THE ZEALOUS PRACTICES OF TECH INDUSTRY LEADERS

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Introduction

Prepping for the apocalypse. Fighting for eternal life. Building separatist compounds for like-minded people. Reproducing to fill the world with chosen ones. Manifestos to recruit believers. All these practices are age-old characteristics of religious zealots and sound like the makings of a promising cult docuseries. And yet, they are also increasingly common obsessions of leaders of the American tech industry. From building luxury bunkers to hoping cryonic freezing could make resurrection possible, many billionaire and multi-millionaire founders, engineers, and VCs are investing time, money, and attention into speculative pursuits that are often considered the realm of religious paranoia. Through a conjunctural analysis, this research aims to examine a set of religiously coded practices to reveal the teleological formations and apocalyptic anticipations of some of the world's most influential tech elite. What do these practices reveal about how the "religion of technology" persists today? What future do they anticipate and create?

Theoretical Framework & Approach

Following the work of Stuart Hall, my exploratory research on this project takes the form of conjunctural analysis (Hall, 1978). As such, I aim to be "located between the specificity of the moment and the long *duree* of the epoch" (Grossberg, 2019, p. 42). In this vein, my analysis examines a select few practices of current tech industry leaders through multimedia analysis while situating the conversation within the overall context of these leaders increasingly taking up more power in shaping our ideological, sociopolitical, and economic landscapes.

David Noble's (1999) work on the "religion of technology" provides a crucial foundation for this project, which seeks to affirm his fundamental thesis that religious ideology and the pursuit of technological innovation in the West are inextricably bound. Noble insists that his comparisons to religion are not merely metaphorical, but rather must be understood "literally and historically, to indicate that modern technology and religion

have evolved together and that, as a result, the technological enterprise has been and remains suffused with religious belief" (p. 5). This research will also contribute to scholarly work aiming to identify and codify the ideology of Silicon Valley (Gebru & Torres, 2024; Geraci, 2010; Turner, 2008).

By connecting the techno-solutionist practices of today's tech elite to questions that have historically been explored via religious interventions, I hope to decenter appeals to rationality and expose the underlying values and emotions that drive these decisions. Additionally, this framework requires taking these practices seriously as symptomatic of an underlying belief system—rather than just the quirks of people with too much money on their hands. This research will unpack three core focuses: separatist communities, conquering death, and apocalypse prep.

Findings

Separatist compounds. Through the more temporary retreats and more permanent attempts at creating entirely new cities and states, the tech elite are preoccupied with creating spaces of "like-minded" individuals. In an attempt to cut out nonbelievers (skeptics and government regulators), there is a wave of people seeking to create communes where full ideological buy-in is necessary. These projects are gaining a following in Silicon Valley under the label "network states," an idea and term developed by Balaji Srinivasan—whose fund, conferences, and now school in Singapore have attracted the endorsement and investment of Silicon Valley billionaires. Srinivasan has described this movement as a form of faith in "tech Zionism" (Duran, 2024).

Conquering death. Going beyond digital immortality (Kneese, 2023), there are two core ways of resisting death gaining traction: longevity and resurrection. Within the longevity space, aging is often presented as a disease in need of curing. Those preoccupied with longevity often have in-depth regimens of supplements and biohacking routines. For those who are more extreme, they promote the practice of infusing themselves with "young blood." A prime example of this is Bryan Johnson who spends $2 million annually on his own approach to anti-aging and uses blood from his son to lower his "biological age" (Heller, 2023). While there are varying extremes, anti-aging and beating death is a widespread preoccupation with the likes of Jeff Bezos investing millions in anti-aging startup Altos (Regalado, 2021). Additionally, cryonics, the act of freezing one's recently deceased body with hopes of being resuscitated in the future when technology advances has captured the attention of powerful VC Peter Theil and Sam Altman who have both signed up for the service.

Apocalypse prep. Fears about the end of the world as we know it seem to haunt, or perhaps excite, many tech leaders. Whether climate collapse, an AI takeover, or societal unrest, many tech leaders have their eyes on potential doomsdays. Meta founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg, for example, is preparing a 5,000 square foot luxury bunker under his home in Hawaii (Scrimgeour, 2023). OpenAI leader Sam Altman—who has said that AI may cause human extinction even as he develops it—has a stash of guns, gold, and gas masks (Nguyen, 2024). And then, of course, there are those who think going underground won't be enough and that going to space is a safer bet (Rubenstein, 2024). As tech elites look deep into the underground of our planet and

beyond the planet for solutions, we must ask, doomsday for whom? There is a pervasive sense not of dread, but of eager anticipation for those who will be spared from collapse. This is aligned with many doomsday cults who warn of Armageddon but also excitedly anticipate it as chosen ones who will be spared. Crucially, we must also account for the fact that these leaders are fabricating futures in both senses of the world: they created imagined narratives of our future and wield the power to make it so.

Conclusion

Assessing these practices begins to reveal a clear eschatology at play. There is a destiny in mind that humanity is, and ought to be, marching toward. In his conclusion Noble (1999) states, "If the religion of technology once fostered visions of social renovation, it also fueled fantasies of escaping society altogether…simply, the technological pursuit of salvation has become a threat to our survival" (p. 208). Such escapist tendencies (from others, death, and the world as we know it) seem to fuel today's tech leaders. There is an underlying sense of inevitability coupled with excited proclamations of progress. But who gets to escape society? Who gets left behind in their visions of new worlds?

Assessing these practices starts to assemble a picture of the grand cosmic narrative at play. Zealotry—and its by-any-means-necessary certainty—is justified through a vision of humanity and technology's destiny. If technology is our salvation, then regulating it and questioning it is a moral flaw. Additionally, the idea of the chosen and the damned starts to be revealed. Within this cosmic vision, who gets to transcend? Who gets to be saved? Who is collateral on the path to sacred progress?

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