

FINANCIAL TIMES – 27 SETTEMBRE 2025

The unholy alliance

di Giuliano Da Empoli

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Tech moguls and populist leaders are far more than disrupters of the old liberal order. Together they seek to sweep it away.

The advantage of indignation is it leaves you with a clear conscience, without any form of further analysis. The words spoken by Elon Musk at the “Unite the Kingdom” rally organised by far-right activist Tommy Robinson this month sparked widespread outrage among politicians. Downing Street condemned the tech boss for using “dangerous and inflammatory” language, after he told the crowd that “violence is coming” and “you either fight back or you die”. The Liberal Democrat leader Ed Davey has appealed to other political forces to “put party politics aside” and join him in condemning Musk’s call for a dissolution of parliament. Even Peter Kyle, the business minister who had distinguished himself for his unapologetic submission to tech bosses, adopted the attitude of the betrayed spouse, judging that Musk’s comments were “slightly incomprehensible” and “totally inappropriate”.

Yet the Tesla boss’s conduct is anything but incomprehensible, and anyone who thought his words — and his unwavering support for far-right movements around the world, from Brazil’s Jair Bolsonaro to Germany’s AfD — were due to the eccentricities of a South African-born billionaire would be making a huge mistake. The truth is that Musk’s approach reveals something more fundamental, which goes far beyond the preferences of a single, albeit extremely powerful, tech oligarch. Until recently, economic elites, financiers, entrepreneurs and managers of large companies relied on a political class of technocrats — or aspiring technocrats — from the right and left, moderate, reasonable, more or less indistinguishable from each other, who governed their countries on the basis of liberal democratic principles, in accordance with market rules, sometimes tempered by social considerations. That was the Davos consensus. A place where politics was reduced to a competition between PowerPoint slides, and the most transgressive thing you could do was wear a black turtle-neck instead of a light blue shirt at cocktail hour.

Today, however, this arrangement has been upset. The new technological elites, the Musks, Mark Zuckerbergs and Sam Altmans of this world, have nothing in common with the technocrats of

Davos. Their philosophy of life is not based on the competent management of the existing order but, on the contrary, on an irrepressible desire to throw everything up in the air. Order, prudence and respect for the rules are anathema to those who have made a name for themselves by moving fast and breaking things, in accordance with Facebook's famous first motto.

In this context, Musk's words are just the tip of the iceberg and reveal something much deeper: a battle between power elites for control of the future.

By their very nature and background, the tech overlords are more akin to nationalist-populist leaders — the Trumps, Mileis, Bolsonaros and leaders of the European far-right movements — than to the moderate political classes that have governed western democracies for decades. Like these leaders, they are almost always eccentric characters who have had to break the rules to get ahead. Like them, they distrust experts and elites, all those who represent the old world and who could prevent them from pursuing their vision. Like them, they have a taste for action and are convinced that they can shape reality according to their desires: virality prevails over truth, and speed is at the service of the strongest. Like them, they have nothing but contempt for politicians and bureaucrats: they see their weakness and hypocrisy and believe that their era is coming to an end.

Donald Trump's re-election marked a turning point because since then, the tech titans have finally felt strong enough to enter into open conflict with the old elites. Until then, the convergence between extremist leaders and technologists had been obscured by the fact that the latter did not feel powerful enough to openly challenge the supremacy of the Davos bloc. For many years, the tech overlords had to exercise diplomacy, even though they were burning with the desire to assert their superiority over the dinosaurs of politics. Before Musk, there was Eric Schmidt, Google's former chief executive, whose help targeting voters in key electoral states played a role in Barack Obama's re-election in 2012 that was no less important than that played by the South African billionaire in Trump's re-election last year. Except that, unlike Musk, Schmidt remained largely behind the scenes.

For their part, moderate politicians failed to understand that, far from being simply a business project, the advent of digital technology was laying the foundations for a veritable political revolution and, ultimately, regime change. I have lost count of the number of times, in my days as a political adviser, that I witnessed these rituals of degradation.

In any capital city, the scene is always the same. The oligarch steps off his private jet, in a foul mood at being forced to waste his time with a tribal chief, when he could be spending it more usefully on some post-human venture. After welcoming him with the honours of a state visit, the politician spends most of the meeting begging him to grant a research centre or an AI development laboratory and ends up settling for a hasty selfie on the way out. The easy-going nerds who promised us

a future of universal brotherhood in the late 1990s have thus been able to transform themselves into frightening molochs, engaged in a ruthless war for planetary and intergalactic supremacy, with no rules or responsibilities to counterbalance their immoderate power.

The shocking passivity of the governing elite will not be enough to guarantee its survival. After pretending to respect its authority, the tech oligarchs have gradually imposed their dominance to the point of disputing the last attributes of the rulers' sovereignty: currency and the monopoly of force. Today, the point is not to accuse Schmidt of hypocrisy when, in 2012, he presented himself as a soft-mannered progressive democrat. Several tech moguls still consider themselves to be so.

But it is clear that, beyond individual sympathies, the convergence between digital moguls and national-populist leaders is structural. Both derive their power from the digital insurrection, and neither group is willing to tolerate any limits on their desire for more: the old world and its rules are their natural enemies, the target to be destroyed in order for the new world to flourish.

Of course, Trump and other populist leaders seem to have emerged from the past, rather than from the future. These figures are impossible to understand if we rely on the political science of recent decades, whereas we need only open a Latin classic, Tacitus or Suetonius — or even one of the satires, Juvenal or Petronius — to find figures very similar to those who dominate today's political scene. They are characters accustomed to operating in a world without limits, who draw strength from the unexpected, the unstable and the bellicose.

Today, however, the resurgence of such premodern characters is based on the ecosystem developed by the tech bros. As long as political competition took place in the real world, in public squares and traditional media, the customs and rules of each country determined its limits, but now that it has moved online, public debate has turned into a jungle where anything goes and the only rules are those of internet platforms. As a result, the fate of our democracies is increasingly being played out in a kind of digital Somalia, a failed state as big as the planet, subject to the law of digital warlords and their militias.

This is a logic that military historians have long been familiar with. There are phases in history when defensive techniques advance more rapidly than offensive ones. These are periods when wars become rarer, because the cost of aggression is higher than that of defence. At other times, however, it is mainly offensive technologies that develop. These are bloody periods when wars multiply because attacking is much cheaper than defending.

On the internet, a campaign of aggression or disinformation costs nothing, while defending against it is almost impossible. As a result, our republics, our large and small liberal democracies, risk being swept away like the tiny Italian republics of the early 16th century. And taking centre stage are characters who seem to have stepped out of Machiavelli's *The Prince* to follow his teachings. In

a situation of uncertainty, when the legitimacy of power is precarious and can be called into question at any moment, those who fail to act can be certain that changes will occur to their disadvantage.

This approach is particularly effective in the face of public opinion that is increasingly convinced that the system is stuck and that voting for one politician or another makes no difference whatsoever. If, in theology, a miracle corresponds to the direct intervention of God, who bypasses the normal rules of existence on Earth to produce an extraordinary event, the logic of Trump and other nationalist-populist leaders is similar. To break the rules — and very often the laws — in order to have an impact on the problems that plague their voters: this is the promise of the political miracle. Hence Nayib Bukele's strategy in El Salvador to combat criminal gangs by replacing the penal code with a tattoo manual and throwing 80,000 people into prison without trial. Hence Javier Milei's chainsaw in Argentina to combat waste, and the illegal measures taken by Trump to curb illegal immigration or to put in place his customs tariffs.

Clearly, decisive action alone is not enough to produce the miracle of power. It must also be a reckless act, for what would be the value of an action that simply responded rationally to necessity? It would be little more than the act of a technocrat, one of those grey and cruel public officials who act in the name of higher obligations, claiming to be the only ones able to master them. The essence of power lies in precisely the opposite. Goethe tells the story of the old Duke of Saxony, an original as well as stubborn man, whose advisers urge him to reflect and ponder before making an important decision. "I want neither to reflect nor to ponder," he replies, "otherwise why would I be the Duke of Saxony?"

The height of power coincides not so much with action as with rash action, the only kind capable of producing the shock on which the Prince's power is based. A chaotic environment requires momentous decisions that capture the public's attention and leave opponents stunned. What matters is impact. As Milei rightly said: "What is the difference between a madman and a genius? Success!" This is the credo of populist leaders and tech bros, shared today by the majority of voters who have stopped considering rules as a guarantee of freedom and have started to see them as a giant scam, not to mention a conspiracy by the elites to oppress the people.

"The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers," says Shakespeare. Or rather, Dick the Butcher in Henry VI, in order to provoke a revolt against the government of the English king. According to Dick, lawyers are the henchmen of power, devoid of morals and ready to support anything and everything. They do not solve problems, they create them, they always have a loophole at hand to further complicate matters. They are interested in form, not substance; they speak an incomprehens-

ible language for the sole purpose of deceiving the poor and uninstructed; in the end, they care only about their own business.

Populist leaders focus on substance, not form. They promise to solve the real problems people everywhere face: crime, fear of immigration, the cost of living. And what do their opponents, the liberals, progressives and dogooder democrats, mumble in response? Rules, democracy at risk, protection of minorities . . .

Last year, Janan Ganesh noted in his FT column that since 1980, among all Democratic candidates for president and vice-president of the US, Tim Walz, Kamala Harris's running mate, was the first not to have a law degree. During the same period, none of the four Republican presidents had a legal background: the first, Ronald Reagan, was an actor and the other three were businessmen. In the US, lawyers are rivalled only by politicians as the most hated professional group. Is it any wonder, then, that the lawyers' party was overwhelmed? That a platform entirely conceived by lawyers, centred on the defence of democratic procedures and respect for minority rights, whose main argument consisted in the lawsuits against the Republican candidate, was swept away by the recriminations of Trump supporters: inflation, illegal immigration, class contempt?

In Europe, the technocrats who govern the European institutions and most of the member countries of the Union share the same incomprehension at the offensive they are facing. They prefer to pretend that Trump's challenge boils down to the negotiation of a few technical agreements, rather than acknowledge that Trump and the tech bros' goal is to impose regime change on this side of the Atlantic as well.

Populist leaders and tech bros do not have the same vision of the future in mind — one of the most awkward moments in Musk's speech at Tommy Robinson's rally was when he invoked, with sparkling eyes, a future of robots straight out of Star Trek. The push for regime change unites premodern figures who seem to have stepped out of the annals of the late Roman empire with tech conquistadors already looking towards post-human horizons. The controversy over H-1B visas for highly skilled workers in the US is just one of the countless issues that divide them.

What they have in common, however, is both an enemy and a strategy: kill all the lawyers.

Together, political predators and digital conquistadors have decided to wipe out the old elites and their rules. If they succeed in achieving this goal, it will not only be the parties of lawyers and technocrats that will be swept away, but also liberal democracy as we have known it until today.