



In the midst of riots across the UK, the owner of X used his platform to declare that ‘civil war’ was inevitable. **Kyle Taylor** considers why he is still able to get away with exerting such unaccountable power – which has the potential to shape our politics and society – given his questionable beliefs

ONE OF THE world’s richest men recently used his self-proclaimed digital town square – which is now more akin to his own personal digital fiefdom – to, what a reasonable person may consider, incite far-right extremists across the UK, declaring on his platform X that “civil war is inevitable”.

It was this incident, on what was formerly known as Twitter, during the riots across the country, that seemed to finally awaken the masses to the dangers of allowing individuals with extreme wealth the ability to unaccountably use social media platforms – with the potential to reach and influence hundreds of millions of people – in a way that democratically elected governments have not been willing to tackle.

It should not be normal to see headlines declaring prime ministers to be in a ‘war of words’ with such individuals. But this is what the owner of X was attempting to engineer in his replies to Keir Starmer’s response to the UK riots. One tweet saw him label the Prime Minister “two-tier Keir” – repeating the claim, without evidence, that far-right ‘protestors’ were being treated more harshly by the police than minority groups.

It should not be normal for governments to have to plead with corporations

in an effort to help them curb nationwide riots, which included white nationalists attempting to burn migrants alive in hotels in England.

But the fact is that there is a new normal now – one in which corporate billionaires hold more power than arguably even the world’s largest nations.

At the head of this pack is Elon Musk. This should worry us all.

A ‘Misunderstood Genius’

For years, X owner Elon Musk has cultivated the illusion that he is visionary and exceptional. So much so that his supporters have bought into a ‘cult of personality’ so strong even the smallest query or critique is met with a rapid response that Musk is simply too intelligent, too unique, and too forward-thinking for ‘normal’ people to understand.

When a narrative takes hold in this way, people begin to actively disregard facts that disprove it – in the same way that people of faith may question the scientific consensus around evolution. If the fact doesn’t fit the frame, it’s not the frame that is rejected – it’s the facts.

Evidence showing that Musk’s electric car firm Tesla withheld safety data on its autopilot feature, which showed that it was highly dangerous and ineffective? He

must have had a good reason. His baseless claim that Covid booster vaccines had “negative reactions”? He must know something we don’t. Calling a diver rescuing children from a cave in Thailand a “pedo guy” for no apparent reason? Well, we don’t *know* that he isn’t an abuser.

Once such a dominant frame is constructed around someone or something, it becomes increasingly difficult to challenge. The further ‘true believers’ go down the rabbit hole, the more forcefully they reiterate their beliefs in an attempt to reaffirm, rather than reassess, their views.

Perhaps the most pertinent example of this is the idea that Elon Musk is simply a ‘misunderstood genius’ who is thinking on a level far beyond our own. This has become his ultimate ‘get out of jail’ card, used by his followers to justify any and all of his actions.

But, when you take a step back and really consider his ideas, you see that none of them are original – whether it’s electric cars, commercial space travel to Mars, reusable rockets, linking computers to human brains, or creating an ‘everything’ app.

In reality, Musk is another person with enormous privilege and wealth who has the money and power to bring the brightest minds together in the hope of creating something remarkable. In short, he is a typical businessman.

There's nothing wrong with that. The problems begin when he is elevated to the status of being a 'genius', which is then used as an excuse for behaviour that would otherwise be deemed not only unacceptable, but highly dangerous to individuals and society at large.

Selective Free Speech

There have been several incidents in recent years that appeared to briefly poke a hole in the thick armour of Musk's 'personality cult'. But it wasn't until he purchased Twitter, as it is still known, that the curtain was fully pulled back.

Within weeks, he had not only reactivated the accounts of known far-right extremists such as Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (who calls himself 'Tommy Robinson'); but also went on his own antisemitic, racist, and transphobic rants, spreading what any reasonable person could describe as hate speech. In one such incident, Musk declared that his trans daughter had been "killed by the woke mind virus" and that "my son is dead".

This self-proclaimed "free speech absolutist" is, however, a raging hypocrite (which is often the case with people who hold extreme views). They don't want *all* speech to be free – just their own and that of those who agree with them.

This 'selective free speech' approach has seen Musk's X suspending and shadow-banning certain accounts whose speech he, presumably, didn't like. In August, he launched a lawsuit against a global advertising alliance, accusing it of unlawfully conspiring to not advertise on X, resulting in a loss of revenue. Yes, he is upset that firms – who he has accused of a "massive advertiser boycott" – are expressing their *own* free speech by not paying his company money because they don't want their ads next to hate speech.

But it was his claim that "civil war is inevitable", in response to the far-right riots in the UK, that seems to have opened up the possibility of a long overdue, deeper questioning of the myth around Musk.

It is not before time. The suggestion that a civil war – centred on a 'clash' of races – is a key idea underpinning the far-right 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory, which claims without foundation



that the white populations of the West are being diluted through immigration by people of colour.

Long-Term Effective Altruists

South Africa-born Musk subscribes to several pseudo-philosophies that define his worldview and which help explain his behaviour. One of the most significant is a version of 'long-termism'.

Common among tech billionaires – for whom long-termism borders on religiosity – their notion of the belief system posits that, millions of years from now, there will be an infinite number of 'digital people' existing in computer simulations and that it is *our* moral obligation to make decisions *now* to ensure that as many of these *future* digital people as possible survive.

It is linked to, and informed by, other belief systems – one of which is 'effective altruism'. Tellingly, Musk has described

this as a "close match" to his philosophy of life.

Effective altruism originated as the idea that only the most effective altruistic ideas should be supported – which, while controversial, isn't inherently problematic. For instance, individuals shouldn't, according to this theory, support every charity working to alleviate poverty – they should only support the *most efficient* charity working to alleviate poverty.

Over time, however, the concept has been warped by Big Tech long-termists to instead focus on making effective altruistic decisions *now* that are in the best interests, not of humans alive *today*, but of the digital people that will be alive in millions of years in the *future* – regardless of the impact that such an approach has on those alive in the present.

In some contexts, this has gone as far as suggesting that no further resources should be put into combating climate change, for example, because it is already too late, and therefore, the most effectively altruistic thing to do for the long-term in this regard is to ensure that humans can colonise other planets. Is it any wonder Musk runs a privately owned spaceship company?

Another belief system that informs long-termism is the need to ensure that the current 'human stock' is as exceptional as possible. The basis of this is what

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existential risk philosopher Nick Bostrom – a significant proponent of long-termism whose posts Musk regularly retweets on X – calls “dysgenic pressures”. This is the idea that fewer and fewer ‘intellectually talented’ people are reproducing, thus posing an existential risk to the future digital people, because there aren’t enough smart humans now to bring about said ‘future’.

This perhaps helps to explain why Elon Musk has at least 12 children, as he has made clear that he deeply believes in his own “breeding stock”. The undertones of eugenics in such thinking are pronounced.

They sit right alongside capitalism which, to a Big Tech long-term effective altruist, is the way to ensure that resources are placed into the hands of the *right* people who will make the *right* decisions for the long-term. Musk is, of course, in his mind, one of those people.

The entrepreneur Sam Bankman-Fried, also a devout long-termist, is another. He can no longer participate, though, as he is currently serving a 25-year prison sentence for defrauding people out of billions of dollars through a crypto scam. It is likely that he believed that he was merely attempting to consolidate capital into the right hands – his own – regardless of the consequences.



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No wonder, then, that Musk appears to be attempting to foment violence in the UK; and has not only endorsed, but has financially supported, Donald Trump – who recently claimed that, if he gets re-elected to the White House, Americans “won’t have to vote any more”.

Do these ideas sound like the world-view of a misunderstood genius or a Bond villain?

The irony is that Musk has acknowledged repeatedly and publicly that these are the principles by which he lives his life. Why don’t we want to listen?

Taking Back Control

Musk’s recent interventions on X, on issues as serious as political violence in the UK, also expose the shortcomings of the last Conservative Government’s Online Safety Act.

This piece of legislation has shown itself to be toothless in halting, or even slowing the hate and violence of, the far-right.

Starmer’s Government should reflect on this and properly act to rein in the power of Big Tech and their billionaire CEOs before it really is too late.

More broadly, however, it is time that governments across the world wake up to the massive power imbalance that now exists between global tech corporations – such as Meta, Google, and X – and democratically elected governments.

We cannot countenance a future in which individuals such as Elon Musk – who, as of August 2024 is the richest person in the world with an estimated net worth of \$241 billion, according to *Forbes* – can impose their will on nation states.

Whether you believe him to be a misunderstood genius, struggling with mental illness, or playing the part of a disruptor is irrelevant to the problem at hand. The underlying issue is that on an individual, societal, national, and even global level, it is the man himself who poses a long-term risk to humanity.

No matter how wealthy, how powerful, or how charismatic, it is effectively altruistic for all of us that Musk be held accountable.

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