

Musk, Thiel and the shadow of apartheid South Africa

The parallels between South Africa then and the US today are striking

Simon Kuper SEPTEMBER 19 2024

Elon Musk lived in apartheid South Africa until he was 17. David Sacks, the venture capitalist who has become a fundraiser for Donald Trump and a troll of Ukraine, left aged five, and grew up in a South African diaspora family in Tennessee. Peter Thiel spent years of childhood in South Africa and Namibia, where his father was involved in uranium mining as part of the apartheid regime's clandestine drive to acquire nuclear weapons. And Paul Furber, an obscure South African software developer and tech journalist living near Johannesburg, has been identified by two teams of forensic linguists as the originator of the QAnon conspiracy, which helped shape Trump's Maga movement. (Furber denies being "Q".)

In short, four of Maga's most influential voices are fiftysomething white men with formative experiences in apartheid South Africa. This probably isn't a coincidence. I say that as a fiftysomething white man whose formative experiences include childhood visits to my extended family in apartheid South Africa. (My parents left Johannesburg before I was born.) We'd swim in my grandparents' pool while the maid and her grandchildren lived in the garage. These experiences were so shocking, so different from anything I experienced growing up in Europe, that they are my sharpest childhood memories.

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So what connects these men's southern African backgrounds with Maga today? Southern Africa under apartheid offered an extreme version of some of the main themes of American life today. First, there was tremendous inequality. The mine where Thiel's father worked was "known for conditions not far removed from indentured servitude", writes Thiel's

biographer Max Chafkin. “White managers, like the Thiels, had access to a brand-new medical and dental centre in Swakopmund and membership in the company country club.” The mine’s Black migrant workers lived in work camps.

To whites of a certain mindset, this inequality wasn’t due to apartheid. They thought it was inscribed in nature. Certain people were equipped to succeed in capitalism, while others weren’t. That was simply the way it was, and it was pointless to try to mess with nature. Two of Thiel’s contemporaries at Stanford in the 1980s recall him telling them that apartheid “works” and was “economically sound”. His spokesman has denied that he ever supported apartheid.

The white South African nightmare in the 1980s, hanging over everything, was that one day Black people would rise up and massacre whites. Like the US, South Africa was a violent society and becoming more violent in the 80s. Musk’s teenage recollections of seeing murders on trains may not be entirely factual, but do evoke the atmosphere of the era. He warned in 2023 about potential “genocide of white people in South Africa”. Trump’s recent claim about “American girls being raped and sodomised and murdered by savage criminal aliens” preyed on similar white fears.

The final commonality between many white South Africans who experienced the end of apartheid and today’s American right: a contempt for government. The apartheid regime and then the [African National Congress](#) left millions of South Africans without electricity, dignity, safety or decent schooling. That experience can encourage anti-government libertarianism. Furber has said that the first online message of what would become QAnon — “Open your eyes. Many in our govt worship Satan” — made perfect sense to him.

If you’re a libertarian who believes that inequality is natural and lives in fear of race war, you will be drawn towards a certain type of American politics. You certainly won’t want government or institutions to try to intervene against racism. In 1995, a year after the ANC began attempting that in South Africa, Thiel and Sacks, who met at Stanford, published *The Diversity Myth* in the US. It’s a well-written defence of “western civilisation” against “multiculturalism” (or what the right now calls “woke”), written by two white twentysomethings who are sure racism isn’t the problem. Indeed, they explain: “There are almost no real racists . . . in America’s younger generation.”

Three decades later, this duo and Musk, with whom they united in Silicon Valley’s “PayPal mafia”, are backing a white Republican ticket that peddles made-up stories

about Black immigrants from Haiti eating pets. The opposing Democrats are fielding a Black presidential candidate for the third time in five elections. The racial aspect of politics is almost as plain as it was in South Africa.

Obviously, Musk et al incurred many other influences besides apartheid, ranging from science-fiction to the billionaire's fear of the tax bill. Still, an old, white South African mindset lives on in Trumpism.

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