance, machinic infrastructure, engineering, programming, ideology and hype), we are never in the presence of either unblemished continuities or total ruptures. But even as we track fascism’s mutations, thresholds and changing tempos, we can identify some significant constants that allow for a creative dialogue with theories forged in earlier conjunctures of radical reaction. While the material and political conditions under which these earlier theories were forged have mutated massively, they discerned structures and tendencies that are still operative, and find striking exemplification in the theory and practice of Palantir.

If it may be argued that “the unwritten history of technical norms is a history of war”,²² interwar fascism explicitly assumed the project of making history through the fusion of war and technics. It was a politics for the age of “men-machines at war”.²³ The contradiction between technological development and social form – between the mastery of machines and the ability to collectively shape humans’ relations to one another and nature – which fascism both exploited and crystallised was perhaps best formulated by Walter Benjamin. As he wrote in “Theories of German Fascism”, reflecting on the combat literature of the far-right (including Ernst Jünger) in the wake of World War I, war’s “destructive power provided clear evidence that social reality was not ready to make technology its own organ, and that technology was not strong enough to master the elemental forces of society”. The problem was – and we can confidently, if dejectedly, add, *remains* – “the gaping discrepancy between the gigantic means of technology and the minuscule moral illumination it affords”.²⁴ Benjamin further elaborated on this insight in the caustic critique of futurist F. T. Marinetti’s aestheticisation of colonial warfare in the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility”, where he transcoded the Marxian contradiction between forces and relations into a devastating analysis of the link between imperialist war, technology and fascism – an analysis which has unfortunately lost none of its scandalous force today.

22 Kittler, F. (2021). *Operation Valhalla: Writings on War, Weapons, and Media* (I. Iurascu, G. Winthrop-Young and M. Wutz, Eds. and Trans.). Duke University Press, p. 3.

23 Galison, P. (1994). Ontology of the Enemy: Norbert Wiener and the Cybernetic Vision. *Critical Inquiry*, 21, p. 252.

24 Benjamin, W. (1979). Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays “War and Warrior” (E. Jünger, Ed.; J. Wikoff, Trans.). *New German Critique*, 17, p. 120.

From the perspective of the “dialectician”, Benjamin tells us,

*“if the natural use of productive forces is impeded by the property system, then the increase in technological means, in speed, in sources of energy will press toward an unnatural use. /.../ The most horrifying features of imperialist war are determined by the discrepancy between the enormous means of production and their inadequate use in the process of production. /.../ Imperialist war is an uprising on the part of technology, which demands repayment in “human material” for the natural material society has denied it.”*²⁵

With the innervation of so-called “artificial intelligence” and its gargantuan digital-mechanical-energetic infrastructure into contemporary warfare, the “gaping discrepancy” whereof Benjamin spoke (and which in the nuclear age was termed “the Promethean gap” by Gunther Anders)²⁶ has only expanded further, as it now enacts the alienation and appropriation of human cognition and symbolic action themselves. What we are witness to in Palantir’s work on the “ontology layer” of fascism and in its CEOs intellectual posturing is an intensification of a novel strain of fetishism, grafted onto commodity-fetishism, which James William Gibson anatomised in his brilliant study of the US’s genocidal “technowar” in Vietnam – a crucial moment in the infrastructural and intellectual genealogy of the US tech-right of which Palantir is the twenty-first-century crystallisation.

- 25 Benjamin, W. (2008). *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (M. W. Jennings, B. Doherty and T.Y. Levin, Eds.). The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, p. 42 (emphasis in the original).
- 26 Toscano, A. (2016). The Promethean Gap: Modernism, Machines and the Obsolescence of Man. *Modernism/modernity*, 23(3), pp. 593–609.

This new fetishism, Gibson wrote,

*“involved rationalized capitalist production as it was organized for war production. Political and social power became conceptualized and practiced solely in terms of how high societies ranked in their ability to produce high-technology warfare. /.../ And when relationships appear as warfare systems, then social relationships disappear from view just as they do with the system of simple commodity production.”*²⁷

To interrupt and undermine the building of fascism’s “ontology layer” – its digital, energetic and material infrastructure – we will also be required to undo this fetishism, as well as to undertake a self-critical reflection on how much it has come to shape “normal” everyday life in our capitalist societies, not just on its seemingly aberrant authoritarian turns and its bellicose drives. Abolishing the infrastructure will also mean abolishing a part of ourselves.

²⁷ Gibson, J. W. (2000). *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam*. Atlantic Monthly Press, pp. 19–20. See also: Sartre, J. P. (1968). *On Genocide*. Beacon Press.

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