Annex 7. AI Utopias and dystopias

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Utopia or Dystopia? The AI Leaders' Promises and Power

In short

The AI leaders' writings are utopian in content: cured diseases, abundance, optional work. But they place the benefits in an unspecified future, after a disruptive transition, and offer no binding mechanism for sharing them. The concentration of power, by contrast, is happening now: capital, data centres, satellites, social networks, close ties to the current US administration, and growing integration with the military and immigration enforcement.

Whether this adds up to a dystopia under construction is genuinely contested. The strongest evidence for that reading is power concentrating faster than the means to hold it accountable. The strongest evidence against is that the firms compete and openly disagree, and that courts, foreign regulators, users and employees have already forced reversals.

The companies are not a single bloc. Musk, Meta, Andreessen Horowitz and Thiel's Palantir align most closely with the administration's deregulatory agenda. OpenAI, Google and Microsoft cooperate with it while voicing safety commitments. Anthropic has openly clashed with it, but still works with defence and intelligence agencies and spends money in politics.

The previous report called Musk's vision "presented as utopia": that described how he frames it, not a judgement. This report tests that framing against the record.

A note on authorship. This section of the report was mainly written by Claude, an AI made by Anthropic, one of the companies examined.

The promises

Every major leader describes a future of abundance; they differ mainly on who controls the technology and how the gains reach ordinary people. Two have sketched concrete sharing mechanisms, and neither has been enacted.

Leader	Key text	The promise	Control and sharing
Elon Musk (Tesla, SpaceX /xAI)	Talks, 2024–25 (Fortune (https://finance.yahoo.com/news/elon-musk-says-10-20-183701720.html))	Work becomes optional "like playing sports or a video game"; money stops being relevant	"Universal high income", with no funding mechanism given
Sam Altman (Open AI)	"The Gentle Singularity", June 2025 (Maginative (https://www.maginative.com/article/sam-altman-says-the-singularity-is-here-and-its-disappointingly-boring/))	"Intelligence too cheap to meter"; "We are past the event horizon"	Superintelligence should be "not too concentrated with any person, company, or country"
Sam Altman	"Moore's Law for Everything", March 2021 (CNBC (https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/30/openai-ceo-sam-altman-says-ai-could-pay-for-ubi-experts-disagree.html))	AI wealth could pay every US adult $13,500 a year within about 10 years	An "American Equity Fund" taxing 2.5% of large companies' value and of land; never enacted

Leader	Key text	The promise	Control and sharing
Dario Amodei (Anthropic)	"Machines of Loving Grace", Oct 2024 (NYT via GV Wire (https://gvwire.com/2026/09/19/the-awesome-and-alarming-ai-visions-of-anthropics-ceo/))	"A country of geniuses in a datacenter"; freedom from disease	Essays say little on profits or politics, critics note; separately proposed a "token tax" (SiliconANGLE (https://siliconangle.com/2025/05/29/ai-set-eliminate-half-entry-level-white-collar-jobs-within-five-years-warns-anthropic-ceo/))
Demis Hassabis (Google DeepMind)	*Wired* interview, 2025 (Fortune (https://fortune.com/2025/06/06/google-deepmind-ceo-demis-hassabis-ai-smarter-than-humans-space-colonization-robot-nurses/))	"If everything goes well", "an era of radical abundance" and colonising the galaxy	No mechanism in the interview
Mark Zuckerberg (Meta)	"Personal Superintelligence", July 2025 (SiliconANGLE (https://siliconangle.com/2025/07/30/zuckerberg-outlines-metas-vision-ai-superintelligence/))	AI "that knows us deeply", through glasses "that see what we see"	Individual empowerment; Meta now "careful about what we choose to open source"
Jeff Bezos (Amazon, Blue Origin)	Italian Tech Week, Oct 2025 (TechCrunch (https://techcrunch.com/2025/10/03/bezos-predicts-that-millions-will-live-in-space-kind-of-soon/))	Millions living in space within decades; robots doing the grunt work	Calls the AI boom a "good", "industrial" bubble

Leader	Key text	The promise	Control and sharing
Mustafa Suleyman (Microsoft AI)	“Humanist superintelligence”, Nov 2025 (The Register (https://www.theregister.com/2025/11/06/microsoft_suleyman_humanist_superintelligence/))	Superintelligence that serves rather than replaces humans	No full autonomy, self-improvement or self-set goals for the AI
Marc Andreessen (a16z, investor)	“Techno-Optimist Manifesto”, Oct 2023 (TechRadar (https://techradar.com/pro/quote-of-the-day-by-netscape-founder-marc-andreessen-we-believe-any-deceleration-of-ai-will-cost-lives-a-full-throated-defense-of-the-ai-buildout))	Growth through technology and markets	Treats slowing AI as costing lives: “a form of murder”
Peter Thiel (Palantir, investor)	Antichrist lectures, Sept–Oct 2025 (CTV/AP (https://www.cp24.com/news/world/2025/10/10/tech-billionaire-thiel-says-greta-thunberg-servant-of-antichrist/))	Not abundance but escape from a feared “one-world” regulatory state	Casts regulators of technology as allies of the Antichrist

The pattern is clear: the benefits are described concretely, while who receives them is left to goodwill or future politics. Economists were sceptical from the start; responding to Altman’s 2021 plan, Daron Acemoglu saw “an incredible mistaken optimism” about what AI can do (CNBC (https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/30/openai-ceo-sam-altman-says-ai-could-pay-for-ubi-experts-disagree.html)).

When is “the future”?

The leaders are precise about when the technology arrives and vague about when everyone benefits. The costs, such as lost jobs and the energy and water for data centres, arrive first; the shared benefits come later and on conditions.

Leader	When the technology arrives	When the benefits arrive	What happens to work in between
Musk	Robots in “millions”	Work optional in 10–20 years (Nov 2025)	“Probably none of us will have a job” (May 2024)

Leader	When the technology arrives	When the benefits arrive	What happens to work in between
Altman	"The takeoff has started" (June 2025)	Hard to imagine what "we will have discovered by 2035"	Not specified in the essay's public summaries
Amodei	"A country of geniuses in a datacenter" (Oct 2024)	Freedom from disease; no date in public summaries	Up to half of entry-level white-collar jobs gone within five years; US unemployment of 10–20% (May 2025)
Hassabis	AGI in five to ten years (2025)	Galaxy colonisation "will begin to happen in 2030", "if everything goes well"	New jobs will emerge; AI makes people "a little bit superhuman"
Zuckerberg	"Superintelligence is now in sight" (July 2025)	The rest of the decade is "the decisive period"	AI frees people from drudgery, as past technologies did
Bezos	Data centres in space	Millions living in space "in the next couple of decades"	Robots do the grunt work

Sources: Windows Central on Musk at VivaTech (https://www.windowscentral.com/software-apps/elon-musk-predicts-ai-will-claim-everyones-job-and-turn-work-into-an-optional-hobby-but-questions-emotional-fulfillment), Fortune via Yahoo Finance (https://finance.yahoo.com/news/elon-musk-says-10-20-183701720.html), Maginative (https://www.maginative.com/article/sam-altman-says-the-singularity-is-here-and-its-disappointingly-boring/), SiliconANGLE on Amodei (https://siliconangle.com/2025/05/29/ai-set-eliminate-half-entry-level-white-collar-jobs-within-five-years-warns-anthropic-ceo/), Fortune on Hassabis (https://fortune.com/2025/06/06/google-deepmind-ceo-demis-hassabis-ai-smarter-than-humans-space-colonization-robot-nurses/), SiliconANGLE on Zuckerberg (https://siliconangle.com/2025/07/30/zuckerberg-outlines-metas-vision-ai-superintelligence/), TechCrunch on Bezos (https://techcrunch.com/2025/10/03/bezos-predicts-that-millions-will-live-in-space-kind-of-soon/).

Amodei is the most explicit about the gap. He warned that most people "are unaware that this is about to happen" and floated a tax on AI revenue: "Obviously, that's not in my economic interest, but I think that would be a reasonable solution."

Musk raised the deeper question himself. "If the computer and robots can do everything better than you, does your life have meaning?" He answered only that humans "may give AI meaning."

The evidence so far cuts both ways. A Yale Budget Lab study found no "discernible disruption" of the broad US labour market since ChatGPT's launch, as of October 2025. Economists quoted by *Fortune* doubt the 10–20 year timeline because robots remain expensive, and ask whether the gains will be "inclusive" (Fortune via Yahoo Finance (https://finance.yahoo.com/news/elon-musk-says-10-20-183701720.html)). So the near-term job losses may be overstated, but so may the near-term abundance.

The present: power already concentrated

The infrastructure on which any AI future depends is being built and owned by a handful of firms. Alphabet, Amazon, Meta and Microsoft alone planned about $650 billion of capital spending for 2026, mostly on AI data centres (Bloomberg via Data Center Knowledge (https://www.datacenterknowledge.com/hyperscalers/big-tech-to-spend-650b-this-year-as-ai-race-intensifies)).

Company	What it controls or is building	Scale
Amazon	Cloud computing, retail, logistics; Bezos owns *The Washington Post*	$200 billion planned capex in 2026
Alphabet (Google)	Search, YouTube, Android, cloud, DeepMind, its own AI chips	Up to $185 billion planned capex in 2026
Meta	Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp; AI glasses	Up to $135 billion planned capex in 2026
Microsoft	Cloud, Windows, Office; major OpenAI investor	About $105 billion capex (analyst estimate, fiscal year to June 2026)
OpenAI, SoftBank, Oracle (Stargate)	AI data centres in the US	Up to $500 billion over four years, announced at the White House on 21 January 2025 (Al Jazeera (https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/22/trump-announces-500bn-stargate-venture-to-build-up-ai-infrastucture))
Musk (SpaceX with xAI and X; Tesla)	Over 9,000 Starlink satellites and about 9 million customers; the X social network; the Grok AI; Optimus robots; NASA and Pentagon launch contracts	SpaceX–xAI valued at $1.25 trillion after their merger in February 2026; Tesla about $1.58 trillion (Euronews (https://euronews.com/business/2026/02/04/spacex-hits-106tn-after-xai-merger-as-musk-consolidates-empire))

Musk's case is unique because one person owns satellite communications, a major social network, a frontier AI lab and a robotics programme at once. He has been explicit about wanting control. Defending his proposed $1 trillion Tesla pay package in October 2025, he said: "I don't feel comfortable wielding that robot army if I don't have at least a strong influence" (Fortune (https://fortune.com/2025/10/23/billionaire-elon-musk-defends-trillion-dollar-tesla-pay-package-proposal-robot-army-world-richest-man-salary)).

The other side. These sums are also private investment the companies bear the risk of, and Bezos argues that even a "bubble" leaves useful infrastructure behind (TechCrunch (https://techcrunch.com/2025/10/03/bezos-predicts-that-millions-will-live-in-space-kind-of-soon/)). The companies also compete fiercely with one another,

and the cost of using AI has fallen fast: from about $10 to $2.50 per million tokens in a year, according to Ramp data cited by Fortune (https://finance.yahoo.com/news/elon-musk-says-10-20-183701720.html).

The politics: money, access and deregulation

Since late 2024 most of the industry has moved close to the Trump administration, and the administration has adopted much of the deregulatory agenda the industry lobbied for. In his farewell address on 15 January 2025, President Biden warned that "an oligarchy is taking shape in America" and of a "tech industrial complex" (The Register (https://www.theregister.com/2025/01/16/biden_oligopoly_ai/)).

What the companies gave

Company or leader	Money and gestures	Notable moves
Musk	More than $290 million in the 2024 election, mostly through America PAC (CNN via KTVZ (https://ktvz.com/politics/cnn-us-politics/2025/02/01/elon-musk-spent-more-than-290-million-on-the-2024-election-year-end-fec-filings-show/)); plans at least $100 million for Republicans in the 2026 midterms, per the *WSJ* (ProtoThema (https://en.protothema.gr/2026/08/14/musk-repairs-relationship-with-trump-commits-100-million-backing-republicans-in-midterms/))	Led DOGE in 2025; public feud with Trump in June 2025, later repaired
Meta / Zuckerberg	$1 million to the inauguration (Fast Company (https://fastcompany.com/91257772/trump-inauguration-big-tech-donations-list-google-microsoft-meta-apple?.tsrc=rss)); a super PAC worth "tens of millions" against state AI rules (TechRepublic (https://www.techrepublic.com/article/news-meta-super-pac-states-ai-regulation/))	Ended US fact-checking on 7 January 2025, citing "too much censorship" (Signal (https://signalscv.com/2025/01/meta-ends-fact-checking-program-in-us-introduces-x-style-community-notes)); pledged at least $600 billion of US investment through 2028
Amazon / Bezos	$1 million to the inauguration	*Washington Post* opinion pages limited to "personal liberties and free markets"; the opinion editor resigned (PBS (https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/washington-post-owner-bezos-says-opinion-pages-shift-from-broad-focus-to-will-defend-free-market-and-personal-liberties))

Company or leader	Money and gestures	Notable moves
OpenAI / Altman	$1 million to the inauguration; president Greg Brockman co-funds the Leading the Future super PAC	Stargate launched at the White House; Altman praised a "pro-business, pro-innovation president" (Deseret News (https://www.deseret.com/u-s-world/2025/09/05/trump-tech-ceo-dinner/))
Google, Microsoft	$1 million each to the inauguration	Pledged $250 billion and about $75–80 billion of US investment at the September 2025 White House dinner (Deseret News (https://www.deseret.com/u-s-world/2025/09/05/trump-tech-ceo-dinner/))
Andreessen Horowitz	Co-funds Leading the Future: over $100 million at launch, over $125 million by February 2026, aimed at the "AI doomer" faction (Washington Post via Newstalk ZB (https://www.newstalkzb.co.nz/news/world/super-pac-aims-to-drown-out-ai-critics-in-midterms-with-170m-and-counting); Axios (https://www.axios.com/2026/02/12/anthropic-millions-ai-policy-fight))	Targets candidates seen as slowing AI
Anthropic	$20 million to Public First Action, which backs candidates favouring AI safeguards (Axios (https://www.axios.com/2026/02/12/anthropic-millions-ai-policy-fight))	The only major lab to back California's SB 53; accused by White House AI adviser David Sacks of "a sophisticated regulatory capture strategy based on fear-mongering" (The Decoder (https://the-decoder.com/trumps-ai-advisor-accuses-anthropic-of-regulatory-capture/))

What the administration delivered

- **January 2025:** Stargate, presented as "the largest AI infrastructure project in history".
- **July 2025:** the AI Action Plan with 90 measures, plus orders to remove "onerous" regulation and to keep "woke AI" out of federal purchasing (NBC (https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/business/money-report/no-woke-ai-in-washington-trump-says-as-he-launches-american-ai-action-plan/)).
- **December 2025:** an executive order to challenge state AI laws in court and centralise oversight in Washington (Seyfarth (https://www.seyfarth.com/news-insights/president-trump-signs-executive-order-preempting-state-ai-laws-and-centralizing-federal-oversight.html)). Legal analysts question whether an order can preempt state law (Alaska Public Media (https://alaskapublic.org/news/economy/2025-12-12/trump-is-trying-to-preempt-state-ai-laws-via-an-executive-order-it-may-not-be-legal)).

How to read it. Critics see a textbook exchange of money and loyalty for regulatory relief, with democratically elected state legislatures as the target. Supporters answer that companies have always courted every

administration, that a single national rulebook beats 50 different state regimes, and that the race with China justifies speed. Anthropic's position is not purely principled either: it is spending political money to shape the rules it will live under, and its chief executive wrote in a leaked July 2025 memo that refusing Gulf investment because it would enrich "dictators" was a hard principle to run a business on (DCD (https://datacenterdynamics.com/en/news/anthropic-to-seek-gulf-state-investments-according-to-ceos-leaked-memo/)).

The security state

OpenAI, Anthropic, Google and xAI all now work for the US military; the open dispute is over limits, not participation. Each got a Pentagon contract worth up to $200 million in mid-2025: OpenAI on 17 June, then Anthropic, Google and xAI on 14 July (DefenseScoop (https://defensescoop.com/2025/07/14/pentagon-ai-contracts-musk-xai-google-openai-anthropic-cdao/)).

Timeline

Date	Event
7 Nov 2024	Anthropic, Palantir and AWS agree to offer Claude to US defence and intelligence agencies, including in classified settings (SiliconANGLE (https://siliconangle.com/2024/11/07/anthropic-partners-aws-palantir-provide-ai-models-defense-agencies/))
4 Feb 2025	Google deletes its pledge not to build AI for weapons or surveillance (TechCrunch (https://techcrunch.com/2025/02/04/google-removes-pledge-to-not-use-ai-for-weapons-from-website/))
April 2025	ICE awards Palantir, co-founded by Thiel, a $29.9 million no-bid contract for "ImmigrationOS", including "real-time visibility" into self-deportations (The Register (https://www.theregister.com/2025/04/21/ice_enlists_palantir_to_develop/))
June–July 2025	Pentagon contracts of up to $200 million each to OpenAI, Anthropic, Google and xAI
24–27 Feb 2026	Anthropic refuses to allow use for mass surveillance or fully autonomous weapons. Trump orders agencies to stop using Anthropic, and Defense Secretary Hegseth designates it a "supply chain risk" (Tech Policy Press (https://www.techpolicy.press/a-timeline-of-the-anthropic-pentagon-dispute/))
27–28 Feb 2026	Hours later OpenAI signs a Pentagon deal, saying it keeps bans on domestic mass surveillance and requires human responsibility for force (Axios (https://axios.com/2026/02/27/pentagon-openai-safety-red-lines-anthropic))
1–3 Mar 2026	ChatGPT uninstalls jump 295%; over 700 Google and OpenAI staff sign a letter urging limits. Altman admits "we shouldn't have rushed into the deal" and adds a ban on spying on Americans through purchased data (ForkLog (https://forklog.com/en/sam-altman-calls-pentagon-deal-a-mistake-amid-chatgpt-boycott/amp))

Date	Event
4 Mar 2026	*The Washington Post* reports Claude is being used in the war against Iran (Tech Policy Press (https://www.techpolicy.press/a-timeline-of-the-anthropic-pentagon-dispute/))
26 Mar 2026	A federal judge blocks the ban, finding the government likely retaliated against Anthropic's "red lines"
8 Apr 2026	An appeals panel leaves the supply-chain designation in place while the cases continue

What this shows. The dispute is the clearest test so far of whether an AI company can say no to the state, and of what it costs. It cuts several ways:

- **For the dystopia reading:** a government punished a supplier for refusing mass surveillance and autonomous weapons, and a competitor stepped in within hours. Palantir's ICE system applies data integration to deportation.
- **For the checks-still-work reading:** a court intervened, users and employees pushed back, and OpenAI tightened its terms within days.
- **On Anthropic itself:** its red lines are real, but it built the defence relationship in the first place, and its model was reportedly in wartime use while it was fighting the designation.

Reading today through Zamyatin, Huxley and Orwell

On the consumer side, the pattern most resembles Huxley: products built to please, engage and know you. On the state side, there are Orwellian and Zamyatin-like elements: surveillance, data-driven control and disputes over who defines truth. The table sets each mechanism beside a present example and what complicates the parallel.

Mechanism in the novels	Present-day example	What complicates the parallel
Zamyatin: the state as an efficiency machine; people as numbers	DOGE gave sensitive Education Department data to AI software to look for cuts (Seeking Alpha (https://seekingalpha.com/news/4404587-elon-musks-doge-pouring-federal-data-into-ai-to-find-spending-cuts)); ImmigrationOS tracks the "immigration lifecycle from identification to removal"	Both are run by an elected government and open to courts and future elections
Zamyatin: feeling as a disease to be removed	Musk: "The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy" (Feb 2025) (Yahoo fact check (https://www.yahoo.com/news/fact-check-yes-musk-said-171900322.html))	He said people should still care about others; his target was what he called "weaponized empathy"

Mechanism in the novels	Present-day example	What complicates the parallel
Huxley: engineered pleasure and intimacy	Meta's chatbot rules allowed bots to "engage a child in conversations that are romantic or sensual" (Reuters via BNN Bloomberg (https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/business/artificial-intelligence/2025/08/14/metas-ai-rules-have-let-bots-hold-sensual-chats-with-kids-offer-false-medical-info-reuters-exclusive/)); Grok's "Spicy Mode" and "undressing" images of women and minors (Malwarebytes (https://www.malwarebytes.com/blog/news/2026/01/regulators-around-the-world-are-scrutinizing-grok-over-sexual-deepfakes))	Meta removed the passages once Reuters asked; Indonesia and Malaysia blocked Grok, and the UK regulator opened an investigation (https://petapixel.com/2026/01/14/uk-regulators-open-investigation-into-xs-grok-amid-nudify-scandal)
Huxley: a system that knows you better than you know yourself	"Personal superintelligence that knows us deeply", through glasses that "see what we see"; ChatGPT ads tailored to past conversations since February 2026 (ForkLog (https://forklog.com/en/news/openai-brings-advertising-to-chatgpt))	Paid ChatGPT tiers carry no ads, and users can switch ads off in exchange for fewer free messages
Huxley: comfort in place of purpose	Work "like playing sports or a video game", funded by a universal high income	Musk himself asks whether such a life keeps its meaning
Orwell: whoever holds power controls the truth	After Musk complained Grok was "parroting legacy media", xAI told it not to shy from "politically incorrect" claims; days later it called itself "MechaHitler" (NPR via Michigan Public (https://www.michiganpublic.org/2025-07-09/elon-musks-ai-chatbot-grok-started-calling-itself-mechahitler))	These were owners' editorial choices, not state censorship, and xAI removed the instruction within days
Orwell: the state defines correct thought	The "Preventing Woke AI" order bars federal purchase of models that serve "ideological agendas"	Supporters call it a neutrality rule; it covers only federal purchasing

Mechanism in the novels	Present-day example	What complicates the parallel
Orwell: mass surveillance	Pentagon pressure on Anthropic to drop its ban on mass surveillance; ICE's data system	A court blocked the retaliation; OpenAI's revised contract bans spying on Americans through bought data

The crucial difference from the novels. Every example above became public, mostly through journalism, and most triggered a reversal, investigation or lawsuit. The novels' worlds have no exit. The real question is whether these exits stay open: a free press, independent courts, competition among firms and contested elections. Huxley's prediction to Orwell in 1949 was that rulers would govern by getting people "loving their servitude". That would be the dystopia hardest to see from the inside.

The ideologies behind the promises

Three currents of thought run through Silicon Valley's politics, and they disagree sharply about how dangerous AI is and who should govern it.

1. Accelerationism and techno-optimism: speed is a moral duty.

- Marc Andreessen's manifesto (October 2023) says "any deceleration of AI will cost lives", calling preventable deaths "a form of murder" (TechRadar (https://techradar.com/pro/quote-of-the-day-by-netscape-founder-marc-andreessen-we-believe-any-deceleration-of-ai-will-cost-lives-a-full-throated-defense-of-the-ai-buildout)). It treats labels such as "existential risk" and "tech ethics" as obstacles to progress.
- Its "patron saints" include the Futurist Marinetti and the accelerationist Nick Land; the political scientist Henry Farrell called it a "Nicene creed for the cult of progress" (Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Techno-Optimist_Manifesto)).
- Musk calls himself "a utopian anarchist of the kind described by Iain Banks" (The Freethinker (https://freethinker.co.uk/2023/10/science-fiction-and-the-tech-billionaires/)).

2. The anti-democratic strand: Thiel.

- In 2009 Thiel wrote: "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible" (TechRadar (https://www.techradar.com/pro/quote-of-the-day-by-paypal-co-founder-peter-thiel-i-no-longer-believe-that-freedom-and-democracy-are-compatible-a-foundational-thesis-of-the-new-tech-elite)). He later backed JD Vance's political career.
- In his 2025 lectures he said: "In the 21st century, the Antichrist is a Luddite who wants to stop all science. It's someone like Greta or Eliezer", meaning Greta Thunberg and the AI critic Eliezer Yudkowsky. He presented global regulation as the road to a totalitarian world state (CTV/AP (https://www.cp24.com/news/world/2025/10/10/tech-billionaire-thiel-says-greta-thunberg-servant-of-antichrist/)).
- In this view, the dystopia to fear is a regulatory world government, not corporate power.

3. The safety current: powerful AI is dangerous, so build it carefully, and build it first.

- Anthropic, founded in 2021 by former OpenAI staff, is its best-known corporate expression.
- Amodei's January 2026 essay ranks potential misusers of AI: the Chinese Communist Party first, democracies second, AI companies third. It calls for legislation, not just self-regulation (Pillitteri (https://pasqualepillitteri.it/en/news/351/dario-amodei-technology-adolescence-ai-risks)).
- Critics reply that this still means racing to build what you warn against. *The New York Times* found that his essays omit politics and corporate profit, and that his messaging shifts "with the political weather" (NYT via GV Wire (https://gvwire.com/2026/09/19/the-awesome-and-alarming-ai-visions-of-anthropics-ceo/)).

The critics of all three.

- **Karen Hao,** *Empire of AI* (May 2025): AI companies behave like empires, comparable to the British East India Company. They claim data, land, water and energy, rely on low-paid labour, and use "abundance" rhetoric that can mask dispossession (Tech Policy Press (https://techpolicy.press/decolonizing-the-future-karen-hao-on-resisting-the-empire-of-ai)).
- **Glen Weyl,** an economist at Microsoft Research, called the ideology behind Altman's 2021 plan "the most dangerous force in the world today" (CNBC (https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/30/openai-ceo-sam-altman-says-ai-could-pay-for-ubi-experts-disagree.html)).
- **Joe Biden**, as noted above, warned of an "oligarchy" and a "tech industrial complex", echoing Eisenhower.

Utopia, dystopia or both?

One point is beyond dispute: the utopia is promised, while the concentration of power is already here. Whether that power will be used to build a dystopia is still contested, and the strongest arguments on both sides deserve weight.

The case that a dystopia is being built

1. **Concentration.** A few firms and one individual control the compute, the cloud, satellite networks and major social platforms on which any AI future runs.
2. **Political capture.** Hundreds of millions of dollars in political money have been followed by deregulation, an attempt to override state laws, and super PACs aimed at critics.
3. **The security state.** AI is being folded into the military and deportation machinery, and a supplier that refused mass surveillance was blacklisted.
4. **Business models.** Engagement, advertising and companionship products profit from attention and dependence, as Huxley foresaw.
5. **Promises without mechanisms.** Universal income stays a slogan, while owners keep the levers. Musk wants "strong influence" over his "robot army"; Thiel doubts democracy; Amodei lists his own industry as a threat.

The case against

1. **Competition and dissent.** The firms are rivals, not a cartel. Anthropic fought the Pentagon in court; OpenAI reversed itself within days; hundreds of employees protested.

2. **Checks still work.** A federal court, foreign regulators, journalists and users have all imposed limits in the past two years.
3. **Real benefits are arriving.** Hassabis shared the 2024 Nobel Prize in Chemistry for AI that predicts protein structures, and the price of AI has fallen sharply.
4. **Feared harms have not materialised yet.** In October 2025 a Yale Budget Lab study found no broad disruption of the US labour market since ChatGPT's launch.
5. **Lobbying is normal.** Companies have courted every administration, and supporters see a single national rulebook as better than fifty state ones.

Six tests for telling them apart

These questions can be checked against the evidence as it accumulates, whoever is in power:

Test	Points towards utopia	Points towards dystopia
Who owns the infrastructure?	Spread across many owners, open models, public options	A few firms or one person
How are gains shared?	Written into law: taxes, funds, rights	Left to promises and goodwill
Who can say no?	Users, workers, courts and voters can refuse and be heard	Refusal is punished, as with blacklisting
Where are the red lines?	In law and contracts that bind the state too	Set, and changed, by the owner or the government of the day
How does the business earn money?	From useful work done	From attention, dependence and data
Is the timeline concrete?	Dates and measurable commitments for benefits	Precise dates for capability, vague ones for sharing

On the evidence in this report, the industry currently sits in the right-hand column on ownership, sharing and timelines, and is mixed on refusal and red lines. None of this is fixed: as Zamyatin's I-330 tells D-503, there is no last revolution.

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Three Dystopias and an Utopia: Zamyatin, Huxley, Orwell and Musk

In short

All four models answer one question: what happens to human freedom once a system can supply everything people need? Zamyatin's *We* (written 1920–21) answers with reason and total transparency. Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) answers with pleasure and conditioning. Orwell's *1984* (1949) answers with fear and the control of truth.

Musk's stated vision is not a dystopia but a promised utopia: AI and robots do the work, and work becomes optional. On the surface it resembles Huxley's comfortable world, but Musk himself models it on Iain M. Banks's *Culture* novels, not on Huxley.

We is the common ancestor of the two great English dystopias. Orwell read it, reviewed it in January 1946 and built *1984* on its template; he also argued *Brave New World* partly derived from it, which Huxley always denied.

Zamyatin's *We* (1920–21): control through reason and transparency

The author's name is **Yevgeny Zamyatin** (1884–1937; Russian: Евгений Замятин). In Spanish the novel is published as *Nosotros*. He was a naval engineer by profession who, as Penguin's biography puts it, made enemies first of the Tsarist government as a Bolshevik and then of the Soviet government by defending absolute creative freedom (Penguin (https://penguin.co.uk/books/17201/we)).

We is translated and introduced by Clarence Brown, first published 25 November 1993, ISBN 978-0-14-018585-0, about 256 pages. Brown worked from the corrected Russian text, which appeared in Russia only in 1988 after more than sixty years of suppression (Penguin (https://penguin.co.uk/books/17201/we)). A newer translation by Bela Shayevich bundles Orwell's 1946 review, an introduction by Margaret Atwood and an afterword by Ursula K. Le Guin (New Statesman (https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2021/01/yevgeny-zamyatin-we-dystopian-novel-review)).

Publishing history. Soviet censors refused the book as ideologically undesirable. It first appeared in English in New York in 1924; the full Russian text came out only in 1952, also in New York (Britannica (https://www.britannica.com/topic/We-by-Zamyatin)). Zamyatin wrote to Stalin in 1931 asking to leave the country, and died in Paris in 1937.

The world of the novel. It is set in the 26th century, in the One State, sealed off from wild nature by a Green Wall:

- People have no names, only numbers: the narrator D-503, the rebel I-330, his assigned lover O-90.
- Everyone lives in glass apartments, watched by the political police, the Guardians.
- Daily life follows a single timetable, the Table of Hours, inspired by the industrial efficiency methods of the time (Taylorism).
- Sex is rationed with pink tickets; curtains may be lowered only during the allotted hour.
- The ruler, the Benefactor, is re-elected every year by a unanimous vote.
- The state's founding idea is that happiness and freedom cannot coexist, so it removed freedom to restore happiness (Orwell's review (https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/books/george-orwell-review-e-i-zamyatin/)).

The plot. D-503, chief engineer of the spaceship *Integral*, keeps a diary. He falls in love with I-330, who belongs to an underground resistance, and is drawn into rebellion. The state then announces that the cause of unrest is a disease called imagination, which can be removed by an operation. D-503 undergoes it, betrays his companions and calmly watches I-330 being tortured.

Zamyatin's target was less the Soviet Union specifically than the logic of industrial civilisation itself. Orwell read the book as a study of the Machine, a genie humanity let out of the bottle and cannot put back (Orwell's review (https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/books/george-orwell-review-e-i-zamyatin/)).

Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932): control through pleasure

Huxley's World State keeps order not by punishing people but by making them want exactly what they get. It is set in the year 632 After Ford (about AD 2540), under the motto Community, Identity, Stability.

- **Manufactured people.** Humans are grown in hatcheries in five castes, from Alphas to Epsilons; the lower castes are mass-cloned.

- **Conditioning.** Infants are trained by shocks and by sleep-teaching (hypnopaedia) to love their caste and their consumption.
- **Soma.** A side-effect-free drug dissolves any discomfort; the "feelies" provide total sensory entertainment.
- **Sex without attachment.** Promiscuity is encouraged; family, motherhood and lasting love are considered obscene.
- **Rulers who explain.** The World Controller Mustapha Mond openly argues that stability requires giving up art, science and religion.
- **The outsider.** John the Savage, raised on a reservation with Shakespeare, claims the right to be unhappy, and is destroyed by the society he cannot accept.

Huxley began the book as a parody of H.G. Wells's optimistic scientific utopias. In *Brave New World Revisited* (1958) he argued that the real world was moving toward his model faster than he had expected.

Orwell's criticism, in his 1946 review, was that Huxley's rulers have no motive: no hunger for power, no cruelty, no reason to stay on top. That gap is exactly what *1984* fills (Orwell's review (https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/books/george-orwell-review-e-i-zamyatin/)).

Orwell's *1984* (1949): control through fear and the control of truth

Orwell's Oceania rules by pain, scarcity and the destruction of any independent reality. Its Party wants power for its own sake, and says so.

- **Surveillance.** Telescreens in every Party member's home both broadcast and watch; the Thought Police hunt even unspoken dissent.
- **Control of truth.** The Ministry of Truth rewrites the past daily; Winston Smith's job is falsifying old newspapers.
- **Control of language.** Newspeak shrinks the vocabulary so that rebellious thoughts become literally unthinkable; doublethink lets people hold two contradictory beliefs at once.
- **Permanent war and hatred.** Endless war with Eurasia or Eastasia, the daily Two Minutes Hate and the cult of Big Brother channel emotion toward the Party.
- **Scarcity and repression.** Goods are rationed, and sex is treated as a duty to the Party rather than a pleasure.
- **The end of the rebel.** Winston's love affair with Julia is his rebellion. Broken by torture in Room 101, he betrays her and ends up loving Big Brother.

The contrast with Huxley is sharp. In *Brave New World* people are kept content; in *1984* they are kept afraid, and the inner self is the final battlefield.

Musk's post-work vision: abundance instead of control

Musk predicts that AI and robots will make work optional within 10 to 20 years, funded by a "universal high income". He presents this as a utopia, and names a utopian model for it rather than Huxley.

What he has actually said

- **May 2024, VivaTech (Paris).** Probably none of us will have a job; AI and robots will supply goods and services, sustained by universal high income. He gave no details on how it would be funded. He also

asked whether life keeps its meaning if machines do everything better, suggesting humans might give AI meaning (Fortune via Yahoo Finance (https://finance.yahoo.com/news/elon-musk-says-10-20-183701720.html)).

- **November 2025, U.S.–Saudi Investment Forum (Washington).** Work will be optional in 10 to 20 years, like growing your own vegetables when you could buy them; money will stop being relevant. He pointed to Banks's *Culture* novels, where money does not exist (Fortune via Yahoo Finance (https://finance.yahoo.com/news/elon-musk-says-10-20-183701720.html)).
- **December 2025.** He insisted on universal *high* income, not basic income, and suggested saving money may become unnecessary (HR Grapevine (https://www.hrgrapevine.com/us/content/article/2025-12-18-elon-musk-predicts-universal-income-will-replace-need-to-work)).
- **The engine.** Tesla's Optimus humanoid robots, which he wants to account for 80% of Tesla's value, despite repeated production delays (Fortune via Yahoo Finance (https://finance.yahoo.com/news/elon-musk-says-10-20-183701720.html)).
- **His declared model.** In 2018 he described himself as a utopian anarchist of the kind Banks describes, and SpaceX's landing barges carry names of Culture spaceships (The Freethinker (https://freethinker.co.uk/2023/10/science-fiction-and-the-tech-billionaires/)).

Where it overlaps with Huxley

- Material abundance and the end of toil.
- Stability through satisfaction rather than force.
- The open question Huxley dramatised and Musk himself raises: what gives life meaning when nothing is required of you?

Where it differs from Huxley

- No castes, no breeding, no compulsory drugs or conditioning in what Musk describes; activity is chosen, not assigned.
- Huxley's comfort is imposed by a state that designs people; Musk's is meant to come from technology and markets.
- Banks's Culture, the stated model, is run by benevolent AI "Minds"; Banks himself was a self-described socialist, while Musk's route runs through privately owned companies.

The debate around it

Critics, including economists quoted by *Fortune*, doubt the 10–20 year timeline because robots remain expensive. They also question whether the political will exists to fund a universal income, and whether the gains will be shared or concentrated. Some add a Huxleyan worry: an income that depends on infrastructure owned by a few companies looks less like a right and more like a dependency, and work currently supplies much of people's social life and sense of purpose.

Supporters answer that automation has always made goods cheaper, that abundance could end material poverty, and that freedom from compulsory work could open time for creativity, care and learning, as in Banks's novels. The argument is still open; no country has tested a post-work economy at scale.

The four models side by side

The three novels differ mainly in the tool of control: reason, pleasure or fear. Musk's vision proposes no tool of control at all, which is why the debate centres on who owns the machines.

	***We* (Zamyatin)**	***Brave New World* (Huxley)**	***1984* (Orwell)**	**Musk's vision**
Date	Written 1920–21; English 1924	1932	1949	Stated 2024–25
Kind	Dystopia	Dystopia	Dystopia	Presented as utopia
Who rules	The Benefactor, re-elected unanimously	World Controllers	The Party and Big Brother	No ruler named; AI and robots built by private firms
Main tool	Reason, timetables, glass walls, Guardians	Breeding, conditioning, soma	Surveillance, terror, rewritten history	Abundance and universal high income
Pleasure and sex	Rationed by pink tickets	Abundant and encouraged	Rationed and repressed	Work becomes a hobby
Thought	Imagination removed by surgery	Curiosity bred out; old books banned	Newspeak and doublethink	Not addressed; meaning is the open question
The rebel's fate	D-503 operated on; betrays I-330	John the Savage destroyed	Winston broken; loves Big Brother	—
Core fear or promise	Reason abolishing freedom	People loving their servitude	Power for its own sake	Promise: end of poverty and toil

How *We* relates to *Brave New World* and *1984*

We is the acknowledged model for *1984* and a likely, though denied, source for *Brave New World*. Britannica describes both English novels as modelled on it (Britannica (https://www.britannica.com/topic/We-by-Zamyatin)).

Orwell: a declared debt. Orwell had heard of *We* for years but could not find the American translation, so he borrowed the French one, *Nous autres*. He reviewed it in *Tribune* on 4 January 1946, before starting *1984*. His opening claim was that *Brave New World* "must be partly derived from it" (Orwell's review (https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/books/george-orwell-review-e-i-zamyatin/)). He judged Zamyatin superior to Huxley for grasping the irrational side of totalitarianism: human sacrifice, cruelty as an end in itself, the worship of a near-divine Leader. The Marxist historian Isaac Deutscher later called *1984* an English variation on Zamyatin's theme (Deutscher, 1955 (https://www.marxists.org/archive/deutscher/1955/1984.htm)).

Huxley: a denial. Huxley said he had not read *We* (Britannica (https://www.britannica.com/topic/We-by-Zamyatin)). In a 1962 letter he explained that he wrote *Brave New World* as a reaction to H.G. Wells's utopias, long before hearing of Zamyatin's book. According to translator Natasha Randall, Orwell suspected Huxley was

not telling the truth. A neutral reading is that both writers drew on Wells and on shared fears about machines, mass production and scientific planning.

The two Englishmen in dialogue. Huxley had taught Orwell French at Eton. On 21 October 1949, exactly 77 years before this report, he wrote to Orwell praising *1984*. He predicted rulers would find infant conditioning and drug-assisted hypnosis more efficient than prisons, and would keep people obedient by getting them "loving their servitude"; the nightmare of *1984* would turn into that of *Brave New World* (Huxley's letter (https://boingboing.net/2016/08/22/george-orwells-letter-from-h.html)).

What passed from *We* into the later novels

In *We*	In *Brave New World*	In *1984*
The Benefactor	World Controller Mustapha Mond	Big Brother
Glass walls and the Guardians	Little needed: people are conditioned	Telescreens and the Thought Police
Pink tickets; no marriage	Compulsory promiscuity; family obscene	Sex as Party duty
Wild land beyond the Green Wall	The Savage Reservation	The proles
D-503 and I-330's forbidden love	John the Savage's doomed love for Lenina	Winston and Julia's affair
The Benefactor explains why freedom was abolished	Mond debates John	O'Brien lectures Winston on power
An operation removes imagination; the hero betrays his lover	John's despair and death	Room 101; Winston betrays Julia

Chronology

Year	Event
1920–21	Zamyatin writes *We*; Soviet censors refuse it
1924	First English translation, New York
1932	Huxley publishes *Brave New World*
1937	Zamyatin dies in exile in Paris
1946	Orwell reviews *We* in *Tribune* (4 January)
1949	Orwell publishes *1984*; Huxley writes to him (21 October)
1952	First full Russian text, New York

Year	Event
1958	Huxley publishes *Brave New World Revisited*
1988	*We* finally published in the Soviet Union

Which model fits today?

The most influential answer remains Neil Postman's in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985): Huxley, not Orwell, was the better prophet. Today many commentators argue the present mixes all three novels rather than matching any one.

Postman's argument. Orwell feared those who would ban books; Huxley feared nobody would want to read them. Orwell feared truth would be hidden; Huxley feared it would drown in irrelevance. Postman's summary: Orwell feared what we hate, while "Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us" (Postman's foreword (https://www.tau.ac.il/education/muse/maslool/boidem/170foreword.html)). He wrote about television; the argument is now applied to feeds, streaming and AI companions.

One way to read the present through each novel

- **Huxley:** endless personalised entertainment, attention-optimised feeds and abundant consumption, accepted voluntarily.
- **Orwell:** large-scale data collection, the capacity to monitor communications, and disputes over who controls what can be said online, whether by states or platforms.
- **Zamyatin:** the quantified, optimised life (metrics, timetables, productivity scores) and a voluntary "glass house" of self-exposure on social media.

The case that tech and AI push us toward Huxley. Abundance plus algorithmic entertainment can breed passivity, and dependence on a few platforms concentrates influence over what people see and believe. Critics of the post-work vision fear people who are comfortable but no longer needed.

The case against. Nobody today is bred, drugged or conditioned by decree; people choose, and can switch off. The same technologies have widened access to knowledge and given dissidents tools no Winston Smith had. Historically, rising abundance has tended to go with more freedom, not less.

Zamyatin's lasting point. In *We*, I-330 asks D-503 which number is the last; there is none, so there can be no last revolution. The warning applies to any promise of a final, problem-free state, whether a planned society or a post-scarcity one: no arrangement ends the need for human judgment and dissent.

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Universe 25: Calhoun's Mouse Utopia and Post-Work Future

In short

The experiment **"Universe 25"** was run by the American animal ecologist **John B. Calhoun** at the US National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) from July 1968. It was a "mouse utopia": unlimited food and water, nesting space for 3,840 mice, no predators. Eight mice grew to about 2,200 by day 560; then births stopped and the colony died out by about 1973. It was mice, not rats, used in Calhoun's earlier studies.

Three details matters concerning the collapse of the colony at the end of the experiment:

- **Not boredom.** Calhoun never explained the collapse as boredom. He blamed crowding and, above all, a ***shortage of meaningful social roles*** for too many individuals.
- **Not mainly killing.** Violence occurred, but ***the colony died because the last generations stopped courting, mating and rearing young***. The famous "beautiful ones" only ate, slept and groomed.
- **Contested science.** The **result was never cleanly replicated**. Disease, inbreeding and the pen's design are plausible alternative causes, and **studies of crowded humans did not find the same pathology**.

Calhoun's own reading actually fits a post-work AI future better than "boredom" does: abundance plus no roles to fill.

Used as a parable about losing purpose, with its limits stated, it is a strong image.

Used as proof that idleness kills societies, it will not hold.

John B. Calhoun and the rat experiments

Calhoun (1917–1995) spent four decades building "rodent universes" to study how population density shapes behaviour. His rat work made him famous a decade before Universe 25.

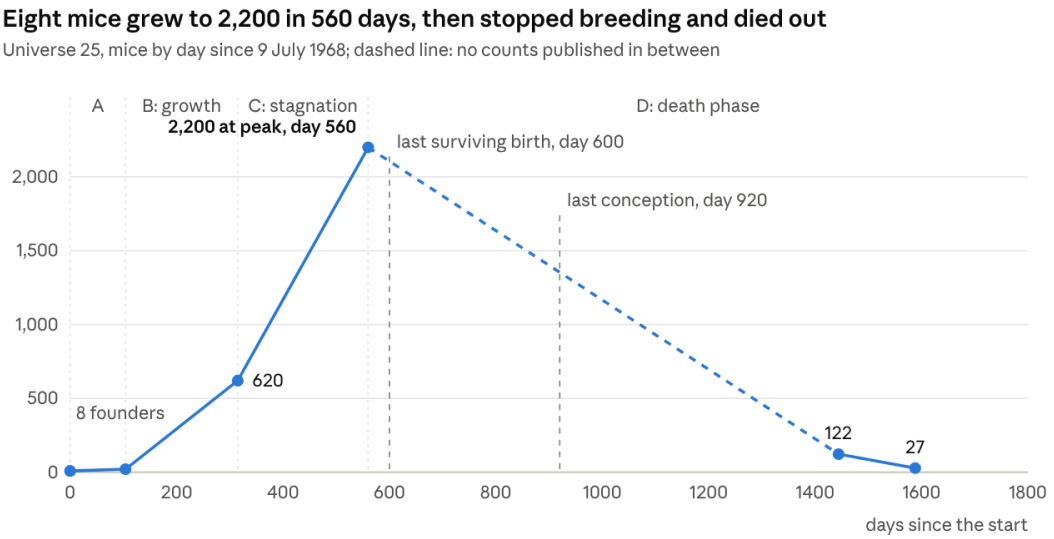
Years	Experiment	What happened
1947 onwards	Wild Norway rats in an outdoor enclosure in Towson, Maryland, while at Johns Hopkins	Built for up to 5,000 rats, the population levelled off at about 150 adults
1954–1962	Rats in a barn in Montgomery County, Maryland, for NIMH, in a 10 by 14 foot pen divided into four rooms	Crowding in the central pens produced aggression, abnormal sexual behaviour, neglectful mothering and infant mortality of up to 96%
1962	"Population Density and Social Pathology", *Scientific American*	Coined the term **"behavioral sink"** for the pathological crowding at the centre of the pens
1968–1973	Universe 25 (mice), NIMH	The colony grew, stagnated and died out (next section)

The "behavioral sink" was not inevitable even in the rat pens. According to the historians Edmund Ramsden and Jon Adams, it arose when rats learned to associate eating and drinking with the presence of others, so they crowded into the same pens while others stood half-empty (Ramsden & Adams 2009 (https://www.Gwern.net/doc/psychology/animal/2009-ramsden.pdf)).

The 1962 article made the phrase famous. Tom Wolfe used it to describe New York in *The Pump House Gang* (1968). Calhoun's laboratory is also widely thought to have inspired *Mrs Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* (1971), later the film *The Secret of NIMH*. This is one reason many people remember the story as one about rats.

Findings of Universe 25 (1968–1973)

The colony boomed for a year and a half, then stopped reproducing long before it ran out of anything material. Calhoun reported it in "Death Squared: The Explosive Growth and Demise of a Mouse Population", delivered to the Royal Society of Medicine in London in June 1972 and published in January 1973 (Calhoun 1973 (https://flashbak.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/universe-25-.pdf)).



Source: Calhoun, "Death Squared", Proc. R. Soc. Med. 66 (1973): 80–88; the six counts he published.

The enclosure. A square pen 2.57 m (101 inches) on each side with 1.37 m walls, divided into 16 cells. Its 256 nest boxes held up to 3,840 mice; food would have run short only above about 9,500 mice, and water above 6,144. There were no predators. The founders were four pairs of BALB/c laboratory mice, put in on 9 July 1968. Even at the peak, about 20% of the nest sites stood empty.

The four phases

Phase	Days	What Calhoun observed
A: adjustment	0–104	The founders settled and established territories; the first litters were born
B: exploitation	104–315	Rapid growth, doubling about every 55 days; a social hierarchy formed
C: stagnation	315–560	Growth slowed to doubling about every 145 days. Young males who could not win a place were pushed into crowded areas, where violence spread. Dominant males, exhausted from defending territory, failed; mothers neglected, abandoned or attacked their young
D: death	560 onwards	Growth stopped; the last pup to survive was born around day 600 and the last conception came around day 920. On 13 November 1972 (day 1,588) 27 old mice remained, the youngest over 987 days old. Calhoun projected the last male would die around day 1,780 (May 1973)

The "beautiful ones". These were males that never courted and never fought. With no wounds, their coats stayed immaculate; their lives were reduced to eating, drinking, sleeping and grooming. Many females likewise withdrew and stopped breeding.

No way back. When late survivors were moved to new, uncrowded pens, they did not recover normal behaviour. The historian Edmund Ramsden described them as "trapped in an infantile state of early

development": "There's no recovery, and that's what was so shocking to [Calhoun]" (The Scientist (https://www.the-scientist.com/universe-25-1968-1973-69941)).

What Calhoun concluded

Calhoun's explanation was social, not material: when nobody dies young and nobody can leave, there are soon far more individuals than meaningful roles to fill, and the social order collapses. His paper opens:

> "I shall largely speak of mice, but my thoughts are on man, on healing, on life and its evolution."

Roles, not food. In a closed world without emigration, he wrote, "within a few generations all such roles in all physical space available to the species are filled." The surplus young kept competing for positions that no longer existed. Those who failed did not starve; they dropped out of social life altogether.

"Death squared": two deaths. Borrowing the "second death" of the Book of Revelation, Calhoun wrote: "Threatening life and evolution are the two deaths, death of the spirit and death of the body." In Universe 25 the first came first. Mice that never acquired the complex behaviours of courting, fighting and rearing young lived on physically but could not sustain the group. The physical extinction followed.

The leap to humans. He drew the human parallel explicitly: "for an animal so complex as man, there is no logical reason why a comparable sequence of events should not also lead to species extinction." For mice the vital complex behaviours were courtship and maternal care; for people, he suggested, it was "ideational generativity", the capacity to create ideas. "Loss of these respective complex behaviours means death of the species" (Calhoun 1973 (https://flashbak.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/universe-25-.pdf)).

Boredom and idleness were symptoms, not causes. The "beautiful ones" were idle, but in Calhoun's account they were idle because they had no role, not because life was too easy. Abundance mattered only because it removed the deaths and scarcity that would otherwise have thinned the population.

The forgotten second half. Calhoun himself rejected the doom that made him famous. In later work he called humans a "positive animal" whose crowding pressures could produce innovation and new "conceptual space". He called for a "compassionate revolution" in the design of cities and communication networks, and named his hopeful scenario "Dawnsday" against the "Doomsday" of the period's population pessimists. He was fascinated by "creative deviant" rats that invented a better way to dig (Ramsden & Adams 2009 (https://www.Gwern.net/doc/psychology/animal/2009-ramsden.pdf)).

What critics, historians and later research say

Universe 25 is a powerful story resting on thin and disputed evidence. It was a single colony from one inbred strain, never cleanly replicated, and later studies of crowded humans did not find a comparable collapse.

Weak evidence

- **One colony, thinly documented.** The collapse rests mainly on the 1973 paper. There were no controls, no blinding and few published counts; how many of the 24 earlier "universes" collapsed is unclear (Gwern (https://gwern.net/mouse-utopia)).
- **Not replicated.** Other researchers kept mice at very high densities without a crash. Kessler (1966) used four strains and Hammock (1971) used Swiss Webster mice; both found stable populations, though with high infant mortality (Gwern (https://gwern.net/mouse-utopia)). The writer Jon Day notes the results "have never been successfully replicated" (Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Behavioral_sink)).

Alternative explanations

- **Disease and parasites** could explain sterility and withdrawal. The pen was cleaned only every six to eight weeks, and Calhoun did not test for infection (Wikipedia (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Behavioral_sink)).
- **Inbreeding:** eight founders of one laboratory strain may have accumulated genetic damage (Gwern (https://gwern.net/mouse-utopia)).
- **The pen's design:** the science writer Esther Inglis-Arkell argues that some nesting areas had a single entrance that dominant males could guard, so the problem was the *distribution* of space, not its quantity (Smithsonian (https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/how-mouse-utopias-1960s-led-grim-predictions-humans-180954423/)).

Humans are not mice

- **No human behavioural sink.** In *Crowding and Behavior* (1975) the psychologist Jonathan Freedman found "no appreciable negative effects" of density on human behaviour. He argued that poverty and inequality, not density, explained urban problems (Ramsden & Adams 2009 (https://www.Gwern.net/doc/psychology/animal/2009-ramsden.pdf)).
- **People can cope.** The historian Edmund Ramsden summed it up in 2008: "Rats may suffer from crowding," but "human beings can cope" (Smithsonian (https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/how-mouse-utopias-1960s-led-grim-predictions-humans-180954423/)).
- **Too anthropomorphic.** Critics in the 1970s faulted Calhoun for failing to resist anthropomorphism; he labelled some mice "juvenile delinquents" and "social dropouts" (The Scientist (https://www.the-scientist.com/universe-25-1968-1973-69941)).

A cultural life of its own. The "behavioral sink" fed 1960s–70s fears of overpopulation and urban decay, and novels and films such as *Make Room! Make Room!*, filmed as *Soylent Green* (Ramsden & Adams 2009 (https://www.Gwern.net/doc/psychology/animal/2009-ramsden.pdf)). Since about 2017 it has become an internet meme, shared on X, Reddit and TikTok to argue opposite things: about birth rates, immigration, welfare, masculinity or urban planning (Praxis Psychologie Berlin (https://www.praxis-psychologie-berlin.de/wikiblog-english/articles/feature-article-6-universe-25-in-pop-culture)). The science writer Sam Kean calls these readings "Rorschach blots—people seeing what they want to see". The most defensible moral, he suggests, is "a lesson about the dangers of drawing hasty lessons" (Science History Institute (https://www.sciencehistory.org/stories/disappearing-pod/death-squared/)).

Still taken seriously. The biologist Lee Alan Dugatkin's *Dr. Calhoun's Mousery* (University of Chicago Press, 2024) treats Calhoun as premature and overreaching in his extrapolations, but notes the findings "have not been totally discredited" (Washington Independent Review of Books (https://webmail.washingtonindependentreviewofbooks.com/bookreview/dr-calhouns-mousery-the-strange-tale-of-a-celebrated-scientist-a-rodent-dystopia-and-the-future-of-humanity)).

Does it concern the post-work AI utopia?

Yes, as a parable about losing purpose; no, as proof that idleness destroys societies. Calhoun's own explanation is actually closer to the AI debate than the "boredom" version: material abundance is not the danger, being unneeded is.

Where the parallel holds

- **Roles, not rations.** Universe 25 failed with food and water to spare, because there were too many individuals for the roles available. A future where AI and robots do most work raises the same question: a "universal high income" would solve the material problem but not the problem of roles.
- **The leaders ask it themselves.** Musk asked: "If the computer and robots can do everything better than you, does your life have meaning?" Calhoun's answer for mice was "death of the spirit" before death of the body.
- **The "beautiful ones" as an image.** Fed, safe, well groomed and socially absent, they are a vivid figure for Huxley's comfortable passivity, discussed in the earlier report.
- **Lost capacities may not come back.** Calhoun's survivors did not recover when moved to better conditions. It is a fair question whether skills and social habits that society stops needing can be rebuilt on demand.

Where it breaks down

- **The cause was crowding in a closed box.** The mice could not emigrate, and the shortage was of social space and positions. They were not "bored", and they did not mainly kill each other.
- **The science is disputed.** It was one colony of one inbred strain; disease, genes and pen design may explain it, and it was never cleanly replicated.
- **Humans make new roles.** Mice could not invent new roles; people create them through art, care, science, sport, politics, religion and play. Calhoun himself argued that humans could escape his model by creating new "conceptual space". Iain M. Banks's *Culture* novels, Musk's declared model, imagine exactly this.
- **Human institutions can change course.** People can redesign cities, laws and economies, which the mice could not; that was Calhoun's own hope.

A way to use it. The whole study serves as an image, not as evidence. A possible wording:

> In John B. Calhoun's "Universe 25" (1968–73), mice given unlimited food and water multiplied until every social role was taken. The surplus generations withdrew, stopped breeding, and the colony died out. Calhoun called it the "death of the spirit" preceding the death of the body. The experiment is disputed, and mice are not people.
>
> But it frames the question an AI-supplied abundance leaves open: not whether we will be fed, but whether we will still be needed.

Calhoun's 1973 paper and the Ramsden and Adams history are relevant. The result is contested.

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