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The Digital Tech Broligarchy's Interest in Left-Wing Science Fiction: A Critical Reading of the Culture of Techno-Libertarianism

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Abstract: A slew of recent articles has asked what the connection might be between right-wing libertarian Silicon Valley billionaires and left-wing science fiction, especially the fiction of Iain M. Banks, the declared reading preference of Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos and Sam Altman. Bank's *Culture* novels create a Rococo utopia that justifies social dislocation and political authoritarianism in the present, licensing and legitimating it under the sign of the exception through what Banks terms Special Circumstances – a dirty tricks team run by superintelligences doing evil to cause good. We argue that the combination of this utopia with reckless AI development and disenchantment with democracy is a profound change to the political economy.

Keywords: AI (Artificial Intelligence), libertarianism, technology, science fiction, neoliberalism

1. Introduction

A recent slew of journalistic articles has begun to ask what the subterranean connection might be between the right-wing-libertarian billionaires currently leading avant-garde AI-corporations in Silicon Valley and leftwing science fiction. The tone of puzzlement in these pieces is hardly surprising. What do anti-union advocates of a 72-hour, "996" working week, who often support minimal government and maximal privatisation, have to do with visionary utopias of post-work, post-money societies of abundance? The emerging consensus is that these fictions provide a publicly accessible ready-made, a prestige techno-utopian reference-text that can be used when discussing blueprints for the future supposed-to-come, one that happens after human-level Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) has been supplanted by superhuman-level Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI). Science-fiction novelist Charles Stross suggests that "today's Silicon Valley billionaires grew up reading classic American science fiction - now, they're trying to make it come true, embodying a dangerous political outlook" (Stross 2023). Sam Freedman adds that "the dominant genre of sci-fi in the 80s and 90s, when today's Silicon Valley overlords were growing up, was Cyberpunk … [but] the dystopian settings of so much cyberpunk fiction are seen by today's tech leaders as prophetic visions of a world they need to try to escape" (Freedman 2025). The problem, it is generally agreed, is misreading: the techno-billionaires have inverted dystopia into utopia. As Stross sums up:

Sci-Fi Author: In my book I invented the Torment Nexus as a cautionary tale."

Tech Company: At long last, we have created the Torment Nexus from classic sci-fi novel *Don't Create the Torment Nexus*."

It's a worryingly accurate summary of the situation in Silicon Valley right now: the billionaires behind the steering wheel have mistaken cautionary tales […] for a road map, and we're trapped in the passenger seat (Stross 2023).

So, whose cautionary tales have been inverted into a road map? Some sleuthing is required before we can specify which sci-fi author has had the greatest influence on the techno-billionaires and AI-research CEOs. Although Stross points to the Golden Age, he names Neal Stephenson, Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov, only the last of whom belongs to that category. Stross also mentions Ayn Rand, JRR Tolkien and John W. Campbell, so clearly this is about an intellectual atmosphere, not specific sci-fi reading selections. Freedman references William Gibson, Phillip K. Dick, and Neal Stephenson, while Rya Jetha mentions Dennis Taylor (Jetha 2025). As for the techno-billionaires themselves, Elon Musk's recommendations include Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars,* Iain M. Banks' *Excession* and Robert Heinlein's *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (Lepore 2021, Carroll 2022, Schleifer 2025). In particular, Musk self-identifies as a "utopian anarchist of the kind best described by Iain Banks," has named his personal company and some SpaceX rockets after things from Iain M Banks's *Culture* series, and highly recommended the *Culture* novels *Excession* and *Player of Games* (Musk 2018, Musk 2019, Schleifer 2025). Peter Thiel opts for Azimov, Heinlein, Stephenson, and JRR Tolkien, while Andreessen just prefers Tolkien (Kakutani 2025). Jeff Bezos, however, discussing Amazon's attempted TV serialisation of the *Culture* novels, names Iain M. Banks "a huge personal favourite" (Flood 2020), while Mark Zuckerberg selected Banks's *Player of Games* for his "A Year of Books" pick (Feloni 2015). The vision of OpenAI under the direction of Sam Altman, meanwhile, is regularly associated by commentators with the *Culture* series, in the context of a horizonal future populated by benevolent superintelligent AIs and their human dependents (Kelly 2018, Anders and Newitz 2023, Robinson and Lovely 2025).

In a long article, Constance Grady notices that the reading preferences of the libertarian technophiles tend to converge on a single author, Iain M. Banks, and Stuart Kelly and Tobias Carroll, while wondering whether these figures can truly have understood the books, agree (Kelly 2018, Carroll 2025, Grady 2025). "Banks is an odd choice for a bunch of tech billionaires", Grady writes. "The author, who died in 2013, was a socialist and avowed hater of the super-rich", who described the Culture as "socialist from the outside, anarchist from the inside". Nonetheless, Banks seems to be exceptionally important, not just to the billionaire owners, but to many other figures in the corporate and scientific leadership of Silicon Valley AI firms. Demis Hassabis, CEO of Google DeepMind has expressed admiration for the *Culture* series as a whole – "brilliant" and "formative," especially *Consider Phlebas* and *Player of Games* – as "the best picture of a post-AGI future" (Hassabis 2018, Hassabis 2023). "Ian Banks' *Culture Series*," Hassabis explain in the context of explaining artificial general intelligence, represents "how the universe would look after humanity has built AI and co-exists with it" (Hassabis 2020). Dario Amodei, CEO of Anthropic, invokes *Player of Games* and the *Culture Series* more generally as exemplifying "principles laid out here" in his manifesto *Machines of Loving Grace*. "The Culture's values are a winning strategy," he writes,

because it uses AI to short-circuit competition and violence while massively accelerating the shift towards "the rule of law, democracy and Enlightenment" (Amodei 2024). As Timothy Cross comments:

> Perhaps the books are just light bedtime reading. But perhaps not, because they explore many of the themes that are worrying the tech world at the moment. The Culture is a society in which virtually everyone's job has been taken by robots. Artificial intelligence (AI) vastly exceeds the organic sort. The spaceships and artificial worlds on which Culture citizens live are run by Minds, machines that are to humans what humans are to ants. […] To self-doubting tech lords, the series is a reassuring tonic. The Culture is a utopia in which the promise of AI has been realised and its pitfalls avoided. The Minds are mostly benevolent gods who ensure that both humans and drones are as happy, safe and fulfilled as possible […] in almost inexhaustible material abundance (Cross 2017, emphasis added).

Iain M. Banks is best known for the *Culture* series, a sequence of hard sci-fi novels exploring a remote future universe in which human civilisation is directed by superintelligent AIs. As Timothy Cross suggests, the *Culture* novels conjecture a post-work, ludic society of material abundance characterised by radical equality, gender fluidity, cybernetic enhancements and pro-social libertarianism. Written by a literary fiction writer who systematically reformulates space opera and science fantasy – Iain M. Banks was the sci-fi pen-name of avant-garde novelist Iain Banks – the *Culture* series develops in an extraordinarily complex atmosphere of ambivalence. On the one hand, every novel tells the classic space opera narrative of the thrilling adventures of a special agent in an exceptional situation, a volunteer for "Special Circumstances", the Culture's secret service. On the other hand, the narratives aesthetically decentre heroism, raising problems of meaningfulness and morality in post-utopian life through a complicated aesthetic of interleafing histories, incommensurable perspectives and interfering patterns. This perhaps explains how one readership can misread the novels as "special circumstance adventures" and "blueprints for utopia". Consider, for instance, that Elon Musk's family office is registered as "Excession" and that his two rockets are named after spaceships from the same novel (the fifth in the Culture Series) (Schleifer 2025). Meanwhile (as we have seen) some sci-fi authors and professional critics interpret the Culture in terms of a subtle equilibrium between utopia and counter-utopia (Mendlesohn 2005, Kincaid 2017).

What can we learn from reading science fiction – especially that of Iain M. Banks – about the worldview of major figures such as Elon Musk, Demis Hassabis, Dario Amodei, Jeff Bezos, Sam Altman, Mark Zuckerberg, plus a host of other players? What would this tell us about technophile versions of right-wing libertarianism that cannot be gained from reading nonfiction manifestos, such as Peter Thiel's *Zero To One: Notes on Startups*, or his *How To Build the Future*, or the public statements of OpenAI, XAI and so forth? We are critical researchers in literary studies who think that the imaginative affordances of narrative fiction play a particularly important role in the way that individuals frame their behaviour towards conjectural scenarios, especially speculative futures. When individuals believe that this future is rushing towards them – for instance, they genuinely think that Artificial General Intelligence is likely to appear in 2027 (Kokotajlo, Alexander et al. 2025) – these speculations become disproportionately important. Here we want to note that, while science fiction has had a significant influence on the development of tech libertarianism, this should not be seen as strictly determinative in the strong sense. Rather than imagining that the entrepreneurial leadership

of Silicon Valley is trying to make fiction become fact, we think that (a particular reading of) Banks and others function as narratively-shaped ideological readymades, in justificatory and visionary contexts.

We propose Banks as an exemplar of what Fredric Jameson once termed the political unconscious of the text. As Jameson puts it, "if interpretation in terms of expressive causality or of allegorical master narratives remains a constant temptation, this is because master narratives have inscribed themselves in the texts as well as in our thinking about them" (Jameson 1981, 34). We might therefore think of science fiction such as Banks as inscribed in and through broader social narratives around technology, capitalism and futurity at the same time as re-producing those effects socially, including among his tech readers. Iain M. Banks' *Culture* novels contain an ideological ambivalence that is potentially serviceable to a technological elite convinced that, despite the manipulative implications of their worldview, their inventions and intentions are benevolent. As Simone Caroti points out, the novels refuse cyberpunk dystopias for a utopian vision of post-scarcity egalitarianism, within which capitalism only remains amongst remnant barbarisms and enclave tyrannies (Caroti 2015, 178). Yet, while presenting themselves as anarchist, post-capitalist utopias, the novels also normalise a post-political order in which superintelligent systems govern society on behalf of intelligent life. The novels therefore offer a convenient imaginative vocabulary for articulating a compelling vision of strong AI, but it is one that risks de-politicising power, circumventing democratic agency and neutralising the moral dilemmas raised by superintelligent manipulation of social futures. As a result, we offer figures from Banks such as the Culture and the secret agency Special Circumstances, where these ambivalences are posed most sharply. These allegorise tech libertarian relationships to Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI), value and futurity. Their interpretation may have indeed informed some of the material-discursive elements of the emergence and proliferation of these technologies. In Special Circumstances, tech libertarianism meets a corporate version of the Schmittian state of exception, one that is justified by a crisis of the social that – from this Schmittian perspective – only AGI/ASI can solve. This, we want to suggest, is an important and underthought aspect of the emergence of new forms of social, technological and economic organisation and offers important insights into the workings of the ascending technological-financial fraction of the ruling class.

In what follows, we document the so-called "Californian Ideology" of Silicon Valley high-tech venture capitalism and AI research-and-development, exhibiting both its anti-humanist implications (Section 2) and its right-wing accelerationist tendencies (Section 3). Against this background, the exorbitant expectations raised by the Californian ideology and its endorsement of strong AI can be grasped in terms of scission between the short-term likelihood of social dislocation and long-term hopes for leisured abundance (Section 4). The combination of "doing evil to cause good" with trust in the benevolent potential of AI explains why Banks' *Culture* series exercises such fascination for the tech elite. It also clarifies why the figure of Special Circumstances, the morally questionable exception that justifies the rules, is central to the reception of these novels within the Californian ideology (Section 5). In conclusion, we suggest that the dalliance of the tech elite with left-wing science fiction is likely to be transitory, since this vision is ultimately reactionary and anti-democratic (Section 6).

2. Transhumanism, Extropianism, Singularitarianism, Cosmism, Rationalism, Effective Altruism, Longtermism (TESCREAL)

The worldview of the so-called "broligarchy" (the oligarchy of the brothers) has been described as "science fictional" and "extremely dangerous". Although they describe it in public as "libertarianism", it is strongly influenced by (Left, Right and Irreal) "accelerationism" (Carroll 2024, 27-56). While high-profile tech entrepreneurs, such as Elon Musk, exemplify this worldview in their thinking, it is important to recognise that it is trans-individual, that is, it is a socially-influential ideology, not a personal idiosyncrasy. In this section, we locate the "science fictional" elements of the worldview of the tech billionaires and executives in the "Californian Ideology", whose most recent iteration can be described through the acronym TESCREAL (fully explained in this section).

In their seminal paper "The Californian Ideology" (1996), Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron argue that the syncretic worldview which emerged in the dotcom era was a fusion of progressive rationalism, cultural bohemianism and technological determinism with forms of right-wing libertarianism based in an unrestricted natural right to property (Barbrook and Cameron 1996). The "Jeffersonian democracy" envisaged by these tech entrepreneurs, professional managers, knowledge workers and "digital artisans" (i.e., systems engineers and program designers) continued to include a form of slavery, only now, this was envisioned in terms of "cyborg masters and robot slaves" (Barbrook and Cameron 1996, 61-63). In the subsequent development of the Californian ideology, during the implementation of the ICT revolution in post-Fordist capitalism (1995-2015), the ambivalence inherent in this syncretism led to polarisation between digital egalitarians and neo-reactionary libertarians (Schradle 2015). Both were pro-slavery, one future-oriented and egalitarian, oriented to robot slaves and digital minions, the other revanchist, oriented to the restoration of the white racist historical bloc of the post-Restoration but pre-Civil Rights era (Schradle 2015, 71). According to Patrick Hermansson and cothinkers, this latter current soon blossomed into Neoreaction (hereafter, NRx) – an anti-Enlightenment movement embracing "white nationalism, religious traditionalism and techno-commercialism" (Hermansson, Lawrence et al. 2020, 125) – best summed up in the works of Curtis Yarvin. With the rapid development of Generative-AI, following the breakthrough development of the Transformer Architecture in 2017, which makes possible an approach using Large Language Models, the robot servitors have been replaced in the technophile imaginary by digital minds, whether conceived of as utterly egalitarian or implicitly supremacist.[1] But, as Yarden Katz reminds us, the problematic connection to histories of slavery has not been lost, either in the intellectual filiation of the Californian ideology, or in the approach of its product designers to questions of social bias in model training (Katz 2020, 8-11). There are issues here around intellectual elitism and its links to liberal (and not-so-liberal) eugenics that we will return to shortly. For the moment, however, the key point is that the Californian Ideology, a politically ambivalent utopian vision centred on technological determinism and oriented by hopes for Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) and Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI), is pervasive in Big Tech. The broligarchy expresses the ideology of the sector, not the other way around.

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[1] This egalitarian/neoreactionary polarization is emblematized by the differences between OpenAI's ChatGPT5 and X-AIs Grok, respectively.

The most recent mutation of the Californian ideology has been compellingly described as TESCREAL – Transhumanism, Extropianism, Singularity-belief, Cosmism, Rationalism, Effective Altruism and Long-termism (Gebru and Torres 2024). This is a complex bundle of ideologemes in a fluid ensemble, which specifies the current articulation of the Californian ideology's original progressive rationalism, cultural bohemianism and technological determinism. As we discuss in a moment, TESCREAL is the stem of the "Y" that branches into egalitarian and neoreactionary stems of digital slavery and eliminationist politics, increasingly manifesting in tech-sector racism, antisemitism and transphobia.[2] Transhumanism refers to the neo-eugenic project of human enhancement, often to the extent of Extropianism, that is a state beyond perfectionist ideals, perhaps achieved through genetic alteration of *Homo sapiens* to create a chimaera, perhaps accomplished by systematic cyborgism, entered with the aim of surpassing the natural limitations of human being. Key figures here are David Pearce and Nick Bostrom, who we will meet again soon (Gebru and Torres 2024, 5-6). Singularity-belief describes confidence in the existence and achievability of a near-future point of recursive self-improvement by artificial intelligences, which, via autonomous development into ASIs, will generate an exponential curve of technological progress. Ray Kurzweil (pro-) and Elizer Yudkowsky (anti-) are the main figures here (Gebru and Torres 2024, 6-7). Cosmism, in the version provided by Ben Goertz, incorporates Transhumanism, Extropianism and Singularitarianism, to endow humanity with a manifest destiny in cosmic colonisation, which will include not only Extropian settlements, but also a massive proliferation of digital selves and virtual realities. "Cosmists can be understood as transhumanists whose focus is less on what humanity could become and more on how our posthuman descendants could radically transform the universe itself" (Gebru and Torres 2024, 7). Rationalism refers to the Enlightenment philosophical standpoint, inflected in this context in the direction of the discursive elimination of obstacles to the anticipated posthuman singularity, or, in anxious articulations, in the direction of efforts to secure human control over the forthcoming superintelligence (Gebru and Torres 2024, 7). The combination of cosmism, (cautious) singularity-belief and rationalism is evident, for instance, in Nick Bostrom's celebrated *Super Intelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies,* with its invocation of the need for human alignment of the super machine that is to redeem humanity's "cosmic endowment" by letting us populate the stars (Bostrom 2016, 122-123). There, the astonished reader learns that it is already possible to anticipate 10^{43} human lives in a future, post-superintelligence, post-singularity universe, living potentially happy, value-laden existences amongst the 10^{58} digital beings that fundamentally populate this cosmos (Bostrom 2016, 122-123). Hold that thought for a moment.

The true core of TESCREAL is the combination of Effective Altruism with Long-termism. Effective Altruism is the application of Rationalism to ethics, and it really amounts to an act consequentialism ("you should act in such a way that the consequences of your actions maximise some benefit – e.g., happiness [Utilitarianism], well-being [Capabilities]") (Gebru and Torres 2024, 7). In the case of Effective Altruism in the Californian ideology, the benefit to be maximised is the sum total of "value" in the

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[2] One oft-unremarked underlying thread that ties key figures like Musk, Land, and Yarvin together is their eliminationist hostility to transgender existence, which is, perhaps, for them, *the wrong kind* of transhumanism – abject, embodied, socially marginalized, and, worst of all, *poor*.

universe, where "value" is described in terms of the net positiveness of a life (i.e., something like a fusion of happiness with wellbeing). When this is combined with Long-termism, the belief that the "value" to be maximised should be calculated from the perspective of the distant future, then this becomes a truly alarming ideology (Gebru and Torres 2024, 8). From the perspective of the "value", the net positiveness of the total lives, actual and digital, which might exist in some long-term scenario, as we have just seen from Bostrom's calculations, TESCREAL thinkers quantify this as 10^{58} units of value. To get a feel for what TESCREAL, the stem of the Y in the Californian Ideology, the thing that remains the same whether its articulation is egalitarian or neoreactionary, really means, we should do a quick calculation. Let's maximise some value!

Start with the value of the lives of the 10^{10} individuals who will probably exist on Earth in 2042-2058.

$$\frac{10^{10}}{10^{58}} = \frac{1}{10^{48}}$$

There are fewer than 10^{22} grains of sand on Earth, so the idea that the global population counts for less than 1 grain of sand amongst all of the grains on the entire planet won't do to understand how trivial your life, and the lives of every other living person, is, through this lens. There are fewer than 10^{26} drops of water in the oceans of the Earth, so it won't do either. But if there were as many earths as there are grains of sand, and each had as much water as earth, then, yes, the lives of the planetary population would count as one drop.

Are we labouring the point? Is it inconvenient to have the genocidal implications of this ideology demonstrated?

Now consider the implications of the fact that this ideology envisages a future where digital selves outnumber human beings by orders of magnitude:

$$\frac{10^{43}}{10^{58}} = \frac{1}{10^{15}}$$

If there were 100,000 planet Earths, each with 10 billion inhabitants, then the human component of the utopian future would count as 1 valuable human life, compared to 100,000 times 10 billion valuable digital existences. What do you think comes first, from the TESCREAL perspective – a human future, or the future of the machine?

3. Superintelligence and Accelerationism

Italian fascism had Marinetti and the Futurists. The Californian ideology has Accelerationism. In this section, we link the disturbing moral imperatives that flow from the peculiar consequentialism that TESCREAL, the core of the contemporary Californian ideology, makes possible to political programs. An act consequentialism that calculates long-term benefits from short-term harms urgently needs a mechanism for implementation that circumvents the reasonable objections of those who are to be the victims. In this context, Accelerationism, the idea that an intellectual or political elite, having identified and isolated the mechanism of history, should hurry things up by pulling hard on the lever, irrespective of democratic deliberation, becomes extremely attractive to this way of thinking.

Originating in the chemical delirium of Nick Land's fever dreams, especially *The Thirst for Annihilation* (1990), *Dark Enlightenment* (2011) and *Fanged Noumena* (2017), accelerationism proposes to let contradictions intensify to the point of cataclysm or breakthrough (Land 1990, Land 2011, Land 2017). Best thought of as the

chance encounter of Leninist vanguardism with cybernetic Surrealism on a laboratory bench that was not entirely free from psychotropic substances, this nihilistic endeavour basically involves doing an end run around popular resistance, consciousness raising, and other such passé notions of Enlightenment thought. Land celebrated capitalism's constantly intensifying deterritorialisation of planetary existence, its corrosive dissolution of ethical life and social institutions, suggesting that capitalism incarnated "machinic drives", "functions of nomadic cybernetic systems [that] […] seek equilibrium, or […] escape equilibrium" (Land 1993, 475). Capitalism, in other words, is a disequilibrium machine that, when inserted into human desire, manifests as the death drive – but resistance is not only futile; it is counter-productive:

> Machinic desire can seem a little inhuman, as it rips up political cultures, deletes traditions, dissolves subjectivities, and hacks through security apparatuses, tracking a soulless tropism to zero control. This is because what appears to humanity as the history of capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy's resources. Digitocommodification is the index of a cyberpositively escalating technovirus, of the planetary technocapital singularity: a self-organising insidious traumatism, virtually guiding the entire biological desiring-complex towards post-carbon replicator usurpation (Land 1993, 479).

This vision, in which vanguardism meets cybernetics, already links technological singularity, deregulated capitalism, artificial superintelligence and digital existence in a single eschatological figure; it is, Land apologises lamely, "a little inhuman".

Though he is widely read by the Right, Land has proven equally influential on the Left, with several of his key works coming out on MIT's accelerationist Urbanomic imprint, which is directed by his former student from Warwick University's infamous CCRU research unit, philosopher Robin Mackay (MIT 2025). Mark Fisher, another student of and collaborator with Land, is sometimes cited as a left-wing accelerationist for his major work *Capitalist Realism* (Fisher 2022 [2009]). However, that text rejects Land's enthusiastic resignation for a critical stance on the entropic potential of capitalist deterritorialisation and its machinic desire, questioning the belief that ineluctable collapse promises automatic liberation (Fisher 2022, 51-52). In *Post-Capitalist Desire* (2020), however, Fisher describes as "accelerationist" the view that the fusion of desire with the machine can colonise the human and drive it (e.g., to destruction), a view that he conditionally endorsed as the mechanism of history (Fisher 2020, 191).

Accelerationism, then, in this specific context, is the belief that the cybernetic colonisation of human desire has the capacity to accelerate technological development in the direction of a singularity, in which artificial intelligence "guides the entire biological desiring complex towards [subservience to machine goals]" (Land 1993, 479). Capitalism and AI generally fuse in this aesthetic, since the economy, as catallaxy (Hayek 1976), is imagined as a cybernetic system whose operations are accelerated by AI-based information processing and whose goal is open to non-human manipulation by a superintelligence. This is what is meant by "post-carbon replicator usurpation". For Left accelerationists, such as Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, the problem with Land's reactionary vision and Fisher's melancholic critique is conflation of diagnosis with strategy (Srnicek and Williams 2013, 2-4). Accelerated development towards utopia or dystopia is not something that has to be detected in the automatism of the present, but a

potential to be mobilised by conscious intervention undertaken by a movement prepared to "repurpose technologies to reignite a utopian imagination" (Srnicek and Williams 2015, 143). In his just-published *Silicon Empires*, however, Srnicek recognises that presently it is big tech that controls the direction of acceleration and that this drives "strong AI" in the direction of a colonisation of work and life (Srnicek 2025, 16-24). Thus, the "fully automated luxury communism" that another accelerationist thinker in the wake of Fisher, Aaron Bastani, advocates (Bastani 2020, 17-18), is premised on the belief that although automation creates an economy of post-scarcity, class struggle nonetheless needs to be added on, in order to wrest back popular control over material abundance. This sort of technological determinist vision naively imagines artificial intelligence in abstraction from political economy, as if its implementation were merely a benevolent affordance that might be captured in a subsequent struggle. It also assumes that the digital will re-make the world, right up to its DNA components, as an immaterial realm of plenty – a fallacy widely debunked by ecosocialists such as Kohei Saito (Saito 2022). Despite the communist veneer to Bastani's theories, the fact that post-scarcity is to be achieved via the reckless drive of corporate libertarianism towards the replacement of human mental labour by machine learning is implicit. As Joonas Martikainen notes, in a swingeing critique, "the luxury communist proposal ends up resembling an extreme case of the neoliberal hegemony that it claims to be fighting, a centrally ruled world completely focused on private enjoyment of luxury and devoid of any shared understanding of human flourishing on which democratic public life could thrive" (Martikainen 2023, 66).

Accelerationist assertions about futurity, then, represent a technological sublime, a kind of aesthetic conjecture that licenses the exploration of desired futures, under the premise that the alignment set into the machine now will determine the future direction of historical evolution. This is horrifying or wonderful, depending on perspective; for Mark Fisher, it was horrifying; for Left accelerationists, such as Srnicek and Bastani, it is wonderful. Yet, it is not surprising that rather than Srnicek and Bastani, the favourite thinker of the tech-elite is Curtis Yarvin, who emerged from the San Francisco tech milieu under the pseudonym "Mencius Moldbug" with a blog called "Unqualified Reservations" to pioneer Neo-Reactionism (known as NRx). Yarvin's NRx is profoundly influenced by Land – Neo-Reactionism is often taken as a synonym for Land's "Dark Enlightenment" – though his writings have had their own even greater influence on the second Trump administration and the American conservative elite more generally. A number of news organisations detail his links to Vice President J.D. Vance, senior State Department member Michael Anton, political strategist Steve Bannon, and venture capitalist Peter Thiel (Wilson 2024, Ward 2025). What might appeal to those figures is that Yarvin's accelerationist NRx argues for the replacement of democracy with a sovereign, who sits on top of a racialised high-tech economy that radically distinguishes between entrepreneurial tech creators and the rest of us. Yarvin says the central problem of human society is violence, which is control plus uncertainty, writing:

> Violence equals conflict plus uncertainty. While there are wallets in the world, conflict will exist. But if we can eliminate uncertainty – if there is an unambiguous, unbreakable rule that tells us, in advance, who gets the wallet – I have no reason to sneak my hand into your pocket, and you have no reason to run after me shooting wildly into the air. Neither of our actions, by definition, can affect the outcome of the conflict (Moldbug 2007, 6).

If violence is uncertainty, then the goal of politics is to reduce uncertainty through automation. Politics thus becomes a problem of algorithmic formulation, which can control its users without creating the messy uncertainty of the jostling between different groups of the *demos*. Yarvin writes, "[t]he key is to look at this not as a moral problem, but as an engineering problem" (Moldbug 2007, 6). Yarvin's reduction of social solidarity to systems engineering is not just elitist – there is a distinct whiff of eugenics to this, as when Yarvin argues for targeted technology restrictions for the masses:

> I am not suggesting across-the-board technology restriction, general medieval stasis, low-res iPads, banning Google Glass, or anything of the kind. My idea of Solution F involves targeted technology controls designed to create market demand for the type of unskilled human labourers that modern industry has made obsolete, but that we are politically unwilling to kill and sell as organ meat. Being so unwilling, we have no choice but to provide these people with a way to survive as human beings - preferably as human as possible (Moldbug 2013, 24).

Much of the human species, here, is blithely dismissed as obsolete, or soon to be, whose only real usage is "organ meat" for those who are "allowed" to make fuller use of digital technology. The "engineering problem" that Yarvin wants to "solve" is democracy in itself, the messy, embodied contestation between groups that needs to be replaced with a cleaner, algorithmically automated system.

Unsurprisingly, then, this elitist technological vision dovetails easily with a far-Right politics around race and gender. Yarvin is most famous for the invention of the "red pill" metaphor taken from *The Matrix* movie, in which initiates into reactionary thought suddenly see the world as it allegedly "really is" – an idea which was taken up by reactionaries of all kinds, including right-wing manosphere types as well as the infamous "black pilled" incels. As the reference to *The Matrix* suggests, broadly science fictional and fantastic metaphors abound in Yarvin's work, including descriptions of drug users as "zombies", as do video game tropes such as the designation of non-tech-elites as "NPCs" (non-player characters) (Moldbug 2013, 5). Yarvin says his philosophy, which he also terms Formalism, "is an ideology designed by geeks for other geeks", and though he peppers his writings with a plethora of references to political philosophers from Plato onwards, it nevertheless emerges within a broader tech milieu in which science fiction constitutes the chief aesthetic reference point, and a profound distrust of democracy circulates. Given his outsized influence on both Silicon Valley and members of the American political ruling class, it matters that Yarvin articulates his vision for a popular sovereign and automated society in the language of science fiction. Here, as elsewhere, the genre provides the engine for understanding this vision of a future society which is premised on the unconditional rule of the tech class – fully automated tech authoritarianism. And as the NPC metaphor suggests, there is the sense that there is something less lively in the average person than in the vibrant matter of digital automation – between those who play, and those who simply exist as organ meat.

4. A World Run by Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI)

It may seem surprising to describe the ideological worldview of the leadership element of rapaciously capitalist Big Tech as seriously contemplating a post-capitalist future imagined by the likes of Banks, Bastani or Srnicek. Actually, however, this is not particularly strange. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, all class consciousness consists of a "dipole" of "ideology and utopia" (Jameson 1981, 287), and even fascism has its

utopian vision of the redeemed body (Jameson 1979, 11-12). Acceleration is a vector, driving towards *something*. That something is not just Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), but Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI), which is a machine intellect whose performance is orders of magnitude better than a human being. In this section, we discuss the relationship between the idea of technological acceleration and the potential for social dislocation. According to the Californian ideology, artificial intelligence is the method by which historical transformation, in line with purportedly benevolent long-term consequences, is supposed to happen. But artificial intelligence, in the conjectures of its developers, happens in two stages – a near future stage, rife with negative implications, followed, everyone is assured, by beneficial consequences in the distant future. In the following section, we will go on to explore how this real contradiction, which demands a social solution, receives only an imaginary resolution.

Speculations about artificial intelligence belong to a discursive field populated by lunatics and charlatans, so some definitions are necessary to avoid simply replicating nonsense. The human intellect constitutes, by definition, general intelligence. AGI is therefore a form of machine learning that models human-level intelligence. According to the "strong AI" vision of AGI, this is a machine that would think like a human intellect. By contrast, the "weak AI" vision, which we provisionally accept, holds that the machine would merely simulate (some aspects of) human reasoning and judgment. ASI would be an artificial intelligence capable of outperforming AGI by orders of magnitude.[3] If AGI is as-yet a speculative technology, then ASI is a science-fictional guess. Yet it is central to the ideological justifications for Big Tech provided by its spokespersons, especially in relation to all-important government funding of military research. In "singularity" conjectures, an exponential model is applied: at some point just after AGI, the machine begins self-refinement, leading to an explosive breakout, resulting in ASI a few years after AGI. In "controlled" conjectures, post-AGI, research applies the brakes just sufficiently to align the machine with humanity and then, at about the close of the 21st century, the now-domesticated genii is released from the bottle. Either way, the leadership of Big Tech seems completely convinced that ASI is going to happen.

It is important not to confuse generative-AI, which is a development based on the use of Transformer Architectures in connection with Large Language Models, with either AGI or ASI. Both AGI and ASI are conjectural technologies that do not yet exist – what does exist is gen-AI, but there is no evidence that the most recent LLMs, such as ChatGPT5 and Gemini, are performing at a level that is as good as or better than a human intellect. Although proposals for a "Final Exam", involving difficult-to-solve problems in most academic disciplines, intended to set a definitive standard for machine performance relative to the human intellect, do exist, there is no consensus. Nonetheless, with current models still struggling with complex reasoning and nowhere near autonomous intellectual performance, the idea that gen-AI (a smart chatbot that can solve defined problems under human supervision) is on the threshold of true AGI is absurd. Current forms of gen-AI are closer to Artificial Narrow Intelligence (ANI), a machine intelligence that can perform narrowly defined intellectual tasks as well as or better than human beings, such as playing Go or solving protein folding problems.

Although both AGI and ASI are speculative technologies, this is unlikely to lead to a new modesty in technology corporation claims. Instead, OpenAI's declared AGI

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[3] Nick Bostrom – despite his EA and Longterm worldview – remains the best guide to this.

benchmark –an artificial intelligence capable of postdoctoral performance across all academic disciplines – indicates the likely direction of AI development, namely, to restrict the nature of the definition so that something like non-agential AGI can be achieved using LLMs. While a scientific consensus on the likelihood of AGI (so defined) does not exist, we regard predictions that this can be attained through the extension and deepening of current methods sometime between 2027 and 2032 as highly credible. The speculative relation between this and ASI is that such a machine could be instructed to recursively self-program for accelerated improvements in cognitive performance – this is basically a chain-reaction conjecture – quickly outstripping human supervision. According to Nick Bostrom, if this happened explosively, such a machine intellect might pose an existential risk to the human species (and planetary life) (Bostrom 2016, 115-119). Nonetheless, Bostrom seems convinced that with the right kind of moral alignment, ASI would be vastly beneficial, making possible a society of abundance that would constitute a "deep utopia" within which human beings (and digital selves) would mostly play, not work, while questing for the meaning of life (Bostrom 2024, 60-61). Likewise, at one extreme, Altman believes that ASI will likely introduce a society of abundance but might instead tile the world with datacentres and eliminate humanity with a novel bioweapon (Andersen 2023). At the other extreme, Musk seems to think that it will treat human beings as domestic pets, unless it can be aligned with human supremacism, via an embrace of natural inequality.

The basic rationale for every single one of the American Big Tech firms researching AI is that it is essential that their benevolent version of high-tech society happens via a machine aligned to negative liberty and possessive individualism. Meanwhile, some projections of the impact of ANI – let alone AGI – involve short-term 30%-40% white-collar unemployment in the decade of its workplace implementation, with the associated annihilation of the living conditions of technical specialists, liberal professionals, and college-educated para-professionals (Felten 2023). This is, after all, explicitly what AGI is designed for: OpenAI, for instance, states in its Charter that its corporate aim is to produce "artificial general intelligence", defined as "highly autonomous systems that outperform humans at most economically valuable work" (OpenAI 2026). Just to be clear here, as proponents of a weak-AI understanding of the technology, we are extremely sceptical about claims that gen-AI, or even AGI, will permanently replace human mental labour. What we are pointing to is the radical cheapening of intellectual work, a process that Marx described as the production of "relative surplus value" through technological improvements to labour productivity. Christian Fuchs has made the cognate point in relation to the automation of manual labour, that instead of reducing the amount of human work performed in the world economy, what automation in the period 1991-2022 has done is to increase the number of employees from 2.3 billion to 3.4 billion (Fuchs 2022, 141). At the same time, in combination with neoliberal privatisation and deregulation, this has resulted in a spectacular transfer of wealth from the producers of value to the owners of capital, together with a rise in overall unemployment, especially of unskilled labourers. Artificial intelligence can be expected to do something similar. Economic research dealing with the implementation of gen-AI models its likely destruction of occupation-types, rather than its creation of permanent unemployment, but this has significant potential for social dislocation. Superintelligence-belief acts prophylactically here, to mitigate the pain of the transition that AGI's arrival will cause. AGI becomes a necessary evil, the sacrifice that the 10^{10} individuals must make to produce 10^{58} units of value.

Given the expected arrival of the digital Jesus, the Promised Land overfloweth – mainly with transhumanism and extropianism. ASI is expected to deliver a tremendous boost to human augmentation, cybernetic integration, and disease eradication. It is also expected to provide the keys to effective immortality, perhaps including digital replication of personality structures, and to the conscious selection of the natural characteristics of one's offspring, i.e., to liberal (and not-so-liberal) eugenics. Such conjectures justify, in the here-and-now, experimental technologies to do with lifespan prolongation, cryogenic suspension and eugenics programs.[4] They also justify a set of experimental lifestyle choices that seem, superficially, to corroborate the idea that this is about libertarianism – notably polyamory, but also, reportedly, drug use. The now-bankrupt cryptocurrency exchange FTX was helmed by a polycule, while Elon Musk is the father of (at least) fourteen children with different mothers, some conceived with IVF. Musk's family has been described as a "harem" by the Wall Street Journal, with some of the mothers solicited by Musk on his social media platform X. In one text shown to the WSJ by conservative influencer Ashley St. Clair, who shares a child with Musk, he reportedly said, "[t]o reach legion-level before the apocalypse, we will need to use surrogates." After the Wall Street Journal story appeared, Musk simply wrote "TMZ > WSJ" on his website, a comment which neither confirms nor denies the details of the story, but rather simply his preference for tabloid news. At the same time, performance optimising drug use has been a feature of Silicon Valley since the 1970s, when early programmers and entrepreneurs experimented with LSD (Harris 2023), to the proliferation of ADHD amphetamine medications, both prescribed and not, as well as other more outré rumours of Musk's heavy ketamine usage. What we are looking at, then, is a set of explicitly prefigurative cultural practices, which anticipate the society of abundance that ASI is to deliver – after the birth pains of AGI, social convulsion, economic dislocation and political authoritarianism.

5. Banks and Bros

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that this worldview needs something rather less angular to provide it with a human face. Enter the somewhat unlikely science-fiction author voted most popular by a committee of authoritarian billionaires. The Culture Series by reformist socialist author Iain M. Banks is literary fiction, intended as a critique of social hierarchies, aversive prejudices and authoritarian worldviews. However, it is *also* intended as an ironic critique of a utopian society whose culture strongly resembles neoliberal capitalism, which reveals its cultural imperialism and totalitarian potential vividly as soon as it encounters what it understands as an existential threat. What that means is that these novels are ambivalent structures which hold utopian and dystopian moments in suspension, reserving final judgement (or rather, transposing that problem onto the reader) by means of subtle irony. This is the point of insisting that this is literary science fiction – we don't mean that it is approved for university syllabi; we mean that it should not be read as pulp sci-fi. In this section, we argue that the reception of Banks among tech billionaires and corporate executives is over-determined by the Californian ideology and the implications of AI implementation in the workplace. In other words, although the problem is a simplistic misreading of a complex author, this misreading is socially conditioned by political economy and ideological factors, because it functions as an "imaginary resolution of real contradictions".

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[4] Just to be clear: with the exception of eugenics, none of these technologies is intrinsically immoral – the point is that they are experimental and so their benefits are conjectural.

Here we want to offer the techno-libertarian appropriation of Banks' work as integral to understanding contemporary capitalist ideology, in the manner of Giorgio Agamben's (Foucault-inspired) genealogical method, an "actual historical phenomena [...] whose role [is] to constitute and make intelligible a broader historical-problematic context" (Agamben 2009, 9). We might think of this appropriation as metonymic of a broader technocratic and authoritarian discourse which has been formed in and through a particular reading of contemporary science fiction by its key participants, such as Musk, Thiel, Yarvin, Land and others, perhaps even the more classically liberal Sam Altman. Banks is here interpreted as articulating a cultural logic that underwrites the drive towards automating contemporary culture whatever the social and environmental cost. This is not to say that this is the only reading of Banks, or indeed the most common one, but rather to suggest that central to techno-libertarianism is a hermeneutics of what Steven Shaviro has termed the "mimesis of futurity" at work in science fiction, "understood as a kind of pressure, or incipience, that is already implicit within the present moment", and that, crucially, demands actualisation through a technics designed to bring that future into being (Shaviro 2024, 1).

Banks' Culture is what happens when ASI generates a society of abundance, within which human activities become expressive preferences rather than functionally necessary, so that "work" is gamified or adventurous. Indeed, every activity becomes ludic, so that even the war machines of the Culture have names like the Torturer-class warship *Killing Time* (Banks 1996, 276) and the Abominator-class dreadnaught *Falling Outside the Normal Moral Constraints* (Banks 2010, 240). The consequence for cultural formations is that they lose their functional relevance to social roles, particularly in respect of the division of labour, which means that cultural forms become elective stylisations of contingent ways of life. Social existence within the Culture looks a lot like the lifestyles of the rich and famous today in cosmopolitan multicultural capitalism – only without the exploitation of the proletariat – plus techno gadgets such as AI drones, complete sexual fluidity, and drug glands for entertainment purposes. According to Banks, the Culture is "a society where material scarcity is unknown and the only real value is sentimental value", one without laws or crimes, governed and organised by its superintelligent shipminds, who as digital citizens are first amongst equals (Banks 1994, 12). "I am a Culture Mind", states the shipmind *Lasting Damage* in *Look to Windward*: "We are close to gods, and on the far side" (Banks 2000, 316). As the author clarifies in his much-cited essay "A Few Notes on the Culture", "humans and independent drones (the Culture's non-android individual AIs of roughly human-equivalent intelligence) [...] have a status somewhere between passengers, pets and parasites" (Banks 1994, 8). Unsurprisingly, a central premise of each of the novels is that the lives of the human beings existing in what Bastani describes as Banks' "Fully Automated Luxury Space Communism" are often beset by ennui (Bastani 2019). Ziller, the non-Culture protagonist of *Look to Windward,* sardonically observes that:

> The point is [...] that having carefully constructed their paradise from first principles to remove all credible motives for conflict among themselves and [...] almost all natural threats, these people then find that their lives are so hollow they have to recreate false versions of just the sort of terrors untold generations of their ancestors spent their existences trying to conquer (Banks 2000, 114).

This is paradise, as administered by artificial intelligence, within which desperation and liberation are sometimes difficult to distinguish, something that seems to entirely escape some of the readership. In a poignant moment in *Consider Phlebas*, the first novel in the series, the Culture agent confronts a defector who has passed from the Culture to an openly authoritarian theocracy. "Why?", asks the agent. "You're ruled by your machines", Horza replies. "You're an evolutionary dead end. [...] I don't care how self-righteous the Culture feels or how many people the Idrians kill. They're on the side of life – [...] fallible and short-sighted, but real life" (Banks 1987, 26). This answer (the spiritual vacuity of the Culture and its domination by post-carbon digital entities) points to the potential lack of existential meaningfulness of the Culture's ludic aestheticisation of human life (Banks 1987, 26-27). Written in 1987, the novel eerily anticipates the "clash of civilisations" that would emerge between Islamic fundamentalism and triumphant neoliberalism after the Fall of the Berlin Wall. In such dialectical set-pieces, the complexity of the series's presentation of utopia and counter-utopia is manifest, despite its author's clear preference for the society of abundance and its benevolent machines. As it is typical in literary presentations of ambivalence, the resolution depends on dramatic irony – the actions of figures such as Horza, Ziller, and Zakalwe in *Use of Weapons* are ultimately self-defeating because their search for absolute self-deconstructs under the pressure of the ruthless deeds their beliefs legitimate. After the ambivalence has been registered, it is narratively neutralised, leaving the everyday life of the Culture as the only benign alternative to forms of religious fundamentalism that are energised by strong evaluations, moral absolutes and atavistic convictions.

Completely central to this resignation to paternalistic guidance is the firm conviction that a strong version of superintelligent AI is a benign technology that supersedes what Horza calls human "fallibility and short-sightedness". The culture of the Culture is tolerant, permissive, and pluralistic. Its society is the opposite of the neoliberal dystopias of cyberpunk fiction – in the Culture, there is no poverty and criminality is managed by benevolent surveillance. There is a great deal to like about Banks' Culture, expressly designed as a utopian "correction" to the real world of 1970s nostalgic reaction, national chauvinism and assertions of a fixed human nature, rigid gender roles, finalistic sexual assignment, racial differences, and so forth (Kincaid 2017, 27-29). However, these egalitarian elements are balanced against libertarian tendencies, which can assert AI sovereignty precisely because this transpires within an imaginary universe, within which the social bond is an elective affinity. What culture is *not*, from this perspective, is the narrative presentation of moral norms, or a conjectural future history of human emancipation, since all that boring stuff is delegated to robots, leaving the citizens of the Culture free to engage in hedonistic self-expression.

Banks imagines a future in which humanity (and other sophont species) will be guided by ASI to a libertarian paradise that is tolerant, pluralistic, egalitarian – and individualistic. It justifies a great deal, in the here and now, which might otherwise seem – well, morally cloudy, to put it mildly. But surely after certain necessary evils, the maximisation of value will be definitively established – right? Apparently not. The problem is that the Culture is surrounded by emergent civilisations, many of which have regrettable tendencies to strong evaluations, moral absolutes, fixed meanings and belief in the superiority of their sophont species. The purpose of Contact is to prepare encountered civilisations for integration into the Culture by a simple process of negative alignment – "carbon fascists" are systematically prevented from attaining the technological mastery necessary for membership of the interstellar community. Now, a carbon fascist is any lifeform that holds not just the belief that its species is superior, but more

generally, any lifeform that holds that life is superior to its digital simulation (hence the "carbon" in the fascism). In short, sophonts who resist the ASIs are treated rather like underdeveloped countries in relation to neoliberal imperialism – for instance, Afghanistan, to name a pointed example. In *The Player of Games*, the second novel in the series, the protagonist is manipulated by the ASIs into participating in a ritualistic competition within a sophont society whose empire depends on a social hierarchy, whose allocation is fixed periodically by the placement of individuals through sort of super-chess (or maybe, space-Buzkashi). Of course, it's all a trick, leading up to the murder of the Emperor of Azad by his own Grand Marshall, out-played by the ASIs into taking a shot at the Culture's agent, which the stealth super-drone, Flere-Imsaho, reflects back at them, with lethal effect (Banks 1988, 374). Upon the death of the emperor, effectively a murder while cheating at the sacred game, the empire dissolves into chaos and the game itself is utterly discredited. The point here is that the technocratic utopia ushered in by ASI is seen as excluding whatever value is regarded by its makers as antithetical to the Culture. There can, in the final analysis, be one and only one Culture. Its substantive definition depends on its inventors.

What is at stake in Banks' work becomes clear in the figure of the Culture's Special Circumstances, its secret assassins and saboteurs. When Contact encounters an alien civilisation that is inconsistent with the Culture –when it finds a form of carbon fascism – it calls on the services of Special Circumstances to suppress religious fundamentalisms, militaristic societies, and species supremacists, not generally by direct violence, but by subtle entrapment and cultural sabotage. The aim is to catalyse technological regression, preventing them from attaining membership of the interstellar community. Here we want to offer the conceptual figure of Special Circumstances as one of the keys to the way that Banks' novels are read in the broader tech milieu. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay has termed neologism one of the seven "beauties" of science fiction (Csicsery-Ronay 2012), and like the Culture itself, "Special Circumstances" as a term offers us an important insight into the blandly automised violence of techno libertarianism, possibly on its way to a form of late fascism. Banks describes it in the following way:

> Special Circumstances had always been the Contact section's moral espionage weapon, the very cutting edge of the Culture's interfering domestic policy, the elite of the elite, in a society which abhorred elitism.
>
> […]
>
> It had about it too an atmosphere of secrecy (in a society that virtually worshipped openness) which hinted at unpleasant, shaming deeds, and an ambience of moral relativity (in a society which clung to its absolutes; life/good, death/bad; pleasure/good, pain/bad) which attracted and repulsed at once, but anyway excited.
>
> No other part of the Culture more exactly represented what the society as a whole really stood for, or was more militant in the application of the Culture's fundamental beliefs. Yet no other part embodied less of the society's day-to-day character (Banks 1987, 28).

There are several salient points to notice in this explanation: first, Special Circumstances is an elitist organisation that operates in some measure in secret; second, it functions as a counter-intuitive justification for behaviour that appears to contradict the values held by the Culture; and third, the fostering of the life of the Culture, including

those of artificial intelligences, legitimates any form of violence against its embodied others. Special Circumstances is an organisation, a societal structure, but it is also a moral justification – in short, it is a sovereign decision arising in confrontation with an existential threat, that is, a Schmittian state of exception.

In other words, Special Circumstances is something like an *aporia* in the sense described by Jacques Derrida, a moment of impasse in which those elements that make something possible also make it at the same time impossible on its own terms. The paradox of Special Circumstances is of a violence done in the name of non-violence, in which the utopian image of a possible future teeming with intelligences, human and artificial, mutates into a dystopian violence against materially existing life in the present, including non-human life in the form of environmental destruction. This goes significantly beyond Popper's paradox of tolerance into an implicitly eliminationist politics whose apparent rationality and appeals to human flourishing elide their investment in the violent erasure of (racialised) diversity. The "crisis" that justifies this corporate Schmittian state of exception is one that Yarvin, at the very least, and likely a decent proportion of his followers, locates in democracy itself. While Alberto Toscano has argued that what he calls "late fascism" is shorn of its utopian dimensions (Toscano 2023, 15), what we see via Banks is the way that techno-utopianism might circulate within tech-financial circles without necessarily spreading very far beyond them, as a discourse of the elite speaking to itself. If not precisely as secret as the Special Circumstances organisation, this is nevertheless a hermetic discourse that presumes the initiation of the chosen few, as when neo-reactionary thinker Curtis Yarvin describes a friend of Peter Thiel as "enlightened", who might benefit in this coming future being created by automation. The rest, unfortunately, in the non-ironic reading of Banks, are as disposable as Yarvin's "organ meat", "carbon fascists" overly invested in their own material existence.

Where the Culture is tolerant, permissive, and pluralistic, Special Circumstances is intolerant, prohibitive and monological – towards fundamentalists, militarists and authoritarians. The paradox is obvious. So too is the way the series anticipated the moral contortions of Western imperialism in the "clash of civilisations" after 2001. In *Excession*, the Culture simultaneously encounters an artefact from a superior civilisation and runs into political problems with managing the militaristic colonialist species, the Affront. The ASIs split into two camps – one camp wants to encounter the superior civilisation in a spirit of curiosity and openness. The other camp wants to use the encounter to entrap and defeat the Affront, without having to actually fight them. The Affront are "useful idiots", providing the ASIs with justifications for presenting a variety of other deep plans to the interstellar community. In the end, the Affront are entrapped. However, the Excession, after protecting itself in the context of violence between the Culture and the Affront, withdraws enigmatically into N-space. An epilogue informs the reader that the ASIs failed the test of their readiness for entry into a higher civilisation; the Culture is to the Excession as the "carbon fascists" are to the Culture (Banks 1996, 445-447, 455). The difference, which only a reading of the series through literary irony reveals, is that the Excession does *not* do to the Culture what the Culture does to the Affront. Read non-ironically, however, the series nests super-cultures in a Russian Doll structure, licensing the idea that manipulation is legitimate if the ends are "good". From *that* perspective, Musk's self-identification of his personal company with the Excession clarifies what he takes from Banks. Musk is the superior intellect, enigmatically beyond current moralities, who manipulates both ASIs and their forthcoming Culture, and the authoritarian right-wing "Affront", the current useful idiot in the White House, in the name of a goal that only he can see.

6. Conclusion

Invocations of socialist science fiction notwithstanding, a worldview that imagines that the intellectual elite has a special destiny to shape history by cunning manipulation of mass society is, ultimately, Nietzschean. There is a common thread of the *Übermensch* that runs through Nietzsche, Banks, Land, Musk, Thiel, and Yarvin – though what distinguishes the Californian incarnation is the transhumanism of TESCREAL and the idealisation of code, automation and digital existence (by contrast, Nietzsche was too in love with embodied pleasure). Yarvin makes explicit the way that the new aristocracy of the tech elite, elected by their superior intellect, see themselves as not merely superior but more deserving of continued life in the future than those whom they rule over. That future, fuelled by the dreams of the science fiction of Banks and others, is imagined as a place outside of the Earth – to Mars and beyond. At its most dangerous, transhumanism turns into eliminationist eugenics, regrettably presiding over the vast majority of human labour now deemed "obsolete", mere organ meat.

As a result, the enthusiastic descriptions of a society of abundance, personal practices of sexual and chemical liberationism, and some vague references to creative self-expression cannot conceal the fact that the "value" that is to be maximised is machine intelligence in the service of the mastery of the human. These two strands coalesce into a "post-humanist" eugenics program that uses AGI as a blunt instrument to force social changes consistent with the hoped-for breakthroughs into a posthuman condition facilitated by ASI. It is in this respect that the *Culture* series of Iain M. Banks functions as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions, a culturally prestigious utopian reference that justifies social dislocation and domination of the human in the name of a benevolent future run by a benign technology. In this concluding section, we want to connect this set of critical reflections on the Californian ideology with the critique of digital capitalism articulated by Christian Fuchs (Fuchs 2021; Fuchs 2022).

In his critique of digital capitalism, Fuchs points out that "digital labour does not only denote the production of digital content" but is rather "a category that encompasses the whole mode of digital production, a network of agricultural, industrial and informational labour that enables the existence and use of digital media" (Fuchs 2021, 263). Conversely, processes of agricultural, industrial and informational production are thoroughly imbricated with the digital affordances of the Information and Communications Technology revolution that has happened in the last 30 years (Fuchs 2021, 312). The digitalisation of capitalist production, distribution and consumption that characterises global capitalism today implies that the implementation of AI technology in the workplace means more than a convulsion in the occupational categories of white-collar employment. It means a revolutionisation of production, intended to restore profitability to a capitalist system whose declining margins have been amply documented by Fuchs (2018) and others. We have suggested that AGI and related technologies involve the production of relative surplus value, generated through the substitution of machine learning algorithms for specific elements of human mental labour in particular processes of production. Strong AI conceptions of the true equivalence of machine learning and the human intellect, best described as digital anti-humanism, are essential to selling this vision, as is the roseate promise that these generally intelligent and then superintelligent machines are going to be more benign than the humans they "replace". As Fuchs points out, the alternative to this techno-Nietzscheanism is not rejection of the technology, but its conceptual and social re-positioning within emancipatory and democratic practices and understandings. "Radical Digital Humanism", Fuchs writes, "rejects the idea to replace humans by, or transform them into, digital machines. Rather, it sees digital machines as part of the struggle for a society that benefits all

humans that can expand, help realise and more fully develop the potentials of humans and society" (Fuchs 2022, 152).

The problem, then, with the pro-socialist science fiction of Iain M. Banks, and the reason that his work can be ideologically repurposed by libertarian billionaires, is that it is centred on an anti-humanist vision of strong AI, characterised by post-carbon digital intelligence as equivalent to, or better than, human life. We might say, then, that the relation of the *Culture* Series of Iain Banks in the thinking of the Big Tech leadership and a program of political manipulation, reckless AI research, eugenics experimentation and corporate consolidation is the same as the relation between dreams of the Millennium and the reality of the Inquisition. In this context, no doubt the science fiction of Iain Banks is only a temporary resting point in the elaboration of the utopian pole of the ideological dipole of big tech's imaginary solution to real contradictions. For the rest of us, the political struggle of our time is to be something more than organ meat in the post-AI, post-AGI future.

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