

Palantir, Technology, and the American Republic

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“You will never touch the hearts of others,/ if it does not emerge from your own.”

Alexander C. Karp, Palantir Technologies co-founder and CEO, and Nicholas W. Zamiska, head of corporate affairs at Palantir and legal counsel to Karp, place this tender but demanding sentiment at the front of their new book, “The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West.”

The sentiment’s prominent placement portends a provocative and iconoclastic work. It is rare to encounter poetry as an epigraph to a serious book dealing with Silicon Valley, let alone one that exhorts executives and software engineers to redirect some of their technical prowess to bolster the U.S. military because it secures American freedom and prosperity.

It is startling for the poetry to come from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s “Faust.” In that 19th-century masterpiece, an eminent scholar dispirited by and disdainful of the scholarly quest for knowledge strikes a bargain with the devil: Faust obtains the love of a beautiful and innocent young woman, loses her, seeks political power and mastery over nature and, finally, love draws him heavenward. Adding to the wonderment, the authors lead one of America’s hottest software companies. Riding the artificial intelligence wave, Palantir’s stock price soared about 370% over the last twelve months and around 60% since the beginning of the year.

Karp has an unusual background for a tech multibillionaire. A graduate of Haverford College and Stanford Law School (where he met Palantir co-founder Peter Thiel), he also earned a Ph.D. in neoclassical social theory from Goethe University Frankfurt. In 2002, he completed his dissertation in German, the formidable title of which in translation is “Aggression in the Lifeworld: The Extension of Parsons’ Concept of Aggression by Describing the Connection Between Jargon, Aggression, and Culture.” In 2003, along with Thiel, Stephen Cohen, and Joe Lonsdale, Karp founded Palantir. The company, which received seed money from the CIA, builds software platforms used by militaries, intelligence services, and large corporations that integrate and analyze large databases.

Karp and Zamiska, a graduate of Yale College and Yale Law School, have written a book that springs from “a nearly decade-long conversation between its authors regarding technology, our national project, and the perilous political and cultural challenges that we collectively face.” They believe that the United States and the West as a whole stand at a crossroads. Grand American national ambitions in science and technology have waned. Preoccupied with “the trivial and ephemeral,” Silicon Valley entrepreneurs concentrate on

devising applications for the lucrative consumer market – “hailing taxis, ordering food, sharing photos” – while lacking gratitude for, much less a sense of obligation to serve, the nation that makes possible their affluent lives.

“We can – we must – do better,” insist Karp and Zamiska. They maintain “that the software industry should rebuild its relationship with government and redirect its effort and attention to constructing the technology and artificial intelligence capabilities that will address the most pressing challenges that we collectively face.” The two most pressing challenges are “the defense of the nation and the articulation of a national project – what is this country, what are our values, and for what do we stand.” Central to the American nation – and to the West – is “the protection of individual rights against state encroachment.” And vital to the national project is the responsibility “to preserve the enduring yet fragile geopolitical advantage that the United States and its allies in Europe and elsewhere have retained over their adversaries.” In the authors’ view, “The rise of artificial intelligence, which for the first time in history presents a plausible challenge to our species for creative supremacy in the world, has only heightened the urgency of revisiting questions of national identity and purpose that many had thought could be safely cast aside.”

Early on, in the mid-20th century, Silicon Valley scientists worked closely with the U.S. government. The collaboration “would culminate in the development of novel pharmaceutical compounds, intercontinental rockets, and spy satellites, as well as the precursors to artificial intelligence.” Today, intense skepticism of government and the nation impels Silicon Valley to shun partnerships with Washington. Nevertheless, the preservation of American leadership and a world order friendly to the principles of freedom and democracy, Karp and Zamiska argue, hinges on constructing a solid working relationship between “the state and the software industry.”

Silicon Valley’s narrowness of vision stems from the conviction widely shared by today’s progressive elites “that belief itself, in anything other than oneself perhaps, is dangerous and to be avoided.” America’s elite universities, the authors maintain, fostered that solipsism by downgrading – where they did not purge from the curriculum – the humanizing study of Western civilization. Higher education further shackled minds by policing speech and thought. Small wonder that Silicon Valley is rife with “technological agnostics” devoted to “the act of creation” but lacking “any grand world view or political project.” Victims of an illiberal education, our elites deride virtue and faith and scoff at citizens’ responsibility to preserve, improve, and protect the nation.

Reform, for Karp and Zamiska, begins with boosting commercial enterprises’ ingenuity and productivity. Drawing on Palantir experience and study of organizational behavior, they commend “the engineering mindset” and especially the culture of “insurgent startups.” Instead of rigid hierarchies typical of large corporations and more like “bee swarms and flocks of starlings,” companies must develop a flexible structure that enables the smooth flow

and steady integration of information from employees of all ranks. The aim is to encourage “execution, but also independence and ultimately freethinking,” to take advantage of human individuality by respecting human sociability.

To make the nation’s common political enterprise as free and secure as possible, the authors advise, we must repair the national spirit. Progressive elites should abandon their “luxury beliefs” and their “refusal to engage with the political claims and demands of essentially half of the country.” All should avoid the temptation to scapegoat, turning fellow citizens with different views into monsters to be slayed. Right and left must jointly refashion “a collective identity and shared mythology.” This refashioning will require public discussion “of substantive notions of the good or virtuous life.” And it cannot succeed, the authors emphasize, without greater appreciation of form, beauty, and taste because building technology is as much art as science. One should add that preserving and improving a rights-protecting democracy is more art than science.

The authors go a long way toward showing that sustaining a worthy “technological republic,” one that is “a rich and thriving and recklessly creative communal experiment,” rests on “value, virtue, and culture, the very things that the present generation was taught to abhor.” But in championing a “technological republic,” Karp and Zamiska risk confusing a major feature of the contemporary American republic for its essence.

To avoid this confusion it is necessary to refine three of their important lines of argument.

First, the authors embrace a faulty understanding of the political theory that undergirds the American republic. They accept Harvard University Professor of Government Michael Sandel’s frequently discredited accusation – shared by New Right thinkers such as Patrick Deneen and Yoram Hazony – that the American political order is captive to a formal liberalism that rejects the very idea of a common good. Contrary to Sandel, America’s founding principles and the best in America’s constitutional traditions affirm a common good that is rooted in the conviction that human beings are by nature free and equal, and which consists in securing rights shared equally by all. By leaving questions about salvation and the highest good to individuals and their communities, the American republic enables shifting national majorities – within constitutionally prescribed limits – to democratically enact laws, and creates room for families and civil society’s multitude of associations to foster virtues, that promote the public interest.

Second, the authors adopt a partial and somewhat dated critique of the university. The campus moral relativism that they decry has not vanished, but it has been incoherently supplemented and often upstaged by a hypersensitive and censorious moral dogmatism. Many students and faculty today suffer from the certainty that their progressive pieties are entirely right and just and that conservative opinions are thoroughly wrong and wicked.

Third, the authors allude to but neglect to explore the peril to our humanity lurking in growing reliance on advanced technologies, not least AI. The digital revolution is the latest stage in modern humanity's ambition to master nature for humanity's benefit. However, as C.S. Lewis observed in 1943 in "The Abolition of Man," this ambition threatens to reduce human beings to mere nature and to empower some to exploit technology for the purpose of subjugating others. To diminish technology's moral and political dangers while reaping its benefits, Lewis argued, we need to relearn old lessons. Obsessed with subduing physical nature to our desires, we must acquire the knowledge and foster the virtues that enable individuals to desire wisely and to live up to standards that can't be reduced to what can be counted, measured, and weighed.

Goethe's "Faust" – which points back, forward, and upward – is a fine place to begin.

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