

What happens when Silicon Valley runs the state?

Palantir, tech billionaires and why MAGA might spell with the death knell for America's empire, with Laleh Khalili.

[Peter Geoghegan](#)

This week, Democracy for Sale revealed how a secretive police unit is instructing forces across England to withhold information about their contracts with Palantir, the shadowy US firm founded by Trump donor Peter Thiel.

For Palantir, this kind of secrecy is par for the course. We know what it does—surveillance, military tech, big data—but much less about how it does it. The company is Silicon Valley's closest thing to a black box.

But we can learn a lot from what its leaders believe.

Thiel openly argues that capitalism and democracy are incompatible. His co-founder, Alex Karp, talks of “disruption, domination, and deployment.” (For those who say his company is over-valued, the Palantir CEO dreams of “getting a drone and having light fentanyl-laced urine spraying on analysts that tried to screw us.”)

Karp has set out his vision in his ~~pitch-deck~~ book *Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West*, published in February. The *Washington Post* (proprietor: Jeff Bezos) called it “a call to arms for tech bros.”

So what does that worldview really look like in practice? And what impact are Palantir—and the rest of the tech elite—having on democracy, in the US and around the world?

To explore that, I spoke with Laleh Khalili, a brilliant writer and scholar whose work traces the ties between empire, capital, and control. Her books and essays explore everything from shipping lanes and oil flows to the hidden infrastructures of surveillance tech.

Laleh has described Palantir as “a child of the war on terror,” and in our conversation she drew out the deep connections between America's vast defence sector—the Pentagon's budget is bigger than the next ten countries combined—and the rise of surveillance technologies and, increasingly, AI.

What Laleh reminds us, too, is that Silicon Valley's boasts of omniscience are often just that—boasts. Palantir's market cap has soared, but as she puts it, its AI-driven promises are “50% bullshit, and 50% sinister.” (Which might not surprise anyone who read our recent reporting on English hospitals refusing to use Palantir's software—because it's not much cop.)

We also talked about how Palantir and other tech giants pay former government ministers and top lobbyists big bucks to push their case—hello, Nick Clegg and Peter Mandelson. Even more

importantly, these new masters of the universe use their money and influence to cultivate close personal relationships with top politicians and decision-makers.

This isn't just about a handful of tech billionaires getting privileged access. It's corruption on a scale not seen in America since the Gilded Age.

Democracy cannot survive this level of state capture. So what lies ahead for the US?

Laleh argues that America could be on the verge of serious social conflict, and warns about the risk of depoliticisation among progressives if the Democrats don't seize on the success of democratic socialist mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani in New York this week.

Right now, the future of American democracy feels perilously uncertain. Trump and his MAGA allies are intentionally undermining the institutions that have long underpinned US global power. The Supreme Court—handpicked to suit Trump's autocratic instincts—seems to enable his every anti-democratic impulse.

All this should serve as both a warning and a wake-up call for the UK.

We don't have a British equivalent of Citizens United, the US ruling that entrenched corporate power in politics. Our legal system doesn't work that way.

Our government could still take money out of politics. The key word, of course, is *could*. Starmer needs to act now —before it's too late.

At *Democracy for Sale*, we're committed to exposing dark money and hidden influence in our politics. If you value this work and haven't yet joined us, now's the time.