

*Survival of the Richest:
escape fantasies of the tech billionaires*

Douglas Rushkoff

London: Scribe, 2022, £20 (h/b)

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Rushkoff is Professor of Media Theory and Digital Economics at Queens College, City University of New York, and is regularly named one of the world's most influential intellectuals. The strap line of his book's title suggests a detailed tell-all about how the ultra-rich plan to survive the decades ahead. It opens with him giving a private talk to 'low level billionaires' about how they will cope with what they anticipate will be a catastrophic future. If this had been written by Hunter S Thompson, Gay Talese or Tom Wolfe, names would have been named. Not so here, though various individuals are identified as the narrative proceeds.

These are ultra-rich preppers – people who have considered climate change, population growth and Artificial Intelligence, and the consequences these – especially the last – may have for human existence on the planet. They also possess, in Rushkoff's words, 'the Mindset'. Namely, they believe they ought to be beyond government control – as should cyberspace, which they largely control; that their contributions to technology and the wider economy are at genius level; and that the accumulation of personal wealth, irrespective of wider social and environmental costs, is accepted, or ought to be accepted, by everyone as the ultimate objective.

The purpose of their meeting Rushkoff isn't clear. The advice he gives them cuts across their world view, to the extent that one wonders if the discussion is merely being held to demonstrate that they have spoken with him (thus disarming criticism that they don't seek counsel from the widest circle of advisers). Or perhaps that they are just gauging how he reacts to their opinions, and from that fine-tuning any subsequent public utterances. However much Rushkoff speaks to them about the failures of their highly deregulated, capitalist system, his audience keep bringing him back to their anxiety about the future. In particular, the looming 'event' – pandemic, nuclear war, climate catastrophe, meteorite strike, destabilizing population migrations – and how they will survive it. They seem to want his blessing for the steps they may have to take . . . and have already taken in some instances.

As noted, it isn't clear to whom Rushkoff spoke at his seminar. But, as he expands his arguments chapter by chapter, a range of names appear, some well-known, some not, on a spectrum from the benign to the frightening.

Beginning with the benign, we have Ray Kurzweil, who believes we will shortly have the chance, via exponential medical progress, to live forever. (Assuming we can pay for whatever interventions/replacements are required.)¹ Next, J. C. Cole promotes Safe Haven Farms – secure eco-havens, for those who can afford them, that will by-pass future food shortages² – and in a variation of this, and catering to slightly more people, we have James Ehrlich's ReGen villages. In truth, the latter look similar to Walt Disney's EPCOT designs of the late 1950s, or any mildly futuristic, low-density, upper middle class housing scheme. Significant claims are made for them, though, with a large number planned globally, including a concentration of projects in Norway and Sweden, possibly to ensure survival when climate change kicks in further south. The publicity states that 29,000 families are signed up as 'future residents'. ReGen has 3 sites in the UK, but does not appear to have built anything.³

Others are a bit more exclusive. Both Vivos and Oppidum are in the business of selling secure shelters where the wealthy can sit out the misfortunes that befall the rest of us. Many of these are converted Cold War missile silos. As with ReGen it isn't clear how many of these have been built. But, there again, if you were buying one and fitting it out, would you tell anyone about this?⁴ At the more communitarian end of the spectrum come various plans for sea-steading or 'independent free floating city states': gigantic, supposedly self-sufficient cruise ships, or decommissioned drilling platforms, securely positioned outside territorial waters and, theoretically, beyond the reach of governments. None of these have come to fruition,

¹ Kurzweil has been criticized on the grounds that many of his predictions turn out to be inaccurate. He is also a board member of the Lifeboat Foundation, run by Eric Klien, who made his money from an on-line dating app, and currently runs Lifeboat from his home, a ranch on the outskirts of Reno, Nevada. See <<https://lifeboat.com/ex/bios.eric.klien>>.

² See <<https://www.safehavenfarms.org/history>> and <<https://tinyurl.com/57tcbbmv>> or <<https://nypost.com/2022/09/24/how-the-worlds-billionaires-are-paying-to-escape-global-disaster/>>.

³ See <<https://www.regenvillages.com/>>.

For a sense of the scale of this see <<https://www.facebook.com/regenvillages/>>.

A paper by Ehrlich can be read at <https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/regenvillages_su_deck_overview_brief.pdf>.

⁴ See <<https://www.terravivos.com/>> and <<https://oppidum.ch/>>.

yet.⁵

The most ambitious of all is Elon Musk's Space X Mars Programme. Channelling the *Terminator* plot-line, Musk wants to colonize Mars 'so that we'll have a bolt-hole if AI goes rogue and turns on humanity'.⁶

Others are a bit more focussed. Peter Thiel, originator of PayPal and a keen supporter of Donald Trump, advocates investing in discreet residencies in New Zealand from where a 'cognitive elite' of 'sovereign individuals' will establish a new world order after the apocalypse.⁷ In a 2009 essay Thiel explained that he could 'no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible', mainly because democracy involves dealing with welfare beneficiaries and women, both groups being 'notoriously tough for libertarians'. Instead, he avoids conventional politics, creating his ideal society via cyberspace. Thiel, a German-American and member of the Bilderberg Group Steering Committee, was granted New Zealand citizenship in 2011.⁸

Collectively, the billionaires and their assorted fellow-travellers justify their 'mind-set' via an intellectual – some might say pseudo-intellectual – framework provided by a range of helpful advocates. In no particular order these include Joseph Schumpeter, an Austro-Hungarian economist who developed his views in the 1920s; various atheists (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris) who collectively reject the notion of a moral universe; Grateful Dead lyricist and drafter of the Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace, John Barlow; business guru Nir Eyal; and the

⁵ Eric Klien, President of the Lifeboat Foundation (see note 1 above) and a libertarian, was involved with 'creating an independent floating city in the Caribbean Sea named Oceania . . . independent of the limitations and bureaucratic failures of the present-day government'.

⁶ Many recognize the potential dangers of Artificial Intelligence. A few, including Vladimir Putin, consider it may have advantages. In 2017 he said:

'Artificial intelligence is the future, not only for Russia, but for all humankind. It comes with colossal opportunities, but also threats that are difficult to predict. Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world.'

(<https://www.theverge.com/2017/9/4/16251226/russia-ai-putin-rule-the-world>)

Russia duly included Robotic Combat Systems in its 2020 State Armaments Programme, though none have yet entered active service.

⁷ The concept of the 'sovereign individual' was first posited in the 1997 book *The Sovereign Individual: How to Survive and Thrive During the Collapse of the Welfare State*, written by William Rees-Mogg, former editor of *The Times*, with US alt-right conspiracy theorist James Dale Davison.

⁸ Bilderberg, a gathering of the great, good and interesting (provided they are wealthy), appear to have invited Thiel to join prior to his endorsement of Trump. Given that Trump was happy to consider abandoning NATO, and Bilderberg came into being to strengthen US-Europe links, one can see a contradiction here.

Edge Foundation, formerly funded by Jeffrey Epstein, and noted for its promotion of 'nudge' theory.

All of these are helpful to them. Schumpeter, who lived through his mother country collapsing completely in the space of a couple of months in 1918-1919, sees nothing at all wrong with 'creative destruction', arguing that all technological innovation creates monopolies, producing immense profits until such time as rivals and imitators develop new products. He asserts that this is natural and something the state should steer clear of. It is from views like this that the billionaire techies insist on maintaining the type of unregulated exponential growth that led to the catastrophic crash of 2007-2008, the consequences of which are still with us. Avoiding compliance with regulatory systems, and in particular employment regulations, is part of this package too, and keenly pursued by Amazon, Google, Uber and Facebook who opt, wherever possible, to engage 'directly' with staff and customers.

A few decades ago, Nir Eyal would merely have been an advertising executive. Today, he sells marketing strategies, enabling social media platforms to attract and keep users. His 2014 book, *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*, aims to 'build products that create habit-forming behaviour in users via a looping cycle that consists of a trigger, an action, a variable reward, and continued investment'. Which in theory is fine . . . but, as we know, much of what is sold on-line (or elsewhere) can be harmful to an individual's health: junk food for instance, or on-line gambling. Eyal, however, is a keen protagonist in favour of individual liberty (even if it causes harm, or comes with an immense social cost) and firmly against regulation of on-line content that would minimize this damage.

Epstein

The appearance of Epstein here marks the line between the objectionable and the sinister. Taken very seriously at one point, prior to the grim conclusion of his life, Epstein was courted by the rich and powerful. He funded the Edge Foundation whose mission statement was: To arrive at the edge of the world's knowledge, seek out the most complex and sophisticated minds, put them in a room together, and have them ask each other the questions they are asking themselves. The Edge Foundation came up with so-called Nudge theory, the idea that people can be nudged to make the right choice without coercing them or restricting their freedom of choice.⁹ Prime Minister David Cameron and President Obama were intrigued by the idea that governments could achieve their goals without having to argue or legislate. (Or regulate). Cameron

⁹ See, for example, <https://expertprogrammanagement.com/2022/01/nudge-theory-explained/>.

established a Nudge Unit within the Cabinet Office.¹⁰

Epstein's donations to Edge enabled it to host an annual billionaires' dinner, but came with a severe, Frankenstein-style downside. It transpired that he was actively interested in reviving eugenics, principally for his own advantage: he planned to impregnate women (up to 20 at once) with his semen in a New Mexico 'baby ranch' as part of an on-going experiment to genetically engineer the human race. He also believed in cryonics, and wanted to have his penis and head frozen, presumably so that he could be brought back into existence at some point in the future, grafted onto a new, youthful and perfect body.¹¹

What Schumpeter, Eyal, Epstein and others like them have in common is a simplistic view that major solutions can be found and delivered without governmental involvement; or even that government involvement is undesirable and (cue here endorsement from Dawkins, Hitchens *et al*) that no moral difference exists between planning for the greater good and more selfish motives. The limitations of this are quickly exposed when they attempt anything practical. Nicholas Negroponte, at one point funded by Epstein, launched his *One Laptop per Child* project in 2005. Addressing education and literacy in the non-developed world, and endorsed by many politicians (including notably, Gordon Brown), it ended in 2014 without coming anywhere near meeting its objectives. Similarly, a Global Hackathon involving Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Microsoft and many others, to 'solve' the Covid pandemic was a failure. It neither developed a vaccine nor produced any other kind of breakthrough. Only governments are big enough, and organized enough, to do really important stuff: the whims of wealthy individuals usually don't work.

Consequently, some of the former billionaire investors in tech companies have now broken ranks and begun to question how they operate. One such is Roger McNamee, previously of Facebook, who has become very critical of its impact on society and democracy, in particular its lack of action in 2016,¹² despite being warned about the scale of Russian meddling in US elections. By 2019 he was telling a Canadian enquiry that Facebook and other social media

¹⁰ On Edge and nudge see <<https://tinyurl.com/2p8f6ata>> or <https://www.edge.org/conversation/richard_h_thaler-master-class-2008-liberatarian-paternalism-why-it-is-impossible-not-to>.

¹¹ The Edge Foundation website, shorn of any references to Epstein, can be viewed at <<https://www.edge.org/>>.

¹² See for example, <<https://tinyurl.com/2p8emzcu>> or <https://www.democracynow.org/2019/10/23/roger_mcnamee_facebook_russia_cambridge_analytica>.

sites should be shut down until they reform.¹³

Perhaps this is too little, too late. By the end of his book Rushkoff is sounding rather like the Club of Rome's 1972 report *The Limits of Growth*, pointing out that the resources needed to manufacture Elon Musk's electric cars might be better preserved than expended on more personal transport. Why not have everyone travel by public transport, bicycle or walk instead, and build compact urban developments that facilitate this? What Rushkoff doesn't address is: are the billionaires onto something? Have they already looked at the myriad challenges and choices facing the world today and concluded that human nature being what it is, few positive steps will be taken in time to avoid catastrophe? Have they simply concluded . . . if you've got the money, hunker down now?

Bannon

Which brings us to the politics behind the rhetoric, and in particular Steve Bannon. Ex-US Navy and Goldman Sachs, Bannon was formerly a would-be Hollywood producer and at one point director of the research project *Biosphere 2*. If nothing else, this would have given him an insight into how to plan hermetically sealed communities for a handful of carefully selected occupants at some point in the future. In his account, he swerved into politics after concluding that Bush had 'fucked up' the economy in 2008 as much as others claimed Jimmy Carter had done in the late 1970s. His political views are best described as nihilistic, manichean and completely binary. At no point does it seem to occur to him that the faults he observes have their roots in deregulation, or that alternative ways of running a country are either viable or legitimate.

For much of the last twenty years he has been pursuing a personal crusade against existing democratic structures in US and Europe, something he presents as revolutionary: 'Lenin wanted to destroy the state, and that's my goal too'. (Actually, Lenin wanted to strengthen the state and did so very thoroughly.) Space does not permit a detailed account of his many activities, and he doesn't figure greatly in Rushkoff's book. But his combination of inaccurate assertions, apocalyptic warnings about the future and alliance building – Trump, Orban, Bolsonaro and many others; a kind of ultra-right/hard-right International – clearly influences and reinforces a great deal of what many billionaires either believe or think they need to take into account when planning their future.

What Rushkoff's book doesn't do, therefore, is consider, above and beyond individual billionaires, whether a number of governments, or governing parties,

¹³ <<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/facebook-grand-committee-tuesday-1.5152436>>

haven't also reached the same conclusions, and are actively taking steps to establish their hegemony over natural resources. By doing so they calculate they will be in a strong position to see out emerging threats, whilst also ensuring that they, as a political elite, remain in power. How else does one explain China building a network of military bases on uninhabited coral atolls and islets in the South China Sea, or Russia trying to acquire, by force, the resources of the Ukraine? Citing historical claims, and one contested map,¹⁴ China can now control trade within this area, as well as access to fisheries and the seabed for mineral mining. And Russia, rather than negotiating a trade deal with Ukraine and/or the EU, will, it hopes, get to own and exploit both Ukraine's substantial fossil fuel reserves as well as 'the bread basket of Europe' in perpetuity.

That centralised, authoritarian countries use force to assert control over assets that otherwise might pass into other hands is not so surprising: innumerable regimes have done this for centuries. Today both Russia and China may well be as much driven by a need to 'future-proof' themselves as they are by their mangled explanations about sovereignty and the various unspecified threats that they produce to justify their acts. Would an on-going Trump regime, or a Trumpite regime, with or without the great man himself, as ordained or facilitated by Bannon, do similar in and around the US? Probably.

Finally, looking at our own local issues, how does the UK's recent excursion into populist politics with Brexit fit into this? Many have puzzled over its instigation and implementation. Did the Brexiteers really know what they were doing? Why was such an extreme version so diligently executed? Who benefits? For some it was essentially a device to facilitate, money-laundering, tax avoidance and international financial crime by the ultra-rich, and criminal regimes.¹⁵ But is it possible that for some Brexit was a strategy undertaken and funded by alt-right ideologues to take over an advanced western economy and convert it into something that serves their interests?

Among the more public exponents of Brexit is Jacob Rees-Mogg (son of William) who shares his father's and Thiel's views about 'sovereign individuals' as well as Bannon's quirky traditional Catholicism. Brexit did not happen, however, because of Rees-Mogg's views as an individual; behind him are a network of think-tanks, lobbyists, social media pundits, newspaper owners, TV and radio station owners, politicians, oligarchs and extremely wealthy tax-

¹⁴ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nine-dash_line> and <<https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/what-does-the-nine-dash-line-actually-mean/>>.

¹⁵ The Brexit agreement signed by Johnson gave the UK the same status vis-à-vis the EU as the Channel Islands and Isle of Man, both tax havens.

exiles.¹⁶

Notwithstanding his avoidance of bigger geo-political themes, Rushkoff's book is a useful starting point to consider where some people are trying to drag us all. If you want to avoid going on that journey, then start kicking back now. Specifically: reject the cack-handed notions of Elon Musk, Steve Bannon and others, and look to elected, accountable, governments to secure a better future.

Simon Matthews' new book –
*Free Your Mind! Giovanni "Tinto" Brass, "Swinging London"
and the 60s Pop Culture Scene* –
will be published by Oldcastle Books in April.

See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKAd25v2Ni4>>.

¹⁶ As with Thiel and the Bilderberg Group, the Catholicism of Rees-Mogg and Bannon is the opposite of the position held by the Catholic Church, which is (and always has been) a robust supporter of the EU, which both Rees-Mogg and Bannon hate. There is some evidence to suggest that Brexit was a failed attempt, by them and assorted allies, to destroy the EU, thus facilitating the longer term goals of the libertarian right.