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# Alex Karp, Palantir and „Dual Use“ in the Humanities

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Palantir: One of the most successful, mysterious and controversial companies, co-founded and still supported by anti-democratic right-winger Peter Thiel and criticized almost from the start for helping to bring about the surveillance state and, more recently, for openly providing software support for ICE deportations. From its inception over 20 years ago, Palantir's CEO has been Alex Karp, long a self-identified "socialist", "Marxist" or "leftist", who studied with Habermas in the late 1990s and who holds a 2002 PhD in social psychology from Frankfurt. His thesis, entitled *Aggression in der Lebenswelt: Die Erweiterung des Parsonsschen Konzepts der Aggression durch die Beschreibung des Zusammenhangs von Jargon, Aggression und Kultur* [*Aggression in the Life-World: The Extension of Parsons's Concept of Aggression through the Description of the Connection between Jargon, Aggression and Culture*]<sup>1</sup> applies Adorno's notion of "jargon" to German *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* in the controversy around Martin Walser's 1998 *Friedenspreis* acceptance speech. The remarkably short thesis – a mere 129 pages and 59 references – is steeped in Parsons, Adorno and Plessner, but especially in the social psychology of Karp's academic supervisor Karola Brede. It is written in eloquent scholarly German and, though it does take some obvious argumentative shortcuts, is in many ways remarkably original, thoroughly "academic" and distinctly leftist in orientation. With Karp's later history in mind, this thesis makes for fascinating reading. By contrast, in his 2025 book-length manifesto *The Technological Republic: Hard Power and Soft Belief*,<sup>2</sup> published with fellow Palantir executive Nicholas W. Zamiska, he propagates techno-nationalism, the superiority of Western civilization, overwhelming US military deterrence and militarized borders; at the same time, he still presents himself as a "progressive" who continues to uphold his oft-repeated concern regarding civil liberties and data protection.

A juxtaposition of Karp's dissertation and his recent views, as well as the use he continues to make of his humanities training (both during his BA at renowned liberal arts college Haverford in the late 1980s and, after his years at Stanford Law School, during his time in the Frankfurt School context), raises a number of questions: How does Karp use humanities concepts and figures of thought to "justify" Palantir's business? Can we trace a line from his "leftist" Frankfurt school dissertation to his accounts of Palantir's business model, and to his recent techno-nationalist positions? And is the notion of "dual use" of humanities ideas – the

appropriation of originally "progressive" concepts for potentially illiberal, anti-democratic or authoritarian purposes – merely provocative, or is it analytically useful?

### *Palantir's Business Model and Karp's Vision in The Technological Republic*

Palantir is tellingly – and, in Silicon Valley fashion, somewhat childishly – named after the seeing stones from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*,<sup>3</sup> where the stones are a powerful and dangerous tool allowing views at a distance. Given their fictional use in the surveillance of borders and in war, their problematic selectiveness and their potential for manipulation, the name is also chillingly appropriate. While increasingly providing software to organize and optimize manufacturing and logistics processes, Palantir is mainly known – and notoriously controversial – for the data aggregation and analysis software it provides both to the US (and allied countries') military, intelligence, law enforcement and other government agencies. Given their pervasive use especially by the US government, Palantir CTO Shyam Sankar in 2021 stated that "[Palantir's] mission [was] to become the US government's central operating system".<sup>4</sup>

One of the company's main products is "Gotham" – again, the name! – data aggregation, analysis and visualization software used by the US (and allied) military, intelligence and law enforcement agencies (versions of the software have been in use, if controversially, in several German *Länder*). As one of its key military functions, Palantir's website advertises its use in the "kill chain" (the established military term for the sequence of decisions from the identification of a target to the launch of the chosen "effector" weapon): "Gotham's targeting offering supports soldiers with an AI-powered kill chain, seamlessly and responsibly integrating target identification and target effector pairing. Operators experience enhanced situational awareness and effectiveness as Gotham streamlines critical decision-making in the modern battlespace."<sup>5</sup>

While long operating with limited public relations, Karp and Palantir have recently become far more outspoken, not least since the publication of Karp and Zamiska's *The Technological Republic* in 2025. A condensation of the book into a 22-theses manifesto posted on X from an official Palantir account in April 2026 was even more controversially received than the book itself.<sup>6</sup> Throughout their book, Karp and Zamiska express strong views on defending the West and its unquestioned cultural, societal, economic and military superiority, not least "a firm and uncontroversial commitment to liberalism and its values, including the advancement of individual rights and fairness [as constituting] our shared vision of the community to which we belong".<sup>7</sup>

The book also expresses a belief in the moral duty of US tech companies to support the national interest and harshly condemns especially Google and Facebook/Meta for catering to superficial consumerism instead:

The engineering elite of Silicon Valley has an affirmative obligation to participate in the defense of the nation and the articulation of a national project – what is this country, what are our values, and for what do we stand – and, by extension, to preserve the enduring yet fragile geopolitical advantage that the United States and its allies in Europe and elsewhere have retained over their adversaries.<sup>8</sup>

What Silicon Valley has brought about instead, they dismissively argue, is an “age of social media platforms and food delivery apps”;<sup>9</sup> elsewhere, they speak of “online advertising, photo-sharing apps, and food delivery empires”.<sup>10</sup> Karp’s critique of 21st-century IT pioneers tellingly misses – or dodges – a crucial point: While Google, Meta and the like do cater to the convenience and vanity of their users, the darker side – the systematic exploitation of data in what, with Zuboff’s impressive book, has come to be called “surveillance capitalism”<sup>11</sup> – is not mentioned, arguably because it is too close to what Palantir is doing far more systematically.

*Attempts at an Explanation: Sell-Out? Disappointment with Habermas? And an Overly Subtle Reading of a Dissertation*

How then – if at all – can such views and the business of Palantir be made to square with Karp’s leftist background, with his insistence on civil liberty and progressive ideals, and with his Frankfurt dissertation? Several common explanations lie close at hand, but strike me as simplistic and unconvincing: Was it simply the lure of money and influence, and leaving academia to co-found a company was simply a form of “selling out”? Or did Karp’s disappointment at Habermas’ refusal to act as his doctoral supervisor make him turn against academia generally, as pop psychology would have it? Karp’s admission to feeling deeply hurt by this rejection,<sup>12</sup> as well as frequent dismissive references to academia (the humanities in particular) may suggest this interpretation. For confirmation, both readings can turn to a 2025 interview, in which Karp states: “I was planning to be an academic until I realized it was worthless and I was better at building things”.<sup>13</sup>

Far more illuminating than speculations about his motivation, it seems to me, is Karp’s own use of humanities concepts in explaining and justifying his trajectory, and in seeking to square his more recent positions with his self-description as still “progressive” – even though one may be tempted to dismiss such uses as merely instrumental and rhetorical. Thus, in arguing for his views in *The Technological Republic*, Karp marshals – in quotations and references – an impressive list of over 30 writers, philosophers, political scientists and other cultural luminaries from Voltaire, Goethe and Emerson via Dewey, Isaiah Berlin, Ágnes Heller and Rawls all the way to MacIntyre, Habermas, Amy Gutmann, Sennett and Sandel. One should probably not underestimate the extent to which this is meant to appease concerns from readers skeptical about Palantir, to suggest that someone this “cultured”, this steeped in – often broadly leftist – thought surely cannot mean any harm.

An equally central question, it seems to me, is this: How does Karp combine progressive

rhetoric with unabashed software support for ICE deportations, predictive policing and surveillance, or for a technology that “optimizes the kill chain”? Part of the answer lies in a highly selective definition of what it means to be “progressive”: According to this definition, to be progressive is to protect the working class. As Karp argued in 2025 (too generally, to say the least): “No progressive ever has believed in an open border.”<sup>14</sup> If to be “progressive” is to protect American workers against putative competition from Latin American immigrants, as Karp suggests, that appears to include the provision of software enabling ICE deportations. He makes a similar case for Palantir’s support of – often working class – military personnel: “At Palantir, we are on the side of working-class Americans. We support people who go to the military, we save their lives, we bring them home safer.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Karp has repeatedly emphasized the benefits of his product for crime prevention in under-privileged areas. Finally, to assuage fears of potentially illiberal abuses of Palantir software, he turns the issue into a sales argument: “The more constitutional you want to make it [the war against terrorists, drug traffickers etc.], the more precise you want to make it, the more you need my product.”<sup>16</sup>

All these moves seem geared towards claiming a continuity in his political views, which Karp expressly asserts in a late 2025 interview: “I didn’t shift my politics.”<sup>17</sup> They do not, however, directly trace a line from Karp’s intellectual origins and his Frankfurt dissertation to Palantir’s business (or to his more recent positions). Arguably the most interesting attempt to do so is Moira Weigel’s 2020 essay “Palantir Goes to the Frankfurt School”.<sup>18</sup> In a long and subtle reading of Karp’s dissertation, Weigel argues that

Karp reinterprets [Frankfurt School critical theoretical concepts] in a way that legitimates the work he would go on to do. Shortly before Palantir began developing its infrastructure for identification and authentication, *Aggression in the Life-World* articulated an ideology of these processes. [...] [I]n Karp’s telling, Adorno’s jargon anticipates the software tools Palantir would develop. By tracing the rhetorical patterns that constitute jargon in literary language, Karp argues that he can reveal otherwise hidden identities and affinities – and the drive to commit violence that lies latent in them. (n.p.)

Tempting as it may be to trace Karp’s current thinking and the essence of Palantir’s business model back to his 2002 dissertation, Weigel’s reading ultimately seems to me to be simultaneously too complex and too simple: She *overstates* the way in which Karp’s Freudianism and the detection of psychological patterns in the dissertation somehow foreshadow Palantir’s pattern-detection software, and *underestimates* (or fails to see) the way in which Karp casts himself as a Hegelian: An argumentative pattern developed in the dissertation which Karp has since consistently applied in justifying Palantir is a dialectical “have your cake *and* eat it” figure of thought which seeks to resolve contradictions with reference to Hegel.

*“Remove the Contradiction and Move Forward”: Hegel and “Aufhebung”*

In a 2009 interview, asked how Palantir dealt with the latent contradiction between the use of large amounts of data and the protection of civil liberties, Karp responded: "The ultimate Silicon Valley solution: Remove the contradiction and move forward."<sup>19</sup> More specifically, Karp has repeatedly outlined the philosophical underpinnings for such a removal of contradictions with reference to Hegel: In an interview at the Munich Security Conference in February 2018, in response to the question of what Palantir does differently or better than other companies, he referred to Peter Thiel and himself as following what he called "a very German approach", stating that both of them were strongly influenced by Hegel's notion of the "Aufhebung" of contradictions.<sup>20</sup> In this English interview, he used the German word, arguing that the English language does not have a word that fully captures the triple meaning of "Aufhebung" (which is true: the common term "sublation" does not). Similarly, in a 2022 promotional video posted by Palantir, he again refers to Hegel: "20 years ago, after 9/11, all everybody cared about was that you catch the terrorists, whatever. So we said no, we don't do that. So we will work in a Hegelian way, so to speak, that is to dissolve the contradiction, which does not exist anyway, between data protection and the fight against terrorism."<sup>21</sup> My reading of this as a pattern derived from his humanities training and especially his Frankfurt doctoral thesis is supported by the fact that Hegel and "Aufhebung" repeatedly feature in Karp's dissertation, though never with reference to any specific text: Hegel does not appear in the Works Cited, but the name commonly recurs as a chiffre for dialectical thinking.<sup>22</sup> In Karp's recurring argument – and it hardly matters for my case whether he himself believes in it or whether this is mere make-believe – Hegel's notion of dialectical "Aufhebung" indeed appears to function as the intellectual tool allowing for the reconciliation of security and civil liberties; Palantir's software functions as the "synthesis" in which the contradiction is "aufgehoben".

With more space available, I believe one could make the case that – in keeping with the 19th-century distinction between, broadly speaking, *Alt-* or *Rechtsh Hegelianer*, who used Hegel to defend the Prussian state, and *Jung-* or *Linksh Hegelianer* all the way to Marx and Engels, who used Hegel in the critique of religion and ultimately in developing dialectical materialism – Karp did indeed *remain* a Hegelian, though he appears to have shifted from a *Links-* to a *Rechtsh Hegelianer*.

### *"Dual-Use" in the Humanities?*

That one can do away with central achievements of "the liberal plural West" in the act of seeking to protect them is a dialectical twist not easily explained away with a casual reference to Hegel. What Karp's use of his humanities training might tell us is that the notion of "dual use", long familiar with regard to technology, may also need to become part of self-reflection in the humanities and social sciences.<sup>23</sup> While this surely cannot mean a self-censoring limitation of what can be thought and written, some form of reception-sensitive discussion of potential abuses of concepts from our disciplines may be in order to help prevent – or at least understand mechanisms of – regressive, authoritarian and anti-democratic appropriations. Even if we are more inclined to regard Karp's – partially – leftist

rhetoric and references to Hegel as part of a sales-rhetorical strategy of assuaging fears, this, too, is a form of “dual-use” knowledge acquired through training in our fields. Let’s make sure we also still train people who can call the bluff.<sup>24</sup>

## References

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4. More Perfect Union, "I Worked At Palantir: The Tech Company Reshaping Reality," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZ95Gmvg\\_D4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZ95Gmvg_D4).
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6. <https://x.com/PalantirTech/status/2045574398573453312>. For initial responses, see, e.g., Aisha Down and Robert Booth, "Palantir manifesto described as 'ramblings of a supervillain' amid UK contract fears," *The Guardian*, April 21, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2026/apr/21/palantir-manifesto-uk-contract-fears-mps>.
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11. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (Profile Books, 2019).
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20. Excerpt shown in Klaus Stern, dir. *Watching You: Die Welt von Palantir und Alex Karp* [documentary on Karp and Palantir], 2024.
21. Palantir. "Interview Series: CEO Alex Karp on Palantir in Germany," February 16, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNrOWWSbz3A>.
22. In the dissertation, references to Hegel and the notion of "Aufhebung" (often in the construction that something is "aufgehoben") occur on pages 29, 70, 74, 78, 85, 86, 113. For a brief discussion of the notion of "dual use" in the humanities, see my *Enlightenment Controversies: Literary Self-Critique and Present-Day Debates* (de Gruyter, 2026, forthcoming), 285–286.
23. For a brief discussion of other such appropriations, see my chapter on the "Culture Wars" in my *Understanding Public Debates: What Literary Studies Can Do* (Routledge, 2024), 65–99, esp. 78–80, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003478935-3>. See also Roman Alexander Barton et al., "Zwischen Fakten und Fiktionen: Zur Zukunft der Fächer Anglistik und Amerikanistik," *Forschung & Lehre* 5 (2025), 32f.
24. This is the short version of a very much longer chapter in an emerging book tentatively titled *Literary Studies in the Age of AI, Populism and Anti-Academic Resentment*.

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