

Democracy's Discontent

Debating the Crisis of Liberalism

**The ResetDOC
Venice Seminars**

Archibugi, Calloni, Ferrara, Leggewie
Magatti, Milbank, Pabst

edited by Fulvia Giachetti

ResetDOC

ResetDOC

Reset
DIALOGUES



The Monographs of ResetDOC

The Monographs of ResetDOC is an editorial series published by Reset – Dialogues on Civilizations, an international association committed to promoting dialogue, intercultural understanding, the rule of law and human rights in various contexts, through the creation and dissemination of the highest quality research in human sciences. ResetDOC does so by bringing together, in conferences and seminars, networks of highly esteemed academics and promising young scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds, disciplines, institutions, nationalities, cultures, and religions.

The Monographs of ResetDOC offer a broad range of analyses on topical political, social and cultural issues. The series includes articles published in ResetDOC's online journal and original essays, as well as conferences and seminars proceedings. *The Monographs of ResetDOC* promote new insights on cultural pluralism and international affairs.

Democracy's Discontent
Debating the Crisis of Liberalism

ResetDOC Venice Seminars 2025

Daniele Archibugi, Marina Calloni, Alessandro Ferrara,
Claus Leggewie, Mauro Magatti, John Milbank, Adarian Pabst

Edited by Fulvia Giachetti

Table of Contents

The Monographs of ResetDOC

Publisher Reset – Dialogues on Civilizations
Via Podgora 15, 20123 Milan – Italy
ISBN 9791298631212

Photocopies are allowed only for personal use,
provided that they do not exceed a maximum
of 15% of the work and that due remuneration
foreseen by art.68 of italian copyright law 1941/633
is paid to SIAE.

Graphic Design
Studio Cerri & Associati
Layout cccppp.studio

Milan. April 2026

- 9 Introduction
Democracy at the Crossroads
Fulvia Giachetti

- Part I
Inside the Crisis of Liberal Order
- 19 The Democracy Levers
Internal and External Connections
Daniele Archibugi
- 35 The Twilight of Liquid Modernity
Digital Rationalization and Technopopulism
Mauro Magatti
- 61 The Rise of the Sophocrats
Political, Economic, and Epistemic Power
in Algorithmic Governance
Marina Calloni

	Part II
	Resources for Renewal
89	The “Liberal Script”, Democracy’s Discontent, and Political Liberalism <i>Alessandro Ferrara</i>
105	Will the Center Hold? In Search of a Renewed Democratic Middle Ground <i>Claus Leggewie</i>
	Part III
	A Different Diagnosis
125	Democracy, Capitalism and the Ethical A Post-Liberal Democratic Manifesto <i>John Milbank</i>
151	The Realist Turn. Freedom, Democracy and International Order After Liberalism <i>Adrian Pabst</i>
177	Authors

Introduction Democracy at the Crossroads

Fulvia Giachetti

Across much of the world, democratic institutions that took generations to build are facing simultaneous pressures from within and without: the rise of authoritarian nationalism, the corrosive effects of transnational digital capitalism on deliberation and collective judgment, the growing gap between electoral democracy and meaningful popular agency, and the waning credibility of the multilateral liberal international order.

The essays collected in this volume were first presented at the ResetDOC Venice Seminars in 2025, a gathering convened to take stock of the crisis of democracy and think carefully about what might come next. They are written from different disciplinary vantage points, political philosophy, sociology, international relations, democratic theory, and they reflect different diagnoses of the current situation. What unites them is a shared recognition that the discontent with democracy cannot be addressed by mere procedural reform or technocratic fine-tuning. Something deeper is at stake.

The title of this volume deliberately echoes Michael Sandel’s *Democracy’s Discontent* (1996). Sandel’s argument – that the “procedural republic” of liberal political philosophy had hollowed out democratic self-government by insisting on a spurious neutrality toward the good, eroding the civic bonds and shared moral languages on which meaningful political participation depends – anticipated much of what has since

The Rise of the Sophocrats Political, Economic, and Epistemic Power in Algorithmic Governance

Marina Calloni

Abstract

This article argues that contemporary transformations in digital capitalism and artificial intelligence are producing not merely a new economic phase, but an emergent regime of rule grounded in the control of epistemic infrastructures. It introduces the concept of *sophocracy* to describe a configuration in which legitimacy derives from privileged access to computational knowledge and the capacity to organize the conditions of cognition itself. Moving beyond accounts of democratic crisis cantered on populism or neoliberalism, the article identifies a structural convergence of epistemic authority, economic power, and political control. Situating sophocracy – as a neologism – within a genealogy of elites – from aristocracy to technocracy – it emphasizes the privatization of the means of cognition and the public sphere. Focusing in particular on Peter Thiel, sophocracy is interpreted as both an infrastructural and symbolic order. What is at stake is the capacity to sustain shared horizons of meaning and collective action within increasingly pre-structured environments, and to transform rather than escape them.

Keywords: Sophocracy; Epistemic elites; Knowledge infrastructures; Algorithmic governance; Artificial intelligence; Peter Thiel; Cognitive capitalism; Deliberative democracy; Public sphere; Epistemic justice.

Mouk, Y. (2018). *The People vs. Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Polanyi, K. (1944). *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Prigogine, I., & Stengers, I. (1984). *Order Out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature*. New York: Bantam.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rosa, H. (2019). *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Rouvroy, A., & Berns, T. (2013). Algorithmic governmentality and prospects of emancipation. *Réseaux*, 31(177), 163–196.

Schmitt, C. (2007). *The Concept of the Political*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1932).

Schrödinger, E. (1944). *What Is Life?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sennett, R. (1998). *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Standing, G. (2011). *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury.

Stiegler, B. (2014). *Symbolic Misery: The Hyperindustrial Epoch*. Cambridge: Polity.

Streeck, W. (2016). *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System*. London: Verso.

Taleb, N. N. (2012). *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*. New York: Random House.

Taylor, C. (2007). *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Twenge, J. (2017). *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy –and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*. New York: Atria Books.

Urbainati, N. (2019). *Me the People: How Populism Transforms Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Valéry, P. (1973–1974). *Cahiers*. Paris: Gallimard.

Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and Society* (G. Roth & C. Wittich, Eds.). Berkeley: University of California Press. (Original work published 1922).

Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. London: Profile Books.

Introduction: The Displacement of the Political

Contemporary political theory remains largely structured by categories inherited from earlier phases of modernity: sovereignty, class, representation, and institutional authority. Yet the rise of digital infrastructures and artificial intelligence has introduced a transformation that these categories only partially illuminate.

The dominant diagnoses of our time – on the one hand, the resurgence of populism and sovereigntism; on the other, the deepening of neoliberal financialization – capture important dimensions of the present but fail to grasp the underlying reconfiguration that links them.

What is emerging is not merely a crisis of democratic institutions, nor simply a new stage of capitalism, but a transformation in the site and substance of power itself. Power no longer resides primarily in territorial control, juridical command, or ownership of industrial production. It increasingly resides in the capacity to structure the conditions under which reality becomes knowable.

Digital platforms, algorithmic systems, and artificial intelligence infrastructures do not simply process information; they organize perception, modulate attention, hierarchize relevance, and prefigure action. They function as conditions of intelligibility. In this sense, they occupy a position analogous to what Kant assigned to the transcendental conditions of experience; however, whereas for Kant the transcendental a priori is subjective, these conditions are instead a posteriori and objective, better understood as a form of “historical and objective transcendental,” since they are privately owned and politically contested. This shift entails a profound mutation of sovereignty. Sovereignty is no longer exhausted by the monopoly of legitimate violence (as Weber argued) or the decision on the exception (Schmitt). It increasingly involves the capacity to

configure epistemic environments, able to determine what can be seen, said, known, and imagined.

To name the elite formation that emerges within this configuration, I propose the concept of *sophocracy*. Situating *sophocracy* – as a deliberate neologism – within a lineage of elite rule, from aristocracy to technocracy, it entails a critical rethinking – and even a reversal – of the classical concept of *sophia* in a technocratic sense, while highlighting the growing privatization of both the means of cognition and the public sphere. The challenge today is not to escape these structures, but to transform them by rethinking democracy.

Sophocracy: Definition and Conceptual Delimitation

Sophocracy designates an emergent regime, or more precisely, a regime tendency, in which authority is grounded in the control of knowledge infrastructures and legitimized through claims to epistemic superiority.

What is at stake is not merely the possession of knowledge, but the capacity to shape the conditions under which knowledge is produced, validated, circulated, and put to use. In this sense, sophocracy marks a shift from the governance of actions to the *governance of the conditions of intelligibility that define what counts as knowledge*.

This distinguishes sophocracy from adjacent categories such as technocracy, neoliberalism, and oligarchy. While it intersects with each, it operates at a different level, not primarily through decision-making, market coordination, or wealth concentration, but through the structuring of epistemic environments.

First, unlike technocracy, which refers to the rule of experts within established institutional frameworks, sophocracy operates at a prior level. Technocracy addresses given problems;

sophocracy shapes what can appear as a problem in the first place. Its agents design platforms, algorithms, and data systems that structure visibility, define evidence, and delimit the space of possible solutions.

Second, unlike classical capitalism, in which legitimacy is tied to production and accumulation, sophocracy reorients legitimacy toward intelligence, innovation, and the capacity to shape the future. Authority derives not only from generating value, but from anticipating and constructing what is to come. The claim shifts from production to prediction. According to Varoufakis, capitalism is being supplanted by *technofeudalism*, where dominant tech firms resemble feudal lords, collecting rents through their control of digital platforms and cloud systems instead of generating profits through open market competition (Varoufakis 2023).

Third, unlike neoliberalism, which conceives the market as a mechanism for distributing knowledge across actors, sophocracy recentralizes that epistemic function. Knowledge is no longer dispersed through competition but aggregated and operationalized within centralized infrastructures. The result is a shift from competitive coordination to infrastructural control.

Finally, while sophocracy shares with oligarchy a concentration of power, it differs in its mode of legitimation. Oligarchic power rests on wealth; sophocratic power is justified through knowledge. It is, in this sense, an epistemically legitimized form of concentrated rule.

Sophocracy can thus be understood as the convergence of three dimensions of power: economic (control of capital), political (the capacity not only to accept commissions, but also to shape and leverage governmental power in order to influence collective outcomes), and epistemic (control over the production and organization of knowledge). What is historically distinctive is their increasing fusion within the same actors and systems.

The novelty of sophocracy lies in the *primacy of epistemic power as a source of legitimacy*. Authority is no longer grounded primarily in lineage, productivity, or procedure, but in claims to superior, often computationally mediated, knowledge. Power presents itself less as domination than as necessity.

In this configuration, sovereignty is increasingly exercised through the governance of cognition. Power operates not only by directing action or regulating markets, but by shaping how subjects perceive, understand, and decide. The central political question is therefore no longer only who governs, but who defines what is real, what is possible, and what can be done.

The Sovereignty of Knowledge Infrastructures

In the algorithmic age sovereignty is not disappearing but shifting. It is moving away from traditional, territory-based institutions (like nation-states) and toward the systems that organize, filter, and even produce how we think and understand the world.

Sovereignty is no longer mainly located in visible state structures; instead, it is increasingly built into the largely invisible systems that shape how reality is perceived, interpreted, and acted upon.

Foucault argued that power/knowledge does not merely repress individuals, but produces “regimes of truth,” shaping what can be said, what counts as knowledge, and what is accepted as legitimate (Foucault 1980). In terms of biopolitics, domination operates not only through force, but by structuring how reality itself is understood. In this sense, both our minds and bodies are shaped by these systems of power (Foucault 2008).

Today's digital systems take this a step further. They do not merely control or limit what can be said; they actively shape

the conditions under which thinking, knowing, and even ordinary life unfold. In the algorithmic age, our bodies and minds are increasingly configured and traversed by a complex web of interconnections, operating in a space that is at once real and virtual. Power, then, no longer simply governs knowledge – it designs the environments in which knowledge and everyday experience become possible.

These systems operate through three connected mechanisms:

Epistemic asymmetry. People do not just have unequal access to information, but they also have unequal access to the tools needed to interpret and use it. As a result, knowledge increasingly depends on access to advanced computational systems.

Computational agency. Decision-making is shifting from humans to algorithms. Those who control data and computational models gain new kinds of authority.

Futurity selection. Power shapes the future by prioritizing certain predictions and possibilities over others. It influences not just what happens, but what can be imagined and pursued.

AI systems are not just part of existing knowledge systems. They are redesigning them. They introduce a new level of reflexivity, where the production of knowledge itself is automated, optimized, and often enclosed within proprietary systems.

Bernard Stiegler argues that if technologies are extensions of human thinking, then privatizing these technologies reshapes human subjectivity itself, that is how we think, perceive, and relate to the world (Stiegler 1998 2009 2011). This means that questions about who owns and controls these systems are also questions about who we can become, both individually and collectively. The issue is not just access to tools, but the shaping of attention, desire, and our experience of time.

Similarly, recalling his original formulation of *Öffentlichkeit* (Habermas 1989), Habermas himself raised concerns about the conditions for rational public debate, a problem he later sought to rethink in his reflections on the transformation of the public sphere (Habermas 2023). It is no longer enough to think of the public sphere as a space for free discussion; it is now a digitally mediated environment whose structure is set by actors that are often not democratically accountable. The “colonization of the lifeworld,” as conceptualized in the theory of communicative action in opposition to the system, thus occurs not only through markets and bureaucracies, but also through algorithmic systems that prestructure interaction from the outset (Habermas 1984–1987).

From this perspective, sovereignty becomes infrastructural before it is institutional. Power is exercised less through direct commands and more through the design of systems that make some actions easy. Governance is built into code, platforms, and protocols.

The term *sophocracy* describes the political logic and ideology that emerges from this shift: a system defined by the apparent primacy of the machine, yet in fact governed by an elite that controls and designs its operations. This tension reveals a new configuration of power, in which authority derives from control over knowledge infrastructures and the large-scale organization of cognition, exercised through algorithmic systems that both mediate and obscure human agency. At the same time, it carries a latent nightmare: that these systems may acquire a degree of autonomy, further displacing control from both their human operators and democratic institutions. In such a system, legitimacy rests less on representation or consent than on performance, that is, on the capacity to produce reliable knowledge and effective predictions.

This does not entail the disappearance of politics, but rather its transformation in form. Struggles over sovereignty increas-

ingly manifest as struggles over infrastructures as well as over material resources. Conflicts can no longer be understood as concerning merely land or territorial sovereignty; rather, they unfold over data, algorithms, and computational infrastructures. Yet these apparently immaterial domains remain inseparable from the material regimes of extraction—rare earths, semiconductors, and logistical supply chains—that sustain them. In this sense, contemporary geopolitical conflicts, including the war in Ukraine, are also struggles over the material conditions of possibility of the digital. The key challenge, then, is not just to understand these systems, but to make them open to debate and contestation, to question who controls the infrastructures that shape how we think and live.

*Genealogy of Elites
and the Algorithmic Transformation
of Epistemic Rule*

Sophocracy should be understood within a long history of elite formation. Across this history, the basis of legitimacy changes, but one core idea remains constant: the claim that a minority is entitled to rule because of its superior relation to knowledge. What changes is not the existence of elites, but how their superiority is justified, epistemically, politically, and economically.

Classical aristocracy grounded its authority in lineage, divine order, and inherited distinction. Its right to rule rested on a cosmological narrative: hierarchy was built into the structure of reality itself. Yet even here, knowledge played a role, not as technical expertise, but as privileged access to education, cultivation, and symbolic codes that distinguished nobles from common people. Aristocratic superiority was thus already epistemic, though embedded in tradition rather than formalized as cognition.

With the rise of the bourgeoisie, legitimacy shifted. Authority became tied to productivity, accumulation, and economic expansion. Still, bourgeois dominance was not purely economic. It relied on a new epistemic ethos: rational calculation, scientific reasoning, and managerial organization. The bourgeois subject presented itself as capable of mastering uncertainty through reason and planning. Economic capital and cognitive competence became inseparable. However, unlike positivism, where progress was seen as generating broad, collective well-being, sophocrats view progress as optimistic but inherently unequal, driven by elitist forces that ultimately create social divisions.

Technocracy pushed this further by explicitly grounding authority in expertise. Legitimacy derived from specialized knowledge and administrative competence. The technocrat claimed authority not through wealth or birth, but through mastery of complex systems. Yet this remained political: expertise justified intervention and control over social processes. Knowledge was no longer merely descriptive because it became operational.

This trajectory is captured in the elite theories of Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto. Against democratic idealism, both argued that all societies are governed by minorities with superior organizational and cognitive capacities. For Mosca, the “political class” maintains power by organizing and administering collective life, while legitimizing itself through a “political formula” (Mosca 1939). According to Pareto, elites circulate, but their defining feature remains a differential in psychological and intellectual qualities that enables them to rule (Pareto 1935).

Yet they did not reduce elite superiority to economic power alone. They emphasized cognitive, organizational, and political capacities, which means the ability to know, coordinate, and decide. Elites are defined less by what they own than by

how they understand and structure the social world. They are, fundamentally, epistemic minorities.

At the same time, these theories imply a philosophy of history: that elite rule, when properly organized, can improve society through conscious design. Whether through circulation (Pareto) or stabilization (Mosca), elites were seen as necessary for order and progress. Their privilege was grounded in education, knowledge, and a presumed capacity to guide collective development. In this sense, elite theory already contains the seeds of sophocracy: the idea that those who know better should govern.

Sophocracy is the latest transformation of this logic. It combines and reshapes earlier elite forms by bringing together:

- aristocratic distinction (hierarchical differentiation),
- bourgeois accumulation (control of resources),
- technocratic expertise (specialized knowledge),
- while redirecting them toward a new axis: the future.

In sophocracy, legitimacy no longer depends only on origin, wealth, or present competence. It rests on the capacity to construct and anticipate the future. Authority belongs to those who can model, predict, and operationalize what does not yet exist.

This shift corresponds to the move from industrial to cognitive (Moulier-Boutang 2011) or platform capitalism (Srnicsek 2016), where value depends increasingly on information, data extraction, and network effects. The decisive resource is no longer material production, but the ability to organize cognition at scale. Economic power becomes dependent on epistemic infrastructure: those who control knowledge systems also control the conditions of accumulation.

Ideologically, this configuration is supported by meritocracy. As Michael Sandel argues (Sandel 2021), meritocratic discourse moralizes inequality: success appears deserved, failure justified. In sophocracy, this logic intensifies. Authority

is grounded not just in achievement, but in epistemic superiority. It is the presumed ability to know, predict, and decide better. Inequality is naturalized as a function of unequal cognitive access and computational leverage.

In this context, the Platonic question of epistemic rule returns in a new form. For Plato, legitimacy derived from *episteme*. Truth is secured through philosophical insight. The philosopher-king ruled because he grasped the Good beyond appearances. Sophocracy revives this structure while stripping away its metaphysical foundation. Truth is no longer contemplative; it is computational.

We thus see a shift from *episteme* to *technê*, and ultimately to algorithmic governance. *Knowledge is operationalized, externalized, and automated, becoming detached from the cultural and experiential frameworks of individuals. It is thereby de-subjectivized.* Wisdom gives way to calculation, deliberation to optimization, and judgment to probabilistic inference. Authority moves from the philosopher to the system designer, from the guardian of truth to the architect of models.

In this transformation, truth becomes statistical, justice scalable, and the good redefined in terms of functional efficiency. What matters is no longer what is right in principle, but what works within a system of constraints. *Politics is increasingly absorbed into technical systems.*

Here, the critique developed by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002) becomes especially relevant. Instrumental rationality turns into a means of organizing and extending control. In sophocracy, this dynamic intensifies: power operates through systems that expand knowledge while simultaneously structuring and constraining it. Domination is no longer external to reason. It is embedded within cognition itself.

The result is the transformation and intensification of elite rule. Elites no longer simply govern society; they shape the

very ways in which society is understood, imagined, and transformed. Their power is no longer primarily economic or institutional; it resides in the control of the systems that organize knowledge and orient how people think and live.

In this sense, sophocrats seek to preserve their position as creators – almost as demiurges – of the systems they bring into being, asserting a form of design-based omnipotence through which they attempt to shape and order a new world. The risk, however, is that this world becomes increasingly detached from material and shared reality. The task, then, is to confront these developments at a concrete level, in order to prevent the drift toward a fully unreal world that reinforces social inequalities.

Peter Thiel and the Mimetic Desire

Peter Thiel's thought offers one of the clearest and most explicit articulations of sophocratic ideology today. Unlike more neutral technocratic discourse, he presents a coherent and often deliberately provocative view of history, technology, and elite power, grounded in both theory and practice.

Thiel – co-founder of PayPal and Palantir Technologies – earned a B.A. in Philosophy in 1989 and later received a Juris Doctor (J.D.) from Stanford Law School in 1992. His intellectual formation reflects a classic elite trajectory, shaped by canonical texts and debates on modernity and political order (Thiel 2009).

Therefore, Thiel does not operate merely as an entrepreneur, but as a thinker who situates technological development within a broader narrative about the trajectory – and possible stagnation (Cowen 2011) – of Western civilization.

In this respect, his thought also resonates with themes associated with Carl Schmitt's emphasis on sovereign decision in moments of exception and Leo Strauss's concern with the

fragility of liberal order and the role of elite judgment in times of crisis.

Thiel's "stagnation thesis", most clearly developed in *Zero to One* (Thiel 2014), argues that the modern West has lost its capacity for genuine innovation. Technological progress has slowed, risk-taking has diminished, and democratic-regulatory systems have produced incrementalism rather than transformation. This diagnosis functions as a justification for elite intervention: if society cannot generate the future it requires, then those who retain this capacity acquire a quasi-historical mandate to act.

Thiel's thought takes on a quasi-prophetic structure. His references to the "Antichrist" frame global governance, surveillance, and political uniformity as expressions of a totalizing order that suppresses innovation and difference.

In this sense, the Antichrist becomes a metaphor for a world in which risk and creativity are neutralized in the name of stability. This is evident in Thiel's remarks at four-part lecture series held in San Francisco in September/October 2025, where, in discussing the Antichrist, he suggests that contemporary figures such as Greta Thunberg signal a politics of global coordination – "from a Christian theological perspective, you could describe that as the Antichrist" (Thiel 2025).

Against this horizon, the exceptional innovator emerges as a figure who disrupts stagnation and reopens the future. Here sophocracy takes on a mythic dimension:

- innovation appears as redemption,
- stagnation as civilizational decline,
- critics as obstacles to the future.

This helps explain why critics of technology or inequality are often cast as enemies rather than interlocutors.

This connects directly to Thiel's critique of democracy. His claim that "freedom and democracy are no longer compatible" signals a redefinition of freedom itself. What emerges is a form

of ego-liberty: freedom as the discretionary power of exceptional individuals – founders, visionaries, technological elites – to act without constraint. Thus, Ego-liberty:

- separates freedom from equality,
- prioritizes individual agency over collective deliberation,
- treats asymmetry as a necessary condition of progress.

From this perspective, democratic institutions appear not as safeguards of legitimacy but as obstacles to innovation. They slow decision-making, enforce conformity, and limit the emergence of radical futures. In this configuration, politics is subordinated to entrepreneurship, legitimacy arises from creation rather than representation, and technology becomes the primary means of reinventing the world.

*The Transformation of the Platonic Ideal World
in Sophocratic Elitism*

Thiel thus revives – while reconfiguring – the Platonic problem of epistemic authority, envisioning an ideal that carries distinctly authoritarian implications. As with the philosopher-king, the figure of the innovator claims a privileged relation to truth. Yet here truth is no longer grounded in metaphysics; it is recast as foresight, that means the capacity to anticipate and actively shape the future. Authority, in turn, no longer derives from contemplation of the Good, but from the power to actualize what does not yet exist. Knowledge becomes fundamentally generative rather than contemplative, oriented toward the production and transformation of reality rather than its interpretation.

This shift binds philosophical reflection to a mode of visionary power. The philosophy of history no longer simply interprets temporal processes but seeks to intervene in them through technological means. The future thus emerges as an

object of construction rather than speculation.

Yet this transformation also raises a deeper question: what drives such world-making ambition? It is at this level that a key influence on Thiel's thought becomes decisive: René Girard's theory of mimetic desire (Girard 1977). This reference is not incidental. Namely, Thiel attended Girard's lectures at Stanford in the late 1980s (Girard 1987), an experience that left a lasting imprint on his intellectual formation.

Mimetic desire refers to the idea that human desires are not autonomous but shaped by the desires of others: we want what others want, generating both imitation and rivalry. In Thiel's interpretation, however, this structure is reoriented. Mimetic desire becomes not merely a source of conflict but a dynamic to be redirected. The desire to imitate is transformed into a drive to differentiate, that is to escape competition by creating what does not yet exist.

Innovation thus appears as a transformation of mimetic desire itself. Rather than competing within given structures, the exceptional innovator seeks to redefine the field of desire by producing new realities. In this way, imitation is converted into a project of radical creation, and philosophy becomes inseparable from the technological reconfiguration of the world.

This vision takes concrete form in Thiel's co-founding of Palantir, a US-based data analytics company that builds software to handle and make sense of complex datasets, mainly for government, defense, and large corporate clients, and whose very high market value reflects its strategic relevance. Even its name, Palantir – drawn from Tolkien's most famous work, *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955) – signals its ambition: to render the world legible through data integration and prediction. Palantir does not simply generate profit; it organizes knowledge for governments and corporations. It exemplifies sophocratic power in infrastructural form: the concentration of the capacity to see, predict, and act.

This project is further reinforced by the figure of Palantir's CEO, Alexander Karp, whose trajectory – like Thiel's – combines training in both law and philosophy. Karp graduated with a J.D. from Stanford Law School in 1992 and later pursued doctoral studies in Germany. He initially sought to complete his PhD under Jürgen Habermas at Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, but this did not materialize due to disagreements over his interpretation of Talcott Parsons and related issues. As Karp recalls in an article published in *Politico* a few days after Habermas's death in Starnberg on March 14, 2026, he completed his doctorate in Frankfurt in 2002 under the supervision of Karola Brede, a sociologist at the Sigmund Freud Institute with whom Habermas worked closely (Karp 2026).

Despite this intellectual formation, Karp operates within systems oriented toward intelligence, security, and strategic advantage, thereby contributing to the construction of a “technological republic” (Karp & Zamiska 2025). This stands in clear contrast to Habermas's theory, which grounds reason in communication, deliberation, and intersubjective understanding. Palantir, by contrast, is structured around data integration, prediction, and operational effectiveness.

Karp's trajectory therefore reflects not simply a departure from Habermas, but the emergence of a conception of reason that is effectively antagonistic to communicative rationality. Reason is no longer oriented toward mutual understanding and consensus, but toward the concentration of the capacity to see, predict, and act.

What this reveals is a broader transformation: communicative rationality is increasingly displaced by computational rationality. Power is no longer organized around dialogue and justification, but around data processing and predictive capacity.

However, sophocracy cannot be reduced to infrastructure or expertise alone. It also depends on symbolic legitimization.

The sophocratic elite is legitimized by its capacity to disrupt, control and create. The criterion is no longer wisdom, but world-making power.

Taken together, Thiel's philosophy and its joint realization with Alexander Karp in Palantir articulate a distinct techno-elitist vision. It celebrates individual innovation within a post-subjective framework, while simultaneously challenging democratic forms of collective decision-making. In this view, a small group of highly capable individuals – defined by their ability to think, create, and anticipate the future – emerge as the primary drivers of historical change.

Thiel, then, does not simply describe a sophocratic order. Together with Karp, he helps to build it in practice. What emerges is a system in which power depends less on wealth alone and more on a particular kind of knowledge: the capacity to see further, think differently, and bring into being what others cannot yet imagine.

However, against the ideology of sophocrats, which envisions progress as unequal and driven by elites, AI development can still be anchored in an ethical framework grounded in collective responsibility. The case of Anthropic – a US AI company focused on building safe and aligned artificial intelligence, led by its CEO Dario Amodei, a former OpenAI researcher and developer of the Claude models – is emblematic in this regard. Anthropic's refusal to engage in military applications of AI, as discussed in the reported dispute Anthropic v. US Department of Defense, suggests that technological advancement need not be detached from moral constraints, but can instead remain oriented toward the common good and the prevention of harm (Amodei 2026).

The Erosion of Deliberative Democracy

The rise of sophocracy, as outlined above, does not only challenge democracy at the level of institutions. It reshapes its deeper foundations and its epistemic conditions. Democracy, in both its classical and modern forms, presupposes a shared space in which individuals can reason together and deliberate (Arendt 1961). Sophocracy intervenes precisely at this level, altering how such a space is formed and sustained.

What is at stake, then, is not simply a decline in participation or trust, but a transformation of the public sphere itself (Calloni 2023a). As suggested earlier in the discussion of knowledge infrastructures, the space in which opinions are formed is no longer relatively autonomous. It is increasingly shaped by systems that are:

- privatized, as communication platforms are owned and governed by corporations not accountable to democratic publics;
- algorithmically structured, as visibility and relevance are determined by opaque systems of ranking and selection;
- oriented toward engagement, privileging immediacy and emotional intensity over reasoned argument.

This transformation follows the same logic described in Thiel's framework. If the future is to be shaped by exceptional actors operating beyond democratic constraint, then collective deliberation appears less as a foundation of legitimacy and more as an obstacle. The displacement of public discourse by technical systems is therefore not accidental: it reflects a broader shift toward concentrated epistemic power. The consequences are extensive.

First, public discourse becomes fragmented. Instead of sharing a common horizon of meaning, individuals are distributed across isolated informational environments. This weakens not only consensus, but even the possibility of meaningful

disagreement, since conflicts no longer unfold within a shared reality.

Second, shared standards of truth erode. As algorithmic systems optimize for attention and intensify polarization by continuously constructing adversarial divides (Calloni 2025), they privilege what spreads rapidly over what withstands critical scrutiny. In this environment, truth becomes subordinate to visibility.

Third, citizens are increasingly treated as data subjects. Their role shifts from participants in a public conversation to sources of behavioural data, tracked, predicted, and influenced. The direction of influence reverses: instead of citizens shaping politics through discourse, technical systems shape citizens through continuous feedback and modulation.

From the perspective of political theory, this marks a shift away from what Jürgen Habermas called *communicative rationality* (Habermas 1984–1987). For Habermas, legitimacy arises from open processes of argumentation under conditions of equality and mutual recognition (Habermas 1996). These conditions depend on a public sphere that is not distorted by asymmetries of power and access.

Sophocracy normalizes such asymmetries. Rationality is no longer grounded in shared justification, but in computational efficiency. What matters is not the better argument, but the better-performing model. The ideal of consensus gives way to prediction; deliberation is replaced by behavioural steering.

A similar shift can be understood through Hannah Arendt's idea of the *space of appearance* (Arendt 1958) – the political space where individuals act freely and speak in the presence of others. Under sophocratic conditions, this space is not eliminated but transformed. To appear politically increasingly means to be visible within platform systems governed by metrics of attention. Visibility becomes quantifiable and programmable, and plurality is flattened into streams of competing content.

In Thiel's view, once innovation is taken as inherently good and critique as obstruction, the erosion of deliberative spaces appears justified. Democratic processes seem slow and inefficient, while technological systems promise clarity and speed. Reformulating Girard's theory, the public sphere becomes a scapegoat, blamed for stagnation and displaced by systems that claim to surpass it.

The result is a paradox. Democratic forms persist – elections, institutions, and the language of popular sovereignty remain – but their substance is weakened. The conditions that make democracy meaningful, such as shared knowledge, discursive equality, and collective agency, are gradually eroded.

In this sense, the crisis of deliberative democracy is not simply a side effect of technological change. It reflects a deeper transformation already traced in this analysis: the concentration of knowledge, the rise of epistemic elites, and the growing belief that the future should be shaped by those who claim to understand and build it. Democracy is not overthrown; it is increasingly bypassed.

Reclaiming Democratic Knowledge

If sophocracy works by capturing and privatizing the infrastructures through which knowledge is produced and circulated, then resisting it cannot be limited to institutional reforms or regulation alone. What is at stake is deeper: how reality itself is made visible and understandable, by whom, and in whose interest.

As the previous section has shown, the current crisis is not only political but epistemic and symbolic. The spaces where people once formed opinions together are increasingly fragmented, mediated, and controlled. If democracy is to remain meaningful, it must reclaim these spaces, not just formally, but in practice.

This begins by restoring the capacity for public reasoning. Citizens must be more than passive recipients of information or targets of algorithmic influence. They must be able to question, interpret, and contest what they see. This is what can be called *epistemic literacy*: not technical expertise, but the ability to understand how knowledge is shaped, filtered, used, and to push back against it.

But individual awareness is not enough. Democracy depends on shared spaces. This means rebuilding and protecting *public infrastructures of knowledge*, that is platforms, institutions, and media that are oriented toward transparency, accountability, and common access rather than profit and control. The aim is not to return to an idealized past, but to develop, alongside traditional spaces of public debate, new forms of digital public space in which discussion, disagreement, and critique can unfold under fair conditions.

A crucial part of this effort concerns AI and data systems. These technologies increasingly shape what people know and how they decide. Leaving them entirely in private hands means giving up control over the conditions of collective understanding. Democratizing them does not simply mean wider access, but public involvement in how they are designed, governed, and evaluated. In other words, they must become objects of public debate, not just tools of optimization.

At the same time, there is a need to *rebuild the public sphere – both virtual and real – as a concrete space of shared meaning* (Calloni 2023b). The fragmentation described earlier cannot be solved by technical fixes alone. It requires practices: discussion, interpretation, and even disagreement carried out in common. Social criticism plays a central role here. Against a culture that treats critique as obstruction, it must be reasserted as a necessary part of democratic life and how societies reflect on themselves and correct their course. This also means challenging the idea that the future belongs only to those who claim to build it.

Sophocratic thinking presents innovation and acceleration (Rosa 2013) as the only path forward. Technology, in Andreessen's formulation of effective accelerationism (Andreessen 2023), is posited as the primary driver of wealth creation and human flourishing.

In contrast, from the perspective of *epistemic justice*. This means that the future must remain open to collective interpretation and contestation, rather than being pre-structured by predictive systems or controlled by a narrow set of actors. The struggle, then, is not only over power or resources, but over the shared conditions of understanding. That means our capacity to know, judge, and act together. If sophocracy operates by shaping what can be known and how people think, democracy must respond by reclaiming these epistemic conditions and restoring their collective, public character.

Epistemic justice, then, is not a single solution but a direction: a way of reorganizing knowledge, technology, and public life so that no single group monopolizes truth, and so that the future remains open to democratic contestation.

*Conclusions: Resisting Sophocracy.
Why Human Agency Still Matters*

Sophocracy designates a form of power that operates through the organization of knowledge. Sovereignty is no longer located primarily in law, territory, or economic control, but in the infrastructures that shape perception, interpretation, and action. The central shift identified in this article is therefore epistemic: power increasingly lies in structuring the conditions under which reality becomes knowable.

This transformation redefines elite authority. It is grounded less in ownership or expertise than in the capacity to model, anticipate, and shape the future. Actors such as Peter Thiel

and institutions such as Palantir exemplify this development: they do not simply act within established frameworks but contribute to producing the frameworks themselves.

At the same time, this configuration is stabilized by a narrative structure with a quasi-prophetic orientation toward the future. Innovation appears as necessity, while critique is framed as obstruction. In this way, asymmetries in the control of knowledge and decision-making are legitimized.

The consequences are observable at multiple levels. Public discourse becomes fragmented and mediated by systems that prioritize visibility and engagement over argument. Individuals are increasingly treated as data subjects, and the conditions for shared judgment are weakened. These developments are not only institutional or epistemic; they also have material effects in the form of surveillance (Zuboff 2019), exclusion, and new forms of exploitation.

From this perspective, the problem is not only who governs, but how the conditions of governance are configured. When systems anticipate and shape behaviour, the space for autonomous judgment is reduced. This raises a fundamental issue: whether human agency can be maintained within environments that tend to translate action into prediction.

A response to this situation cannot be limited to institutional reform. It requires intervening at the level where knowledge is produced and organized. This includes pluralism (Giacomini 2023), the cultivation of critical capacities, the construction of accountable knowledge infrastructures, and the opening of technical systems to public scrutiny.

At the same time, resistance has a more basic dimension. It depends on the recovery of practices that sustain a shared world. Resisting sophocracy requires a return to concrete human relations and social bounds. Democracy begins with the ability to listen, to recognize others not as data points, but as individuals with voices, perspectives, and claims. Dialogue,

rather than prediction, is the condition of common understanding. To listen is to acknowledge the irreducibility of the other, and thereby to affirm both human dignity and the possibility of political life.

In this sense, democracy is not only an institutional arrangement, but a form of collective practice grounded in interactive human agency. Its persistence depends on sustaining the conditions under which individuals can speak, be heard, and act together.

The future under sophocracy remains open. Its direction will depend on whether the infrastructures that organize knowledge can be rendered contestable, and whether human beings retain the capacity to act within them as agents rather than as reified objects.

What is at stake is not only the viability of democratic forms, but the preservation of a shared world grounded in mutual recognition rather than governed by prediction alone. To meet this challenge requires more than critique: it calls for the construction of concrete institutions, practices, and digital spaces capable of sustaining public reasoning, limiting epistemic domination, and resisting the logics that normalize violence and perpetual conflict.

References

- Airoidi, M. (2021). *Machine Habitus: Toward a Sociology of Algorithms*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Amodei, D. (2026, February 26). Statement from Dario Amodei on our discussions with the Department of War. <https://www.anthropic.com/news/statement-department-of-war>
- Andreessen, M. (2023). The techno-optimist manifesto. <https://a16z.com/the-techno-optimist-manifesto/>
- Arendt, H. (1958). *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Arendt, H. (1961). *Between Past and Future*. New York: Viking Press.
- Calloni, M. (2023a). Introduzione all'edizione italiana. Ripensare la sfera pubblica. In J. Habermas, *Nuovo mutamento della sfera pubblica e democrazia deliberativa* (M. Calloni, Ed., pp. VII–XXXVII). Milano: Cortina.
- Calloni, M. (2023b). Nuove dimensioni della sfera pubblica tra reale e virtuale. La pandemia e il cambiamento delle visioni del mondo. In M. Calloni (Ed.), *Pandemocrazia. Conoscenza, potere e sfera pubblica nell'età pandemica* (pp. 105–126). Bologna: il Mulino.
- Calloni, M. (2025). Polarization and enmity in the algorithmic age: Striving for a digital ethos of relationality and pluralism. *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 51(4), 672–692.
- Cowen, T. (2011). *The Great Stagnation: How America Ate All the Low-Hanging Fruit of Modern History, Got Sick, and Will (Eventually) Feel Better*. New York: Dutton.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (C. Gordon, Ed.). New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Giacomini, G. (2023). The ideal of pluralism and the problem of online polarisation: Four scenarios and five proposals for the future. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 27(3), 91–102.
- Girard, R. (1977). *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Girard, R. (1987). *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1984–1987). *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Vol. 1: *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Vol. 2: *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1996). *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (2023). *New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Horkheimer, M., & Adorno, T. W. (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Karp, A. C. (2026, March 20). My time with Jürgen Habermas, Europe's "last intellectual". *Politico*. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2026/03/20/karp-habermas-remembrance-00838398>

- Karp, A. C., & Zamiska, N. W. (2025). *The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West*. New York: Crown Currency.
- Mosca, G. (1939). *The Ruling Class*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Moulier-Boutang, Y. (2011). *Cognitive Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Pareto, V. (1935). *The Mind and Society (Trattato di Sociologia Generale)*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company.
- Plato. (1992). *The Republic*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Rosa, H. (2013). *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sandel, M. J. (2021). *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* London: Penguin.
- Srnicek, N. (2016). *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Stiegler, B. (1998, 2009, 2011). *Technics and Time*. Vol. 1: *The Fault of Epimetheus*; Vol. 2: *Disorientation*; Vol. 3: *Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Thiel, P. (2009, April 13). The education of a libertarian. *Cato Unbound*. <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2009/04/13/peter-thiel/education-libertarian/>
- Thiel, P. (2025). *The Antichrist: A Four-Part Lecture Series*. San Francisco.
- Thiel, P., & Masters, B. (2014). *Zero to One: Notes on Startups, or How to Build the Future*. New York: Crown Business.
- Varoufakis, Y. (2023). *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism*. London: Bodley Head.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Part II

Resources for Renewal