Opinion
Guest Essay

The Failed Ideas That Drive Elon Musk

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President Trump has reportedly told cabinet members that Elon Musk may soon leave the administration. If and when he goes, what will he leave behind?

Mr. Musk has long presented himself to the world as a futurist. Yet, notwithstanding the gadgets — the rockets and the robots and the Department of Government Efficiency Musketeers, carrying backpacks crammed with laptops, dreaming of replacing federal employees with large language models — few figures in public life are more shackled to the past.

On the day of Donald Trump's inauguration, Mr. Musk told a roaring, jubilant crowd that the election marked "a fork in the road of human civilization." He promised to "take DOGE to Mars" and pledged to give Americans reasons to look "forward to the future."

In 1932, when civilization stood at another fork in the road, the United States chose liberal democracy, and Franklin Roosevelt, who promised "a new deal for the American people." In his first 100 days, Mr. Roosevelt. signed 99 executive orders, and Congress passed more than 75 laws, beginning the work of rebuilding the country by establishing a series of government agencies to regulate the economy, provide jobs, aid the poor and construct public works.

Mr. Musk is attempting to go back to that fork and choose a different path. Much of what he has sought to dismantle, from antipoverty programs to national parks, have their origins in the New Deal. Mr. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration provided 8.5 million Americans with jobs; Mr. Musk has measured his achievement by the number of jobs he has eliminated.

Four years ago, I made a series for the BBC in which I located the origins of Mr. Musk's strange sense of destiny in science fiction, some of it a century old. This year, revising the series, I was again struck by how little of what Mr. Musk proposes is new and by how many of his ideas about politics, governance and economics resemble those championed by his grandfather Joshua Haldeman, a cowboy, chiropractor, conspiracy theorist and amateur aviator known as the Flying Haldeman. Mr. Musk's grandfather was also a flamboyant leader of the political movement known as technocracy.

Leading technocrats proposed replacing democratically elected officials and civil servants — indeed, all of government — with an army of scientists and engineers under what they called a technate. Some also wanted to annex Canada and Mexico. At technocracy's height, one branch of

the movement had more than a quarter of a million members. Under the technate, humans would no longer have names; they would have numbers. One technocrat went by 1x1809x56. (Mr. Musk has a son named X Æ A-12.) Mr. Haldeman, who had lost his Saskatchewan farm during the Depression, became the movement's leader in Canada. He was technocrat No. 10450-1.

Technocracy first gained worldwide attention in 1932 but soon splintered into rival factions. Technocracy Incorporated was founded and led by a former New Yorker named Howard Scott. Across the continent, rival groups of technocrats issued a flurry of tracts, periodicals and pamphlets explaining, for instance, how "life in a technocracy" would be utterly different from life in a democracy: "Popular voting can be largely dispensed with.

Technocrats argued that liberal democracy had failed. One Technocracy Incorporated pamphlet explained how the movement "does not subscribe to the basic tenet of the democratic ideal, namely that all men are created free and equal." In the modern world, only scientists and engineers have the intelligence and education to understand the industrial operations that lie at the heart of the economy. Mr. Scott's army of technocrats would eliminate most government services: "Even our postal system, our highways, our Coast Guard could be made much more efficient." Overlapping agencies could be shuttered, and "90 percent of the courts could be abolished."

Decades ago, in the desperate, darkest moment of the Depression, technocracy seemed, briefly, poised to prevail against democracy. "For a moment in time, it was possible for thoughtful people to believe that America would consciously choose to become a technocracy," writes William E. Akin, the author of the definitive historical study of the movement, "Technocracy and the American Dream." In the four months from November 1932 to March 1933, The New York Times published more than 100 stories about the movement. And then the bubble appeared to burst. By summer, Technocrats Magazine and The Technocracy Review had gone out of print.

There are a few reasons for technocracy's implosion. Its tenets could not bear scrutiny. Then, too, because technocrats generally did not believe in parties, elections or politics of any kind — "Technocracy has no theory for the assumption of power," as Mr. Scott put it — they had little means by which to achieve their ends.

But the chief reason for technocracy's failure was democracy's success. Mr. Roosevelt was inaugurated on March 4 and immediately began putting the New Deal in place while calming the nation with a series of fireside chats. By May, E.B. White in The New Yorker could write technocracy's epitaph: "Technocracy had its day this year, and it was characteristic of Americans that they gave it a whirl and then dropped it as they had dropped miniature golf."

Nevertheless, technocracy endured. Its spectacles grew alarming: Technocrats wore identical gray suits and drove identical gray cars in parades that evoked for concerned observers nothing so much as Italian Fascists. Mr. Musk's grandfather was a technocracy stalwart. In 1940, when Canada banned Technocracy Incorporated — out of fear that its members were plotting to undermine the government or the war effort — Mr. Haldeman took out an ad in a newspaper, proclaiming technocracy a "national patriotic movement."

Weeks later, when he tried to enter the United States for a technocracy speaking tour, he was denied entry at the border, possibly because of a new passport regulation that barred travel into the United States to "an alien whose entry would be contrary to the public safety" (something of an irony, given the current administration's border policies). In Vancouver, British Columbia, he was arrested, convicted and sentenced to a fine or two months in jail. He later joined the antisemitic Social Credit Party, becoming its national chairman.

Mr. Haldeman retired from politics in 1949 and soon began thinking about moving to South Africa, which in 1948 announced the policy of apartheid. In 1950 he moved to Pretoria, where he wrote and distributed typewritten conspiratorial tracts. (Most have disappeared, but in 2023 I discovered several in university and private collections.) In May 1960, for instance, he wrote a pamphlet called "The International Conspiracy to Establish a World Dictatorship and Its Menace to South Africa," a response to the unrest after the Sharpeville massacre. During those protests, Nelson Mandela was among 11,000 people arrested and jailed. Mr. Haldeman suggested the uprising had been staged.

He furthermore believed the West had been the subject of an "intensive mass mind conditioning" experiment, in which ideas he considered ludicrous, like the equality of races and the immorality of apartheid, were being spread by newspapers, magazines, radio, television and especially university professors. Convinced that the government was riddled with waste, he also proposed a finance committee to combat inefficiency, writing in all caps, "A watchdog financial agency is needed."

That Mr. Musk has come to hold so many of the same beliefs about social engineering and economic planning as his grandfather is a testament to his profound lack of political imagination, to the tenacity of technocracy and to the hubris of Silicon Valley.

Mr. Musk left South Africa for Canada in 1989, where he stayed with family in Saskatchewan. His grandfather's memory loomed large; not long afterward, his uncle Scott Haldeman, who had left Pretoria to pursue graduate studies in British Columbia, wrote an article in which he described Joshua Haldeman as holding "national and international stature as a political economist.

In 1995, after studying at the University of Pennsylvania, Mr. Musk left a Ph.D. program at Stanford to become a tech entrepreneur. He started a company called X.com in 1999. "What we're going to do is transform the traditional banking industry," he said. (Technocrats also planned to abolish banks. "We don't need banks, bandits or bastards," Joshua Haldeman once wrote.) Mr. Musk made a fortune when eBay acquired PayPal, which had merged with X.com, but in 2017 he bought back the URL, and it was at hand when he purchased Twitter and renamed it X, hoping to kill what he called the "woke mind virus" — echoes of his grandfather's "mass mind conditioning." Much that Mr. Musk has attempted to do at DOGE can be found in the technocracy manuals of the early 1930s.

Mr. Musk's possible departure from Washington will not diminish the influence of Muskism in the United States. His superannuated futurism is Silicon Valley's reigning ideology. In 2023 the venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, who helped staff DOGE, wrote "The Techno-Optimist

Manifesto," predicting the emergence of “technological supermen.” It consists of a list of statements:

We can advance to a far superior way of living and of being.
We have the tools, the systems, the ideas.
We have the will. …
We believe this is why our descendants will live in the stars. …
We believe in greatness. …
We believe in ambition, aggression, persistence, relentlessness — strength.

Mr. Andreessen cited, among his inspirations, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who in 1909 wrote “The Futurist Manifesto,” which glorified violence and masculine virility and opposed liberalism and democracy. It, too, is a list of statements:

We want to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and rashness.
We want to exalt movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist. …
We want to sing the man at the wheel. …
We want to demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism. …
Standing on the world’s summit, we launch once again our insolent challenge to the stars!

Ten years after Mr. Marinetti wrote “The Futurist Manifesto,” fists raised to the stars, he co-wrote the founding document of the movement led by Mussolini: “The Fascist Manifesto.”

Muskism isn’t the beginning of the future. It’s the end of a story that started more than a century ago, in the conflict between capital and labor and between autocracy and democracy. The Gilded Age of robber barons and wage-labor strikes gave rise to the Bolshevik Revolution, Communism, the first Red Scare, World War I and Fascism. That battle of ideas produced the technocracy movement, and far more lastingly, it also produced the New Deal and modern American liberalism. Technocracy lost because technocracy is incompatible with freedom.

That is still true, but unlike his forefathers, Mr. Musk does have a theory for the assumption of power. That theory is to seize power with the dead robotic hand of the past. It remains for the living to wrest free of that grip.