The Unbearable Hubris of Musk and the Billionaire Tech Bros [C2]

Le manie di grandezza della nuova élite economica prospettano un futuro distopico in cui la tecnologia servirà ad aumentare ulteriormente le disuguaglianze e la democrazia sarà considerata un artefatto obsoleto.

Billionaires, or their equivalents, have been around a long time, but there's something different about today's tech titans, as evidenced by a [rash](##) of recent books. Reading about their apocalypse bunkers, vampiric longevity strategies, [outlandish](##) social media pronouncements, private space programmes and virtual world-building ambitions, it's hard to remember they're not actors in a reality series or characters from a new [Avengers](##) movie. [Unlike](##) their [forebears](##), contemporary billionaires do not hope to build the biggest house in town, but the biggest colony on the Moon. In contrast, however avaricious, the titans of past [gilded eras](##) still saw themselves as human members of civil society. Contemporary billionaires appear to understand civics and civilians as impediments to their progress, necessary victims of the externalities of their companies' growth, sad artefacts of the civilisation they will leave behind in their inexorable colonisation of the next dimension. [Unlike](##) their [forebears](##), they do not hope to build the biggest house in town, but the biggest underground [lair](##) in New Zealand, colony on the Moon or Mars or virtual reality server in the cloud. While plans for Peter Thiel's 193-hectare [doomsday](##) escape, complete with spa, theatre, meditation lounge and library, were ultimately rejected on environmental [grounds](##), he still wants to build a startup community that floats on the ocean, where so-called '[seasteaders](##) can live beyond government regulation as well as whatever disasters may [befall](##) us back on the continents. To escape near-term problems such as poverty and pollution, Jeff Bezos imagines building millions of space colonies housing trillions of people on the Moon, asteroids and in other parts of the Solar System, where inhabitants will [harvest](##) the resources of space for themselves and those left back on Earth. Elon Musk is convinced he will build a city of a million people on Mars by 2050 at a cost of up to \(10bn a person. The ChatGPT impresario Sam Altman, whose board of directors [sacked](## "dimettere") him as CEO before he made a dramatic [comeback](## "ritorno"), wants to upload his consciousness to the cloud (if the AIs he helped build and now fears will permit him to do so.) [Oddly enough](## "stranamente"), while their [schemes](## "complotti") are certainly more [outlandish](## "stravagante"), on an individual basis today's tech billionaires are not any wealthier than their early 20th-century [counterparts](## "omologhi"). Adjusted for inflation, John Rockefeller's fortune of \)336bn and Andrew Carnegie's \(309bn exceed Musk's \)231bn, Bezos' \(165bn and Gates' \)114bn. Today there are far more centimillionaires and billionaires than there were in the gilded age, and they have collectively accumulated a much larger proportion of the world's wealth. In 1983, there were 66,000 households worth at least \(10m in the US. By 2019, that number had increased in terms adjusted for inflation to 693,000. Back in the industrial age, the rate of total elite wealth accumulation was [capped](## "limitare") by the limits of the material world. They could only build so many railroads, [steel mills](## "acciaieria") and [oilwells](## "pozzi petroliferi") at a time. Virtual [commodities](## "beni") such as likes, views, crypto and derivatives can be replicated exponentially. What evidence we do see of their operations in the real world mostly take the form of externalised [harm](## "danno"). Digital businesses depend on mineral slavery in Africa, [dump](##

"discarica") toxic waste in China, facilitate the [undermining](## "indebolire") of democracy across the globe and spread destabilising disinformation for profit — all from the sociopathic [remove](## "differenza") afforded by remote administration. Indeed, there is an [imperiousness](## "arroganza") to the way the new billionaire class [disregard](## "disprezzare") people and places for which it is hard to find historical precedent. Zuckerberg had to go all the way back to Augustus Caesar for a role model, and his admiration for the emperor borders on obsession. He models his haircut on Augustus; his wife joked that three people went on their honeymoon to Rome: Mark, Augustus and herself; he named his second daughter August; and he used to end Facebook meetings by proclaiming "Domination!" While we should be thankful he has chosen to emulate Augustus instead of, say, Caligula, he is nonetheless aspiring toward the absolute power — and hairstyle — of a Roman dictator. Zuckerberg told The New Yorker "through a really [harsh](## "severo") approach, he established two hundred years of world peace", finally [acknowledging](## "riconoscere") "that didn't come for free, and he had to do certain things." It's that sort of top-down thinking that led Zuckerberg to establish an independent [oversight board](## "comitato di supervisione") at Facebook, [dubbed](## "soprannominare") the "Supreme Court". At least Zuckerberg's anti-democratic measures are expressed as the [decrees](## "decreti") of a benevolent dictator. Musk exercises no such [restraint](## "controllo"). In response to the accusation that the US government organised a [coup](## "colpo di stato") against Evo Morales in Bolivia in order for Tesla to secure lithium there, Musk tweeted: "We will [coup](## "colpo di stato") whoever we want! [Deal with it](## "fatevene una ragione")." Musk has the [gumption](## "intraprendenza") to tweet this way because Twitter/X is his own platform. He bought it. So is Tesla. And that may be the key distinction of this strange moment. In the last gilded age, each titan owned and controlled pretty much one major industry. Rockefeller may have had the monopoly in oil but Carnegie dominated steel, Vanderbilt had shipping and the railroads, and JP Morgan was the banker. Musk not only owns X and Tesla but also SpaceX, StarLink, the Boring Company, Solar City, NeuraLink, xAI, and someday, he hopes, another finance company like PayPal (which he co-founded with Thiel but then sold to eBay.) Similarly, Bezos doesn't just control Amazon – the world's biggest-ever [retailer](## "rivenditore"), if that even does justice to the monolith — but The Washington Post, [IMDb](## "Internet Movie Database"), MGM, Twitch, Zoox, Kiva, Whole Foods, Ring, Ivona, One Medical, Blue Origin and, of course, Amazon Web Services, which owns at least one-third of the cloud computing market. Included in Gates' 20bn dollars' worth of Microsoft [stock](## "azioni") and [assets](## "beni") are Microsoft Azure (his 23 per cent of the cloud), LinkedIn, Skype and GitHub. He also, incidentally, owns 109,000 hectares (270,000 acres) of US farmland. In the 19th and 20th centuries, industrialists understood that giving money to existing institutions meant that it could be distributed wherever it was needed, and so they donated to hospitals, libraries and universities. JP Morgan actually [bailed out](## "salvare") the US federal government on two separate occasions. Today's billionaire

philanthropists, frequently [espousing](## "sostenere") the philosophy of effective altruism, donate to their own organisations, often in the form of their own [stock](## "azioni"), and make their own decisions about how the money is spent because they are, after all, experts in everything. Rather than donating to a university, Thiel's [Fellowship](## "amicizia, compagnia") pays \)100,000 "to young people who want to build new things instead of sitting in a classroom". Meanwhile, contests such as Musk's X Prize and Singularity University focus on "exponential technologies" that solve "global grand challenges". Such moonshots reward the bold thinking that "aims to make something ten times better." Their words and actions suggest an approach to life, technology and business that I have come to call The Mindset— a belief that with enough money, one can escape the harms created by earning money in that way. It's a belief that with enough genius and technology, they can rise above the plane of mere mortals and exist on an entirely different level, or planet, altogether. By combining a distorted interpretation of Nietzsche with a pretty accurate one of Ayn Rand, they end up with a belief that while God is dead, the Übermensch of the future can use pure reason to rise above traditional religious values and remake the world "in his own interests". Nietzsche's language, particularly out of context, provides tech Übermensch wannabes with justification for assuming superhuman authority. In his book Zero to One, Thiel directly quotes Nietzsche to argue for the supremacy of the individual: "Madness is rare in individuals, but in groups, parties, nations, and ages it is the rule". In Thiel's words: "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." This distorted image of the Übermensch as a godlike creator, pushing confidently towards his clear vision of how things should be, persists as an essential component of The Mindset. Any new business idea, Thiel says, should be an order of magnitude better than what's already out there. Don't compare yourself to everyone else; instead, operate one level above the competing masses. For Thiel, this requires being what he calls a "definite optimist". Most entrepreneurs are too process-oriented, making incremental decisions based on how the market responds. They should instead be like Steve Jobs or Elon Musk, pressing on with their singular vision no matter what. The definite optimist doesn't take feedback into account, but ploughs forward with his new design for a better world. It happens ex nihilo — literally "from zero to one". So like a supervillain constructing an all-seeing eye, Thiel builds a giant data analytics system, Palantir, through which he can observe and predict threats before they even manifest — all the while preparing for Armageddon, just in case. Following his early investor and mentor Thiel's advice, Zuckerberg, too, seeks to rise far above the competition. Facebook was one of the internet's first and most successful aggregators, thriving off the social competition of users and profiting no matter whose cookie-cutter profile page garnered the most likes. It took us all from web 1.0 to web 2.0. As competition between the social networks of web 2.0 increased, Zuckerberg again went meta to claim sovereignty over some ill-defined combination of virtual reality, cryptocurrency and AI he would call "web 3". This is not capitalism, as Yanis Varoufakis explains in his new book Technofeudalism.

Capitalists sought to extract value from workers by disconnecting them from the value they created, but they still made stuff. Feudalists seek an entirely passive income by "going meta" on business itself. They are rent-seekers, whose aim is to own the very platform on which other people do the work. Instead of emulating them, we should first laugh at them, and then dismiss them. They're like the contestants in an episode of Survivor, trying to be the last one on the island. It's perversely amusing, and sometimes hard to look away. It's the same impulse that leads many Americans to vote for Trump — less because they want him for president than because he will make for better television. But it's time to turn off this show, this car accident of a tech future, and get on with reclaiming the world from this new generation of robber barons rather than continuing to fund their fantasies. These are not the demigods we're looking for.   Published in The Guardian on May 6, 2023. Reprinted with permission.

Glossary

- **schemes** = complotti
- **counterparts** = omologhi
- **Avengers** = vendicatori
- **harm** = danno
- **remove** = differenza
- **harsh** = severo
- **stock** = azioni
- **amusing** = divertente
- **doomsday** = fine del mondo
- **seasteaders** = colonizzatori marini
- **harvest** = raccogliere
- **grounds** = con la motivazione che
- **steel mills** = acciaieria
- **dubbed** = soprannominare
- **gumption** = intraprendenza
- **bailed out** = salvare
- **rash** = ondata di
- **sacked** = dimettere
- **altogether** = totalmente
- **oilwells** = pozzi petroliferi
- **Deal with it** = fatevene una ragione
- **contests** = competizioni
- **all-seeing** = onniveggente
- **garnered** = guadagnare
- **Unlike** = a differenza di
- **undermining** = indebolire
- **quotes** = citare
- **cookie-cutter** = fatto con lo stampino
- **lair** = covo, rifugio
- **capped** = limitare
- **commodities** = beni
- **restraint** = controllo
- **retailer** = rivenditore
- **Übermensch** = superuomo (dal tedesco)
- **dump** = discarica
- **espousing** = sostenere
- **moonshots** = progetti chimerici
- **to rise above** = elevarsi al disopra di
- **godlike** = divino
- **ploughs** = procedere

- **befall** = accadere
- **disregard** = disprezzare
- **reward** = riconoscere
- **thriving off** = prosperare
- **imperiousness** = arroganza
- **outlandish** = stravagante
- **oversight board** = comitato di supervisione
- **decrees** = decreti
- **Fellowship** = amicizia, compagnia
- **bold** = audace
- **Mindset** = mentalità
- **rent-seekers** = cercatori di rendite
- **forebears** = antenati
- **comeback** = ritorno
- **acknowledging** = riconoscere
- **coup** = colpo di stato
- **IMDb** = Internet Movie Database
- **ill-defined** = vago, indefinito
- **gilded eras** = epoche dorate
- **Oddly enough** = stranamente
- **assets** = beni
- **wannabes** = aspiranti