

Billionaires like Elon Musk don't just think they're better than the rest of us – they hate us



Zoe Williams Mon 11 Nov 2024

The ultra-wealthy talk about solving the climate crisis or ending inequality. But what they're really interested in is outliving or escaping anyone poorer than them



Seizing a country ... Elon Musk speaking before Donald Trump at a Republican rally in New York last month.

Photograph: Evan Vucci/AP

Nearly three years ago, I started working on an idea for a book. It started out with the pretty mild proposition: we're in a class war, but it's a weird one, because one side is curiously coy. The capital class used to strut its stuff. It used to build libraries and great estates; it used to tell you it thought it was superior, and why. Now that it is billionaires on one side and everyone else on the other, they are like ghosts. They might tell you what they think, in Ted Talks, at Davos, but it can't be real: according to them, all they care about is fixing climate change, solving inequality and bringing about world peace. Mysteriously, none of those things ever come about.

I dragged my feet a little bit, and while I did so, the billionaires got louder, and maybe truer to their authentic selves. Vladimir Putin, estimated to be worth billions, invaded Ukraine. Elon Musk bought Twitter. Sam Bankman-Fried got outed as not-a-billionaire – the billions turned out to either belong to someone else, be fictional, be priced in crypto, or all three – and a lot of his fantasies for the future came tumbling out in the same legal proceedings: a plan, stated in a memo, to purchase the sovereign nation of Nauru in order to construct a “bunker/shelter” that would be used for “some event where 50%-99.99% of people die [to] ensure that most EAs [effective altruists] survive” and to develop “sensible regulation around human genetic enhancement, and build a lab there”.

This same memo noted that “probably there are other things it's useful to do with a sovereign country, too”. It distilled in a single paragraph the mind-map of the billionaire class: apocalypse fantasies and bunker futures; a fervent belief in their own, gene-level superiority; a hatred of any sovereignty higher than theirs; and an almost childlike lack of self-reflection, to the extent that you would call yourself an “effective altruist” just by dint of having fictionalised enough net worth to potentially help others, while simultaneously planning for a future in which all the others have perished.

It turned out a lot of billionaires had a plan for that event where 50-99.99% of us all died. An awesome number of them had a private island, or were looking for one. The OpenAI chief Sam Altman and the PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel were gonna split to New Zealand and go halvesies on a bunker.

The Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa was by no means the only “high net worth individual” trying to shoot himself into space, though he was the only one who went on YouTube to describe his exploratory trip, rumoured to have cost \$80m (£62m), to the International Space Station.

“I did not get aroused whatsoever,” he said. “When you wake up in the morning, it’s quite normal for us men to have a happy manhood.” But in two weeks on the ISS, “not even once did my manhood greet me with energy”.

More predictably, and to make matters worse, the lack of gravity made his penis float upwards, causing a perspective disturbance that “made it look like a child’s ... I didn’t feel confident about my manhood in space,” he concluded.

What’s it to you, whether or not a billionaire can get an erection in space? Childlike lack of self-reflection, again. Between that and the coming apocalypse, the bunkers, the private islands, the space exploration, the dreams of colonising the sea and living on it, and the land wars, I couldn’t help but notice that what they’re trying to escape is civilisation, the rule of law, other people – bluntly, us. They’re trying to escape us.

When you add in their dreams of living for ever, of siring scores of children, the picture is even clearer: they hate us. They’re not neutral about us; we’re not mere flies on their windscreen. They think any one of them, living to be 700, is worth an infinite number of us in our prime. They think their children are more precious than our children. Who knows, maybe some billionaires don’t hate us or fantasise about our annihilation. But even one should be a red flag.

Then on 6 November, I realised the ship had sailed. This is an open secret now. The whole world has watched Musk seize a mature democracy, and you can see he hates us with one look at his face. You don’t even have to scroll through his X feed.

My procrastination wasn’t just uselessness (though a bit of that, sure); it was that I couldn’t keep my mind on this hatred for five minutes straight without getting distracted by something I loved.

So while, without question, Musk is faster than me, more ambitious and more effective, I am happier than he is. To pilfer an uncharacteristically cheerful line from Albert Camus: in the midst of this billionaires' winter, there is, within me and probably you, an invincible summer.

And that's great, but we've still got an almighty class war on our hands.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/nov/11/billionaires-elon-musk-hate-us-ultra-wealthy-climate-crisis>