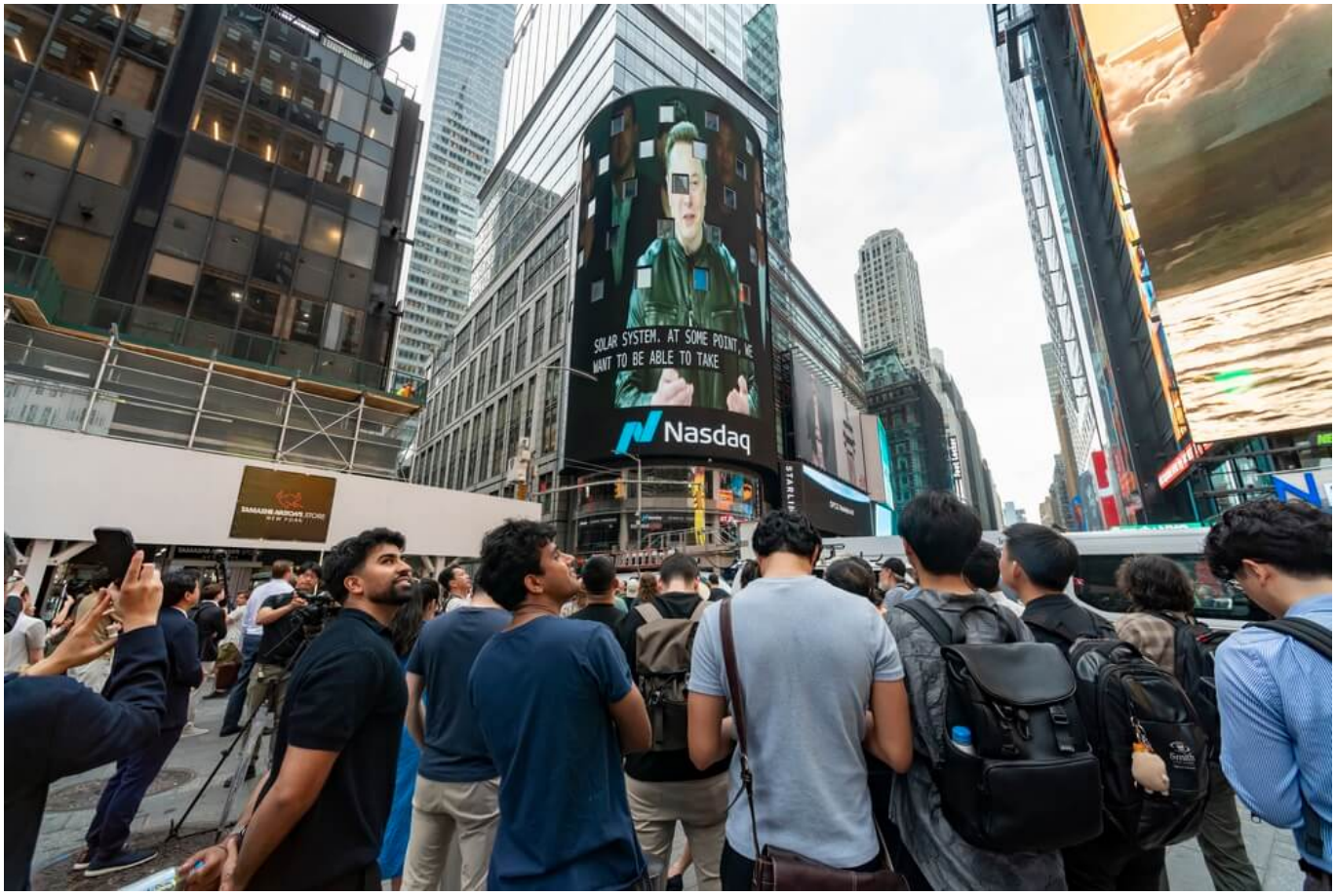
Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: Katharina Pistor

Proactive disloyalty towards new tech sovereignty



Over several centuries, nation-states have come to define the international system and govern much of humanity.

After emerging in modern Europe and spreading through colonialism, they eventually made it to every corner of the world through postwar decolonization.

Their defining feature is control over territory and its inhabitants, without interference by others.

Modern nation-states are still with us, of course, but a new form of sovereignty, capable of even more intrusive and insidious forms of control than most states can muster, is asserting itself.

Such is the nature of the new tech sovereignty being advanced, through words and deeds, by a small brotherhood whose members have been crystal clear about their goal of replacing the state and subordinating other necessary institutions to their will.

For example, Peter Thiel, one of the co-founders of PayPal, speaks openly about a "deadly war" between tech and state.

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg has tried (unsuccessfully, so far) to launch a global currency, and has now set his sights on controlling critical infrastructure like the subsea transatlantic cable system.

Elon Musk rules the skies with Starlink and has demonstrated a willingness to cut off access to embattled democracies (or anyone else) whenever he sees fit, no matter the national-security implications.

And the platform company Palantir (whose board is chaired by Thiel) is ensnaring the state with digital infrastructure to reach deep into sensitive sectors, including health and security.

Tech companies' absolute rule

Most states have willingly aided and abetted these companies, effectively accelerating their own demise for fear that they might be outdone by other states embracing the same mass surveillance and control technologies.

Yet the tech brotherhood leaves no room for doubt about the fate it has in mind for "we, the people."

It has no patience for social contracts with mutually binding obligations for rulers and ruled.

It conceives of power as unilateral and top-down, and while some of its members have recently expressed fears of losing control over their own digital creations, neither the prospect of global instability nor even human extinction is enough to convince them to share power.

They have put our fate at the mercy of rogue AI agents, and we are expected to accept it quietly.

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They may have played nicely at first, using treaties or contracts, and pretending that the contracting party was acting voluntarily.

Eventually, they took what they wanted by force, sometimes under cover of law, whether it be land, labor, animals, or water.

Colonists found a justification for expropriation without compensation by asserting that Indigenous peoples had no concept of property or capacity to improve it.

From there it was only a small step to remove the people from their land and place them in reservations.

Platform reservations far from the levers of power

Similarly, courts today have denied data producers any property rights to their data, and legislatures have vindicated, ex post, the property rights that tech companies asserted over data they "improved" by cleaning, organizing, and storing it on some device.

Now the free people of constitutional democracies find themselves in platform reservations far from the levers of power, feeding their addiction to endless scrolling (and data extraction).

The big technology companies resemble the corporate charters imposed on Indigenous peoples by the US Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, which allowed for a president and a board, but not self-determination.

Likewise, Anthropic and Musk recently announced plans to let the people they exploit share in some of the financial spoils.

Anthropic wants to establish a public benefit fund that will be capitalized with shares in the company, potentially making payouts to the public from time to time.

But the fund's structure is revealing. As a limited liability company owned and controlled by Anthropic, it would give no voice to anyone but its own people.

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Going one step further, Musk has proposed to give "every kid" in the United States a share in SpaceX.

That sounds more promising, but the devil is in the details. Will they get voting rights? With cumulative rights, could they elect at least one director?

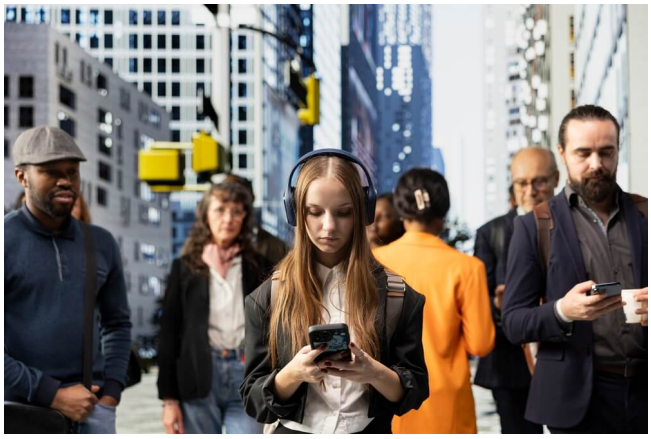
Of course, it would be delusional to believe that the kids might one day exert control.

The expectation is that they should be grateful for the pittance they receive in exchange for bending to corporate rule.

Exit, voice, or loyalty

That is where we are heading. We may continue to vote for public officials, but our elections will be manipulated by money and communication technologies that further cement tech sovereignty.

Far from being free or sovereign, people will be a mere resource to be managed by the likes of Thiel, Zuckerberg, and Musk.



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Here, too, Indigenous peoples' experience is instructive. When they were finally given the right in the US to adopt their own constitutions, only a few succeeded in forming viable societies again.

The power structures that had been imposed on them had destroyed their social fabric, and with it their capacity to self-govern.

The late economist Albert Hirschman famously argued that every organization gives its members three options: exit, voice, or loyalty.

The current tech infrastructure is designed to deny us exit by making us dependent, and we have already seen that it gives us no real voice.

That leaves only loyalty, which means nothing when it is not freely chosen. Proactive disloyalty by the many may be our last, best defense.

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