

Up/Down Politics and Techno-Human Relations: Utopias, Dystopias and Pluralistic Futures

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Abstract. This paper will consider the development of a new polarity in politics: up wing and down wing. It will trace the lineage of the up wing to proto-transhumanism and outline how utopian promises underpin this sensibility with its fantasies of overcoming all natural constraints. The influence of cybernetics upon up/down thought will be discussed and the post-anthropocentric shift it enabled from centring the human to Life itself. The influence of up wing politics on post-neoliberal, techno-utopian, authoritarian ideologies and its growing connections to power will then be discussed.

Keywords: transhumanism, critical posthumanism, up/down politics, cybernetics, authoritarianism.

Riassunto. L'articolo esamina lo sviluppo di una nuova polarità politica: *up/down*. Dopo aver ricostruito la genesi dell'ala *up* fino al proto-transumanesimo, si discute di come le promesse utopiche sostengano questa posizione e le sue fantasie di superare ogni limite naturale. Verrà quindi analizzata l'influenza della cibernetica sul pensiero *up/down* e il conseguente spostamento post-antropocentrico dalla centralità dell'essere umano a quella della vita. Infine, sono prese in esame l'influenza della politica *up* sulle ideologie post-neoliberali, tecno-utopistiche e autoritarie, e le crescenti connessioni che essa intreccia con il potere politico.

Parole chiave: transumanesimo, postumanesimo critico, politica up/down, cibernetica, autoritarismo.

Introduction

Contemporary political analysis tends to chart a horizontal left-right axis to map political ideology. However, such is the import of technological development on the unfolding of social, environmental and political reality, a new up/down axis is useful to capture novel ideological commitments and practices in a different way. In this paper, I will outline the lineage of the up/down political axis, identifying the up wing with technoutopian, proto-transhumanist thought and the down wing with critical posthumanist ideas, particularly inspired by a complexity framework with a focus on environmental justice. Whilst my position in the latter camp will become clear, the article will focus more on outlining the history and ideology of the up wing. This is because up wing thought is now highly influential in the most hegemonic sector of the global economy: Big Tech, and within the most powerful political institution: the US government.

Central to my aim here is to draw attention to the way up wing thought has traditionally seen technology as a route out of political and ethical contestations of all kinds. Through transcending the human condition it claims to eclipse the right-left axis and all other questions of values in their entirety. Its primary commitment is thus radical technological development, in particular technologies that enhance or enact “intelligence” in order to solve all other problems. In outlining where this strain of thought stems from and its integration into the heart of global power structures, I hope to provide down wing thinkers with context to better understand and contest the direction of contemporary politics.

Transhumanism and Up Wing Politics as Utopian Abstraction

Both utopia and transhumanism are concepts that have different meanings to different people. As Duncan Bell argues, the meaning of utopia has never been stable in “its historical origins, its geographical reach, or its political valences [...]. Utopia is everywhere and nowhere, dying and resurgent, restricted and expansive, radical and conservative, vital for human progress and a threat to humanity.” Bell contends that the conceptual ambiguity of the term can be traced back to Thomas More’s 1516 book *Utopia* in which he “coined two terms – *utopia*, the no-place, and *eutopia*, the good place.” This leads to the “the unhelpful conflation between claiming it names a demand for *fundamental* change and for a *better* world.”¹ While transhumanism may have more consensus over its

¹ Bell, “What is Utopia?” 1, 6 and 19 respectively.

broad definition, the imaginary futures that it inspires can be highly varied. It is a distinctly schismatic discourse. Numerous transhumanist sub-categories exist, and continue to proliferate. Its self-proclaimed modern progenitor, Max More attempts to guard an essentialist formulation in the image of his version of the philosophy.² However, this is a futile aim as more influential transhumanist thinkers such as Nick Bostrom and Ray Kurzweil contradict his core tenets and spiralling techno-human developments inspire new transhumanist identities and visions for the future. Transhumanism is best understood as a capacious and inclusive term to describe unfolding techno-optimistic imaginaries promoting the radical enhancement of human (and posthuman) capacities.

A significant influence on the ideas of More and other modern transhumanist thinkers was the futurist and proto-transhumanist F.M. Esfandiary. He changed his name to FM-2030 in the hope of celebrating his 100th birthday that year in what he envisioned would be a spectacular world. FM-2030's vision for the future combined the utopian "no-place" and the eutopian "better place." He foresaw a world so radically improved that no limitation of the human lifeworld would still exist. In 1973, he advanced the up wing political pole with the publication of *Upwingers: A Futurist Manifesto* in which he claimed:

The Right-Left establishment wants to maintain an evolutionary status quo [...]. It is resigned to humanity's basic predicament. It simply strives to make life better within this predicament. Up-Wingers [...] accept no human predicament as permanent no tragedy as irreversible no goals as unattainable.³

By imagining a world where no human predicament is beyond transcendence and no goal is beyond reach, FM-2030's appeal to "no-place" is utopian in the extreme. If no predicament is permanent, no context is relevant. The transcendence of all possible limitation is the transcendence of all possible context – thus a position from nowhere is staked out. FM-2030 goes on to argue that all traditional politics of the left / right axis – conservatism, liberalism, left-wing "radicalism" – are all "down" because they all accept or presume a "predicament" and are thus inherently conservative.⁴ Interestingly, Bell and Taillandier characterise this up wing position as post-ideological and anti-utopian because of its rejection of the right-left "bipolar dynamics" of Cold War politics.⁵ However, the up wing gesture is, in a different sense, deeply ideological in its advocacy of radical

² More, *True Transhumanism*.

³ Esfandiary, *Upwingers*.

⁴ Esfandiary, *Upwingers*.

⁵ Bell and Taillandier, "Cosmos-politanism."

technological development. In presenting a positionality that denies any predicament, it presents the exemplar of a view from nowhere, a place that simply cannot be. Yet at the same time, this “no-place” acts as an imperative for radical technological progress in order to realise a presumed “better place.” It is at once utopian and eutopian. Prescriptive and imaginary.

Transhumanism is often considered to be a utopian discourse. David Pearce advocates the engineering of paradise,⁶ Bostrom constructed a Letter From Utopia and identifies “Deep Utopia” with a “solved world”⁷ and Steve Fuller and Veronika Lipinska envision serving God by becoming God.⁸ Michael Hauskeller concludes “transhumanism is without doubt a philosophy of strong utopian tendencies”.⁹ More, however, reveals once more the heterodox nature of transhumanist thought by rejecting its utopian credentials, as he associates utopia with a static goal or an ideal of perfection. He claims his term “extropia” is intended to signal a “conceptual alternative... a never-ending movement toward the ever-distant goal of extropia.”¹⁰ If transhumanism can be said to be internally cohesive at all, it is only as a broad church, a loose ideology, with many different views of what a transhumanist utopia or extropia will or should look like and contradictory conceptions of the avenues to get there. However, More’s extropian conceptualisation is not a championing of pluralistic futures, but rather a linear conception of progress through the amassing of knowledge and power.¹¹ He echoes FM-2030’s desire for a total eclipsing of the human predicament through transcending all “natural, but harmful, confining qualities derived from our biological heritage, culture and environment.”¹²

Transhumanist and proto-transhumanist thought does not always decry a commitment to specific political values or claim that they can simply be transcended through technological progress.¹³ In the early twentieth century, J.B.S. Haldane and J.D. Bernal were highly influential socialist scientists whose work foreshadows the central concerns of contemporary transhumanism.¹⁴ Julian Huxley, who is usually cited as coining the term “transhumanism,” was a technocratic liberal thinker. Prominent political positions of modern transhumanism include the libertarian “extropian-

⁶ Pearce, “The Hedonistic Imperative,” n.p.

⁷ Bostrom, “Letter from Utopia;” *Deep Utopia*.

⁸ Fuller and Lipinska, *Proactionary Imperative*.

⁹ Hauskeller, “Utopia,” 101.

¹⁰ More, “The Philosophy of Transhumanism,” 14.

¹¹ Thomas, *Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*.

¹² More, “The Philosophy of Transhumanism,” 4-5.

¹³ Bell and Taillandier, “Cosmos-politanism.”

¹⁴ Coenen, “Transhumanism.”

ism” inspired by More, and a social democratic techno-progressive wing which James Hughes has been integral in developing. Despite this, transhumanist thought often depends on a decontextualised and abstracted positionality that is at once a position from nowhere, outside all context, and at the same time, presumes enhancement – which implies relationality, and necessitates value judgements. Furthermore, there is a persistent and misguided assumption that technological progress can transcend all ethical and political contestations.

Building on Esfandiary’s notion, transhumanists Fuller and Lipinska claimed in their book *The Proactionary Imperative* that up/down politics are the new political poles of the future with “Up” being transhumanist, “proactionary” and techno-utopian and “Down” being posthumanist, “precautionary” and environmentally minded. This is something of a shift, as “up” is no longer a commitment to an imagined political future beyond the human predicament, but a claim on the politics of the moment for how we get there. As such, context very much exists in the real world up/down politics of today, and the human predicament is still intact. No longer is “up” the place of the decontextualised imagination, but a site of grounded machinations of modern techno-capitalist contestations. No doubt, the increasing potency of technologies requires a recalibration of political thought. However, the up wing continues to rely on an imaginary, abstracted future of ‘enhancement’, where an upgraded intelligence frees us from our embeddedness in material, grounded relations of rich complexity. The questions that such embeddedness raises about power, response-ability,¹⁵ and the deepening crises of our times are transcended, or more fittingly, avoided. The triumphalist claims of up wing politics are thoroughly undermined by this evasion.

The Cybernetic Legacy of Up/Down Politics

In *How We Became Posthuman*, Katherine Hayles analyses the role cybernetics played in inspiring the up wing imaginary.¹⁶ Dan Zimmer highlights how cybernetics gave rise to a novel strain of down wing thinking too. As Zimmer explains, “[c]ybernetics broke with classical Western categories of being (where something is what it is because of its distinct, unchanging, and essential nature) by reconceiving the myriad entities that swim upstream against entropy as analogous kinds of *complex information*

¹⁵ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

¹⁶ Hayles, *How we Became Post-Human*.

processing systems.”¹⁷ Resultantly, cybernetics enabled political thought to take on a postanthropocentric disposition with both up and down renouncing the human in favour of something altogether grander and more expansive: life itself. Zimmer states,

Dissolving distinctions between human and nonhuman and organism and mechanism made it newly possible to link everything from human-built machines to single celled organisms, slime mold, insect swarms, rats, simian cousins, human families, computer programs, firms, economies, and ecological networks as part of a continuous arc of interacting systems that process information to sustain their complex organization.¹⁸

But this postanthropocentricism manifests itself in two very different ways. Zimmer sees the “scions of cybernetics” splitting into two camps with each taking a different lesson from the subject. Up wing thinkers “privilege the *information processing* aspect of Life” whilst down wingers “stress the *complex systems* side of the equation.”¹⁹ These competing interpretations lead to a dichotomous ideological rupture.

As Hayles recognised, an “information/materiality hierarchy” emerged for up wingers, through which information was abstracted into something that need not be constituted by a material incarnation. This imaginary act is powerful and seductive: “Information viewed as pattern and not tied to a particular instantiation is information free to travel across time and space [...] free from material constraints that govern the mortal world [...] we can achieve effective immortality.”²⁰ The Enlightenment humanist credentials of transhumanism are often cited in histories or genealogies of transhumanist thought, so the claim that up wing politics takes a postanthropocentric turn may seem dubious or to set it at odds with transhumanism.²¹ However, central to the humanist conceit was the idea that human intelligence, our capacity for reason, separated us from the rest of nature. As Hayles describes, this informational framing made of intelligence not just a distinctive capacity but something potentially transcendent: “At the inaugural moment of the computer age, the erasure of embodiment is performed so that ‘intelligence’ becomes a property of the formal manipulation of symbols rather than an action in the human life-world.”²² Thus, the postanthropocentric up wing gesture is a continuation of the

¹⁷ Zimmer, “From Left/Right to Up/Down,” 5.

¹⁸ Zimmer, “From Left/Right to Up/Down,” 5.

¹⁹ Zimmer, “From Left/Right to Up/Down,” 9.

²⁰ Hayles, *How we Became Post-Human*, 12-13.

²¹ Bostrom, “History of Transhumanist Thought,” Thomas, *Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*.

²² Hayles, *How we Became Post-Human*, xi.

inner logic of Enlightenment humanism: “Up wingers reconceived human beings as the tool Life crafted to break out of earthbound biological limitations and realize its universal potential.”²³ The exceptionalism humanism finds in human reason can be transposed to other, potentially superior, forms of intelligence, but the human remains a pivotal actor in the struggle of life against entropy. It is the capacity to process information efficiently that is significant, and humans are the current pinnacle and so of vital importance to the trajectory of “Life.” Zimmer states that the up wing made a cardinal virtue of intelligence.

On the other side of the divide, the notion of a complex system reiterates context and thus limitation, emphasising the interconnection of all things and the importance of the environment. Humans are thus inextricably bound to the richly complex materiality of being. The postanthropocentricism of the down wing is more resolute. Indeed “some Down wing thinkers came to view human beings as a biological outbreak marring the face of Gaia.”²⁴ Down wing or down politics is not usually a moniker embraced by advocates of posthumanism, the precautionary, and the environmentally minded. However, it is perhaps implicit, for example, in Haraway’s claim “I am terran. I am not astralized” and Latour’s *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*.²⁵ Whilst “down” may not be an appealing appellation for a political stance, its coherence as an antipode to the up wing is worth consideration. Zimmer argues that it is not intelligence that down wingers venerate, but wisdom. Wisdom demands ethical response-ability. Rather than the instrumental progress revered by up wingers, a recognition of limitation, co-dependency, humility, and embeddedness is central to down wing thought. Zimmer states,

post-cybernetic ecology reframed the mere fact of survival as a miracle daily renewed through the mutual maintenance of countless species – humankind just one among them [...] Rather than simply replace modern dreams of mastery with the more modest – but still, in an entropic universe, heroic – goal of survival, this view actively suggests that mastery and survival work at cross purposes.²⁶

Thus, the up wing aims of the control and domination of nature are not only quixotic but self-destructive.

A very human, and indeed, a more-than-human predicament remains. Climate crisis is progressing at an alarming rate alongside other spiralling

²³ Zimmer, “From Left/Right to Up/Down,” 29-30.

²⁴ Zimmer, “From Left/Right to Up/Down,” 29-30.

²⁵ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 273; Latour, *Down to Earth*.

²⁶ Zimmer, “From Left/Right to Up/Down,” 19.

environmental catastrophes including the sixth great extinction of species event. The spectre of nuclear war has returned, and wars and genocides and increasingly prominent in the news cycle. There is deeply ingrained economic precarity, rapidly increasing inequality, entrenched political instability. An emergent cognitive meta-infrastructure comprising “5G communications networks, artificial intelligence and big-data analytics programs, social media, internet-connected appliances and devices, media creation and manipulation tools, cloud storage, and more” has facilitated an epistemological crisis creating a conspiracy epidemic and deepening levels of polarity.²⁷ Down wing thinkers may consider all this unsurprising: the interconnection of all things points to deep complexity vastly beyond the power of human reason. The social, economic and cultural impacts of technologies are often well beyond our ability to predict or control as our understanding of anything is only ever partial, so as humans deepen their monocultural technological and social webs, balance is jeopardised.

Such a critique leaves up wingers requiring *more* intelligence and thus more technology. They dream of the creation of an enhanced posthuman species to realise the full potential of superintelligence: the escape from all limits, and the creation of Utopia. Whilst down wing thinking identifies the dystopian crises of our times, from climate catastrophe to the ongoing threat of nuclear war, as the inevitable failure to acknowledge context, complexity, relationality, and the limitation of human reason, the up wing turns to artificial intelligence to create a “solved world.”²⁸ The stated aim of OpenAI, the creators of ChatGPT, is to build “artificial general intelligence,” a term that is deeply embedded in transhumanist thinking.²⁹ And while there is no clear definition, it broadly indicates the moment when AI can do all cognitive tasks to the level of any human. As originally conceived of by I.J. Good in 1965 and later identified with the term the “Singularity,”³⁰ AGI will shortly after lead to the first superintelligence which, for up wingers, can then rocket progress past the moon, to Mars and beyond.

Hierarchy, Exit and Scale (HES): patriarchal billionaire capitalism and AI

As the polycrisis deepens, more extreme forms of politics are developing to defend the interests of capital. Despite the down wing’s more accu-

²⁷ Allenby, “5G, AI and big data,” n.p.

²⁸ Bostrom, *Deep Utopia*.

²⁹ Gebbru and Torres, “The TESCREAL Bundle.”

³⁰ Vinge, “The Coming Technological Singularity.”

rate diagnosis of the present, and prognosis of the future, it is the up wing that is providing the narratives for these new political imaginaries. In particular, transhumanism is having a pervasive impact on the imagination of the leaders of the Big Tech industry. It has become the salvific bedtime story of choice for many Silicon Valley billionaires. This oligarchic techno-elite have aligned themselves with Trump's MAGA project raising the spectre of an up-right techno-authoritarianism, which Gil Duran has dubbed the "Nerd Reich."³¹ There are three particular strains of political imagination which are becoming popular amongst this hegemonic project which are nourished by transhumanist ideology. These can be summarised as Hierarchy, Exit and Scale (HES – a fitting acronym given the influence of patriarchal capitalism).

The use of scale as an eschatological tool for disorienting ethical reasoning has been a longstanding conceit within transhumanist discourse. Christopher Coenen traced a history aimed at showing that transhumanist "visions could be an expression of displaced eschatological needs" with Darwin forming a major part of this displacement.³² Coenen recognises in proto-transhumanist voices of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an attempt to dignify humanity in a way that makes us integral to the dizzying sense of the sublime invoked by our novel insights into the epic scale of time and space. Proto-transhumanist thought imagined humanity rising up to this scale itself, once more emphasising the humanist and up wing urge to control and dominate nature.

Modern transhumanism also draws upon the dizzying sense of the cosmological sublime in promoting its ideas. If we can imagine the future to be vast and glorious, even limitless, its potential value can be made to outweigh any current injustices, or social problems. Bostrom, perhaps the most intellectually influential transhumanist of the 21st Century, is the main inspiration behind a transhumanist offshoot called longtermism. Bostrom claims that 10^{29} potential human lives are wasted every second that we are not colonizing the Virgo Supercluster with computer generated minds of human equivalence.³³ The value that these many trillions of potential digital consciousnesses constitute vastly outweighs the interests of the few billion humans alive today according to longtermism. Indeed, these speculative and fanciful numbers enable real world catastrophes to be couched as "mere ripples" in comparison. Climate crisis, genocides, wars and other down wing concerns, all are minor episodes as long as some survive to maintain and bestow our technological expertise. Given

³¹ Duran, "The Nerd Reich."

³² Coenen, "Transhumanism," 38.

³³ Bostrom, "Astronomical Waste."

the utilitarian moral duty to realise our “cosmic endowment” and bring these trillions of posthuman beings into existence, only those who carry the technological expertise can be considered of significant importance and value.

Longtermism has unsurprisingly proved appealing to Silicon Valley because it places the elites of scientific and technological progress as the main characters in the most important moment in history. We are on “the precipice” as the longtermist Toby Ord, states. Elon Musk labelled one of Bostrom’s articles “Likely the most important paper ever written” and called William MacAskill’s longtermist tract *What We Owe the Future* a close match for his philosophy. It is so influential among Big Tech billionaires and so well-funded that Torres has persuasively claimed radical longtermism “may be the most influential ideology in the world today that most people have never heard about.”³⁴ AI-inspired fantasy, such as radical longtermism, is particularly vulnerable to the power of the “cosmopolitical sublime,” because “superintelligence” promises to eclipse theory, ethics and all political contestations. This quasi-religious promise of transcendence empowers the desire to avoid the messy, complex, embodied reality of intra-connection that demands grounded ethical work, and wisdom, the cardinal virtue of down politics. It is replaced by a reductive, computational mindset – the efficient processing of abstract information.

As for exit, the billionaire symbols of space rockets and underground bunkers reveal the desire for escape either as forms of extending projects of colonialism into space or to hide underground from the impacts of destructive and exploitative techno-capitalist social systems. Dreams of exit reveal the desire to claim all the spoils of capital accumulation and technological development without tending to the social and environmental damage left behind. Transhumanism speaks effectively to this desire to transcend limitations; it chimes with this politics of exit – the fantasy that “we” or at least some of us, can free ourselves from constraints – whether that is aging, death or more prosaically, taxes. The escape from the human predicament that FM-2030 identified with up wing politics, has morphed into the political claim for some to escape the ethical and economic costs of techno-capitalist progress, whilst using its boons to separate and insulate themselves.

Well-funded and orchestrated techno-libertarian fantasies are emerging in the context of a “post-neoliberal” world, brought on in large part, by the multiple overlapping crises that have been noted. Davies and Kane argue that ‘libertarian reactions against neoliberalism do not simply signal the death of the latter [...] but rather the emergence of new, shifting and

³⁴ Torres, *Human Extinction*, 388.

hybrid political positions and interests on the political right.”³⁵ Neoliberalism’s co-optation of state power to service market mechanisms and generalise competitive logics throughout society may have run its course. The democratic crisis would suggest that game is up. The defensive manoeuvre of techno-capital has been to aim for the takeover of the state by authoritarian forces. Quinn Slobodian’s *Crack-Up Capitalism* analyses “zones of exception with different laws and often no democratic oversight,” while Atossa Araxia Abrahamian’s *The Hidden Globe* characterises such places as “a product of colonialism, capitalism, technology, megalomania, and a pinch of alchemy.”³⁶ These are spaces where pockets of experimental authoritarianism and capital friendly arrangements already exist as a kind of utopian “no-place” for those who can exploit them.

It is in this context that another transhumanism-adjacent political ideology is worth highlighting. Neoreaction or NRx has been developed by Curtis Yarvin, Nick Land, Patri Friedman (who served as a board member for the main transhumanist organisation Humanity+), and transhumanist and key protagonist for the anti-democratic insurgency of techno-authoritarianism, Peter Thiel (co-founder of PayPal and Palantir). At the heart of the Neoreactionary idea is the dissolving of democratic systems such as nation states into multiple hierarchical privately owned autocracies, governed by CEOs or monarchs. Yarvin has been identified as the intellectual scaffold to the ideology of J.D. Vance.³⁷ Furthermore, Thiel (who also played a role in transhumanist institutional politics)³⁸ is Yarvin’s benefactor,³⁹ underlining the extent to which these up wing philosophies are no longer fringe, sci-fi fantasies, but are now intricately bound up with real world power. Yarvin’s notion of RAGE (Retire All Government Employees) seemingly inspired the Musk-run DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency), prior to Musk’s feud with Trump. On 5th February 2025, a memorandum entitled “Capture of U.S. Critical Infrastructure by Neoreactionaries” was reportedly released⁴⁰ by anonymous government whistleblowers claiming,

Musk has not limited government or dismantled the deep state; he has replaced it with himself. Under his radical restructuring of federal power, the White House is at risk of becoming captive to Musk’s demands [...] His rapid takeover of federal infrastructure mirrors the broader ambitions of the neore-

³⁵ Davies and Gane, “Post-Neoliberalism,” 8.

³⁶ Slobodian, *Crack-Up Capitalism*, 3; Abrahamian, *The Hidden Globe*, 320.

³⁷ Duran, “Where J.D. Vance Gets his Weird.”

³⁸ Hughes, “Politics.”

³⁹ Pogue, “Inside the New Right;” Duran, “Where J.D. Vance Gets his Weird.”

⁴⁰ Ahmed, “Silicon Valley Whistleblowers.”

actionary (NRx) movement – a small group of Silicon Valley elites who reject democracy and seek to install a “CEO Monarch” to rule by technological and financial dominance.⁴¹

Transhumanism is part of the potent influence of techno-libertarian culture within Silicon Valley that inspired NRx thinkers like Yarvin.⁴² Libertarian fantasies of exit abound in extropian literature and animate NRx and related philosophies. Land uses the term hyperstition to indicate “a positive feedback circuit including culture as a component. It can be defined as the experimental (techno-)science of self-fulfilling prophecies.”⁴³ Libertarian up wing imaginaries are thus becoming hyperstitional enactments, though once more, without the escape from the human predicament, and thoroughly embedded in deeply ideological proceedings. Up has not transcended left or right but aided extreme right wing formations.

Increasingly, Silicon Valley billionaires are taking it upon themselves to give voice to escapist, up wing fantasies, albeit without the post-ideological rejection of left-right politics. Their ideas unapologetically serve the interests and claims of capitalist elites. Tech baron Balaji Srinivasian’s *The Networked State: How to Start a New Country* and Mark Andreessen’s *Techno-Optimist Manifesto* are exemplars. Both are cited in the memorandum as part of the NRx network.⁴⁴ Andreessen triumphantly claims “there is no material problem – whether created by nature or by technology – that cannot be solved with more technology.” He celebrates free markets as a technocapital machine whose magic is only matched by AI, “our alchemy, our Philosopher’s Stone – we are literally making sand think.” The “enemies” that stand in the way of Andreessen’s techno-solutionist utopia are “existential risk, sustainability, tech ethics, social responsibility, limits to growth and the precautionary principle [...] zombie ideas, many derived from Communism.” The manifesto lists fascist thinker Filippo Marinetti and NRx’s Land among its “patron saints” and reveals its authoritarian credentials further by trumpeting “we are conquerors. We believe in ambition, aggression, persistence, relentlessness – strength.”⁴⁵

Andreessen identifies with a new pseudo-transhumanist, up wing movement called Effective Accelerationism or e/acc for short. The e/acc manifesto demands we rush headlong into developing Artificial General Intelligence with no oversight or regulation. The manifesto insists “Stop fighting the thermodynamic will of the universe. You cannot stop the

⁴¹ Anonymous, *Memorandum*, 1.

⁴² Tait, “Mencius Molbug.”

⁴³ Land, “Hyperstition.”

⁴⁴ Anonymous, *Memorandum*.

⁴⁵ Andreessen, *The Techno-Optimist Manifesto*, n.p.

acceleration. You might as well embrace it. ACCELERATE.⁴⁶ They claim AI presents no real threat, existential or otherwise, and only utopian promise. As such their up wing positionality is pitched in contradistinction to longtermists who they characterise as doomers due to their fretting over the existential risk that developing superintelligence poses. The e/acc rejection of such a possibility is not derived from a sanguine acknowledgement of the current limitations of AI, but rather an emotional revulsion to possible government intervention if such a threat is deemed real. It is the resonance with libertarian ideology that motivates their claims.

The third aspect of this new political imaginary is hierarchy. As noted, core to the techno-authoritarian imaginary, is that Big Tech industry leaders hold humanity's "cosmic endowment" in their hands.⁴⁷ They are as Gods, for the universe's destiny is dependent on them. Palantir co-founder and CEO Alex Karp reveals another dimension to these hierarchical assumptions with his claim that his company's aim is to "power the West to its obvious innate superiority" making an explicit continuity with Western imperial colonialism.⁴⁸ But the up wing imaginary, with its cardinal virtue of intelligence, is most notable for its hierarchical conceptualisation of that virtue. This notoriously ill-defined concept tends to be simplified by up wingers as "the ability to solve complex goals."⁴⁹ Such a framing avoids contextual and meta-level questions which may allow for a view of intelligence closer to the down wing virtue of wisdom. The up wing conceptualisation enables a glorification of the kind of intelligence computation can display – narrow problem solving. In modern up wing culture this celebration of intelligence manifests in forms of IQ fetishism, race science and culminates in the return of the discourse of eugenics.⁵⁰

Elise Bohan typifies the transhumanists' reductionist, hierarchical, narrow conception of intelligence. Whilst scathing about all humans' intellectual capacities, she envisages an imminent future in which AI will automate away most jobs, intensify inequality and offer no redemption for those with low IQs. Her proposed solution to this potential social catastrophe is not wealth redistribution, or universal public services but an updated version of the happiness producing drug from Brave New World: "soma." For Bohan most people should not be left to decide what to do with their lives as their low IQ leaves them unfit for such a determination. Along with better drugs, Bohan argues virtual worlds will be needed to provide the

⁴⁶ Jezos and Bayeslord, *Notes on E/Acc Principles*.

⁴⁷ Bostrom, "Existential Risk."

⁴⁸ Karp, *Palantir Technologies*.

⁴⁹ Tegmark, *Life 3.0*.

⁵⁰ Gebru and Torres, "The TESCREAL Bundle."

masses with a worthwhile future.⁵¹ This repeats the Neoreactionary ideas of Yarvin who suggests (with the trolling irony typical of right-wing internet culture) “virtualising” the masses is a beneficent alternative to the profit maximizing solution of converting the surplus population into biodiesel.⁵²

Thus, transhumanism can be seen to have a concerning proximity to necropolitics: the indifference to death and dying of those structured outside of the techno-capitalist bubble of “progress,” those deemed lower in the hierarchy. Indeed, self-proclaimed up winger Fuller calls for the construction of a new “Republic of Humanity” exclusively for those entities who should be regarded as having political rights. For Fuller, humans, animals, and machines may all gain entry, or be expelled. He states “your capacity for self-assertion against a countervailing force – marks you as worthy of rights. You don’t simply capitulate or adapt: You leave your mark.”⁵³ Any entity that fails to “leave its mark” becomes susceptible to necronomics, an economics of death, which aims to generate “the most societal value from death making.”⁵⁴ Put simply, if you are not at the top of the techno-human hierarchy in control of our future evolution, you have no right to an existence at all. You compete or die, a radicalisation of the expulsions and concentrations that are inherent to capitalist logics.⁵⁵

As Bell and Taillandier note, transhumanists “contend that reengineering human biology, rather than designing better institutions or developing new principles of justice or forms of democratic governance, is the principal way to achieve (post)human flourishing.”⁵⁶ For up wingers the causes of the multiple crises of our times should be located in the failings of human biology, not structural social injustice. Humans are “sitting ducks who are extremely vulnerable to climate change, natural disasters, pathogens and the ever more powerful arsenal of our own technologies” and “ape-brained meatsacks” who must “upgrade our cognitive functions [...or] we will exit this blue marbled stage watching cat videos while the world burns.”⁵⁷ Up wing politics thus chimes with anti-democratic projects because humans are considered too stupid, too lowly, to be trusted with the future. It is a hyper-rationalist technocratic and elitist ordering with IQ fetishism and a problematic eugenic logic baked in.

Up wing politics can function as a disorienting discourse that celebrates the amassing of knowledge and power whilst failing to attend

⁵¹ Bohan, *Future Superhuman*.

⁵² Moldburg, *Patchwork*.

⁵³ Fuller 2019, *Nietzschean Meditation*, 130.

⁵⁴ Fuller 2019, *Nietzschean Meditation*, 165.

⁵⁵ Sassen, *Expulsion*; Thomas, *Politics and Ethics of Transhumanism*.

⁵⁶ Bell and Taillandier, “Cosmos-politanism,” 3

⁵⁷ Bohan, *Future Superhuman*, 311 and 11.

carefully to the co-constitutional social and ethical implications of techno-human systemic developments. It tends towards the abstracted, utopian and hyperbolic, whilst relying on the magic of superintelligence to realise a “lucid” and benevolent eugenics⁵⁸ or a solved world⁵⁹: the false belief that scientific progress necessarily leads to ethical progress. It therefore functions as a useful ballast for new authoritarian formations seeking to secure hyper-accumulated capital in the face of growing global crises that require collaboration, solidarity, sacrifice and thus alternative political arrangements – all threats to billionaire wealth.

The Emancipatory Imagination of the Down Wing

Critical Posthumanist discourse can effectively contest the notions of hierarchy, exit and scale which underpin up-right techno-authoritarianism thought. Hierarchy is rejected through the recognition of intra-connection and relationality – envisioning existence as an unfolding dynamic heterarchy. Life does not exist as a battle of ‘intelligence’ on a linear scale but as a complex process with mutual intra-dependencies. An emphasis on embodied being refutes the dreams of exit: the fantasy of escape from a given context. Embodiment reminds us that intelligence is not simply an abstract force but is always something that is embedded in the material world. Whilst critical posthumanists may draw on scale to generate a post-anthropocentric perspective, the aim is not to invoke hubristic affects relating to the human “cosmic endowment,” but its opposite. When Stefan Herbrechter uses “deep time” to bring to mind “preanthropy” (the universe before our existence) and “postanthropy” (when we have long since disappeared) its purpose is to generate humility by foregrounding the fleeting nature of humanity’s existence.⁶⁰

Despite this, while the up wing, with its naïve embrace of instrumental progress and its veneration of abstract intelligence, lends itself all too easily to co-optation by authoritarian forces, the down wing seems to have little purchase on the political trajectory of today. Authoritarian politics has been far more effective in leveraging the new complex media ecology to foster support. This does not come in the form of a populist embrace of up wing possibilities and transhumanist ideology, but rather draws on various affective narratives to exploit the sense of powerlessness prevalent in our times. Thus, nationalist sentiments, anti-immigrant rhetoric and a politics of retri-

⁵⁸ Bohan, *Future Superhuman*.

⁵⁹ Bostrom, *Deep Utopia*.

⁶⁰ Herbrechter, “Posthumanism and Deep Time.”

bution underpin what Richard Seymour calls Disaster Nationalism.⁶¹ Post-humanist theory can supply an effective analysis of the complex cognitive ecology⁶² that constitutes unfolding techno-human relations. This includes the meta-infrastructure (after Allenby) of the techno-capitalist media ecology. However, the descriptive powers of critical posthumanism are not always matched by its prescriptive potency and ability to inspire mass praxis.

Openness and vagueness [...] is part of the agenda of critical posthumanism, as it reveals its general anti-dogmatism and rejection of ideological thinking. The more concrete, detailed, and formulated an ethical theory is, the more it tends to ossify, which results in an inflexible distinction between right and wrong.⁶³

While a “society designed according to critical posthumanist inclusive ethical principles would without any doubt look very different from contemporary ‘western’ societies,”⁶⁴ we are not close to seeing such a society materialise.

Our era is now characterised not just by the environmental cataclysms mourned by the down wing but an increasingly pernicious political situation. Transhumanists have a tendency to downplay both. More, for example, denies the existence of climate crisis.⁶⁵ Up wing thinkers are all too often guilty of perpetuating a metanarrative of progress as historical fact. Adorno diagnosed such a perspective as synonymous with an “affirmative mentality” which “is incapable of looking horror in the face and thereby perpetuates it.”⁶⁶ Down wing politics on the other hand acknowledges the horror of the age. For critical posthumanists “recognition of shared vulnerability and imperilled condition [...] is nothing short of a revolutionary process.”⁶⁷ Rosi Braidotti sees the bonds inspired by this shared vulnerability central to cross-species solidarity: “[d]eath and destruction are the common denominators for this transversal alliance.”⁶⁸ There is a dystopian realism to down wing thinking, with notions of death and dying prominent. The challenge is to articulate postanthropocentric visions committed to life and living that thus look horror in the face and contest it. Cudworth and Hobden call for a Terraist Manifesto which advocates causing less harm and “promoting flourishing of life in [our] communities.”⁶⁹

⁶¹ Seymour, *Disaster Nationalism*.

⁶² Hayles, *Unthought*.

⁶³ Loh, “Posthumanism and Ethics,” 20.

⁶⁴ Loh, “Posthumanism and Ethics,” 20.

⁶⁵ More, *True Transhumanism*.

⁶⁶ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 7.

⁶⁷ Cudworth and Hobden, *The Emancipatory Project*, 154.

⁶⁸ Braidotti, *Posthuman knowledge*, 111.

⁶⁹ Cudworth and Hobden, *The Emancipatory Project*, 156.

Conclusion

While climate crisis denial and Western supremacist claims of progress form part of the up-right suite of rhetoric and ideology, apocalyptic thinking is also drawn upon by the “end times fascists” of the Nerd Reich to foster an affective regime of fear, division and paranoid survivalism. As Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor point out “the most powerful people in the world are preparing for the end of the world, an end they themselves are frenetically accelerating.”⁷⁰ These preparations put technology at the centre. Thiel and other billionaires perceive democratic politics in an age of collapse as a threat to their billions. He sees in technology the potential for a permanent fix to that threat as he rejects the idea that “freedom and democracy are compatible.” He claims technology offers an alternative to politics and “we are in a deadly race between politics and technology.”⁷¹ Technology is the tool techno-authoritarians aim to use to escape democratic claims once and for all. Technology can enable the absolute concentration of wealth and power which for Thiel is what freedom means. It is this fetishisation of technology that brings the up wing and right wing together. That the up wing has been parasitically embraced by emergent authoritarian right wing philosophies should be no surprise. It reminds us of a central failing in the original conception of up wing thought: the belief that technological progress can make us post-political and beyond ethics. Technology can direct means, but not effectively determine ethical ends. To pretend otherwise is to occlude the structures of power which can co-opt the services of technological progress. Down wing politics recognises the interconnection of all things, and therefore decries binary dichotomies. Thus, down wingers should reject the very framing of up/down as the political poles of the future. It may be useful alongside other political formulations, but the future is not a choice between techno-scientific progress and technological relinquishment. Traditional political and ethical questions relating to power, justice, equality, inclusivity and pluralism must be contested in the context of spiralling techno-human relations, whilst also squarely recognising the unfolding horrors our current lifeways generate.

In presenting techno-science as salvation in itself, up wing politics denies the importance of values that lie behind technologies and social systems. Yuk Hui states,

The objectification of the planet in the twentieth century on all levels ranging from abstract representation to scientific exploration, including mining, earth

⁷⁰ Klein and Taylor, “Rise of End Times Fascism.”

⁷¹ Thiel, *The Education of a Libertarian*.

system science, automated agriculture, hydroengineering, and geoengineering, as well as to the preparation for space war, has presented us in the twenty-first century with an urgent task to conceive a new political form, one that allows us to imagine a future for peace and coexistence between different peoples, between humans and nonhumans. Planetary thinking will have to firmly grasp the process of planetarization and develop a *language of coexistence*.

His call for planetary thinking envisions that “the future of philosophy is technology, and the future of technology is philosophy.”⁷² Technology can never allow us to escape the task of philosophy despite the utopian up wing fantasy where context is superseded. Grounded and ongoing ethical and political struggle are a permanent necessity in this age of spiraling techno-human developments.

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⁷² Hui, *Machine and Sovereignty*, 9 and 255.

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