

Elon Musk's Vision Is Coming Into Focus—and It Looks a Lot Like Neo-Apartheid

Apartheid was, first and foremost, a business plan—one that the South African-born Musk seems to be reworking for the modern age.

ELIE MYSTAL



Elon Musk prepares to speak at Donald Trump's Inauguration Day rally at the Capital One Arena on January 20, 2025.

(Christopher Furlong / Getty Images)

The most explicitly racist thing Donald Trump has done in establishing his white supremacist regime these past three weeks has been his approach to South Africa. On February 7, Trump signed an executive order to cut off aid to the country (aid that mainly goes to South Africa's HIV/AIDS prevention programs) because of its land reform laws. He went on to say that white South Africans should resettle in the United States where they will be accepted as "refugees" because they have been "persecuted" by the predominantly Black regime.

The juxtaposition of Trump gleefully deporting actual Black and brown refugees already in the United States with his order throwing open the borders to white South Africans is the reason I know that Trump is racist, not just as a matter of policy but as a matter of personality. It's also the reason I know that Trump is not fully in charge; Trump is just a puppet dictator, while the real power behind the throne is the white South African Elon Musk. It's Musk's language and framing that Trump merely parroted in his orders and tweets about South Africa.

It is worth asking how Musk wants to use the power he has arrogated to himself. The man is already the richest person in the world, and while he no doubt follows the Monty Burns philosophy from *The Simpsons*—"I'd trade it all for a little more"—money is ultimately always a means to an end instead of the end goal itself. Musk is clearly trying to do more with his DOGE-*groep* than strip our government down to its studs. I believe he is going for nothing short of neo-apartheid in the US. He's trying to end the ability of Black Americans to have fair access to employment opportunities, while pushing the false and debunked white supremacist narrative that every white *man* is preternaturally more qualified for any job than any woman, trans person, or non-white man.

Musk has skin in the game. Musk lived in white-controlled South Africa until he was 17. Recently, he's described some of South Africa's post-apartheid reforms as "racist ownership laws," and warned of a white "genocide." Nothing could be further from the truth (indeed, Trump's offer to white South Africans was mocked as "ridiculous and lame" on the streets of Johannesburg by both white and Black citizens), but Musk doesn't appear to know what it's like for white South Africans who *didn't* flee the country. All he seems to know is that South Africa was once a land safe for racist whites, and now it's not, because Black people achieved equal rights.

Not that I should need to drive this point home, but for the white media reading who refuse to call Trump out for his obvious racism: White South Africans are not oppressed. Whites make up only 7 percent of the population in South Africa, but they own around 75 percent of the land, a "hangover" from the centuries of white oppression and violence against the indigenous Black population there. The non-landowning, white working class also does very well in South Africa, earning around three times more than similarly situated Black laborers. White folks in South Africa are much better off than, say, white folks in West Virginia.

But they're not *in charge*. Not anymore. And I believe that is what pisses off people like Shadow President Musk. A profile piece in *The New York Times*, published in 2022, suggested that Musk left South Africa to avoid military service for the apartheid regime. His parents, allegedly, were not “pro-apartheid,” despite making their money in Zambian emerald mines that exploited Black labor.

If Musk was ever truly against apartheid, something must have changed. This excerpt from the Eoin Higgins book *Owned* has some thoughts on how Musk became a MAGA zealot. But, to be honest, I don't really give a damn about the personal intellectual journey of a man whose family participated in the raping and pillaging of sub-Saharan Africa's wealth to give them their head start in making billions. They all look the same to me, if I may borrow a phrase. If Musk, or anybody just like him truly felt *bad* about apartheid, they'd give the money back. I don't care about what Musk thinks (or says he thinks, or has other puppets say he thinks) about South African apartheid. I care about the ways in which Musk is bringing a neo-apartheid economic agenda to the US government.

People born after the end of apartheid in 1994 know the system for its segregation and brutality, its extreme social and political violence. But what a lot of people don't know, or have forgotten, is that apartheid was, at its core, an economic system—one designed in its earliest days to protect the interests of (wait for it) working-class white South Africans who were being outcompeted for jobs and economic opportunities by South Africa's Black population.

For all that, people don't tend to think of apartheid as an economic policy, because to realize apartheid's economic program, white South Africans had to brutally and violently enforce social segregation to prevent the mixing of the races and keep the overwhelmingly large Black South African population out of the government. Amid that obvious savagery, the economic underpinnings get lost.

But those underpinnings are crucial to what apartheid was—and, I believe, are essential to understanding what's happening here. That's because here, in the US, the kind of political brutality that was used to enforce apartheid doesn't *need* to happen. Whites are not a tiny minority—which means that white apartheid-bros don't need to forcefully prevent Black people from participating in the political process by, for instance, completely blocking them from voting. As long as the Black vote is sufficiently suppressed while whites keep voting for Republicans, whites will have all the control of government they'll ever need.

Don't get me wrong: They will still dabble in violence, *because the white people in Trump's government appear to revel in violence*. But racial violence against Black Americans is more of a fun pastime for the MAGA regime than the political necessity it was for their white South African counterparts. Now that they have control of all the levers of government, they can subjugate,

oppress, and exploit Black labor through pure economic means, just as long as white folks and especially white women stay in line and keep dutifully voting for white supremacy.

It's that kind of economic apartheid that I fear Musk, and his brazenly illegal DOGE organization, is trying to bring about here. Some will no doubt think my fear is overblown, and I hope it is, but let me put it this way: I can no longer tell you what the difference would be between a "pro-apartheid" presidential administration and the current administration, and I doubt you can either. Trump and Musk are calling the white South African diaspora "home"... to America; what else do they have to do to make other people see what they're up to, dig up Nelson Mandela and put his body back in jail?

Musk, even more than Trump, has a history of racially discriminatory business practices. Based on an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission lawsuit against his Tesla factory in California, Elon's employment practices could be ripped straight from an apartheid handbook. (For the full, ugly story, check out *The Nation's* extensive article from last year on "The Toxic Culture at Tesla.") This is from the commission's 2023 press release about the complaint:

According to the EEOC's suit, since at least 2015 to the present, Black employees at Tesla's Fremont, California manufacturing facilities have routinely endured racial abuse, pervasive stereotyping, and hostility as well as epithets such as variations of the N-word, "monkey," "boy," and "black b*tch." Slurs were used casually and openly in high-traffic areas and at worker hubs. Black employees regularly encountered graffiti, including variations of the N-word, swastikas, threats, and nooses, on desks and other equipment, in bathroom stalls, within elevators, and even on new vehicles rolling off the production line, the EEOC said.

The probe into Tesla's practices has reportedly (and predictably) already been ended by the Trump administration. But if you understand how old-school South African apartheid worked, you'll understand how Musk's Tesla experience can be seen as a fledgling attempt to bring an apartheid-like system here, and update it for the modern age and the American context.

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First and most important, apartheid is a business plan. It's a system designed to exploit cheap Black labor, without ever letting Black people reap the financial and social gains of hard work. The way they did it in South Africa was to bar Black people from rising from unskilled labor positions to "management." They literally called it the "Colour Bar," and it was introduced to South Africa even before full-blown apartheid, in the 1911 Mine and Works Act, which functionally prohibited Blacks from holding skilled labor positions in the mining industry. Notably, the Mine and Works Act didn't explicitly mention "race"; it just said that to hold a management position in the mining industry, or to be trained to hold such a position, you had to be certified by the government. The white government then did not certify any Black people to do the high-skilled jobs.

In 20th-century South Africa, the mining industry was the country's largest employer. In 21st-century America, the federal government is this country's largest employer (both nationally and within every state, at least for now). Neo-apartheid could work very similarly in the United States if, say, you had some kind of quasi-governmental organization—call it a Department of Government Efficiency—in charge of "certifying" who can be hired for skilled positions throughout the government. Such certifications could be withheld from Black Americans, without even explicitly writing down "no Blacks need apply," if you have the right people in charge of the certification process. It would also help if you controlled, I don't know, the Department of Education, and made it impossible or highly difficult for Black Americans to ever get the training, education, and experience needed to "earn" certification to work for the government.

Still, while the federal government is the largest single employer, private industries employ significantly more people than the government. Apartheid-curious companies can be freed to do all the things Musk allegedly does at Tesla if the government agencies in charge of stopping them, like the EEOC, are hollowed out. Again, we see Musk and Trump doing that already. We see it with companies like Meta and Target rolling back "DEI policies," which is really just a code for no longer hiring Black people. Right now, white employers are functionally free to ignore the Civil Rights Act and the 14th Amendment, and they are reacting with apartheid-esque glee. We see that

many white American employers never really wanted to hire Black folks but were only doing so under the threat of lawsuits, and with those threats lifted, they are more than happy to go back to a “whites only” approach to hiring standards.

There is, though, one key economic aspect of South Africa’s model of apartheid that Musk and the other white South Africans flocking to his cause may have missed: While South African apartheid was good for the white working class, not just the country’s economic titans, America’s neo-apartheid plans are not. Everybody sees the benefits of exploiting cheap labor from the perspective of people like mine owners. But whites in South Africa (even “poor” whites) were not competing for the cheapest, most backbreaking jobs. They were the well-off farmers and middle managers of their society and, absent competition from the vast majority of Black people in the country, “working-class” whites did very well for themselves, relatively speaking. (Indeed, if you really want to go deep into why apartheid ended, it has a lot to do with the international economic sanctions against the country taking too big of a bite out of the profit margins of the white business owners.)

But Musk, as a mere scion of the privilege and wealth apartheid generated for the white business owners, doesn’t appear to be thinking too deeply about how his policies are going to wreck the white working class in this country. Or, more likely, he doesn’t care. To pass off his clearly disastrous plans of stripping away government services from people, white and Black, who need them, he’s begun warning about a period of “economic hardship” for whites living here now. But they are in for more than a period of tariff-induced inflation. The smash-and-grab style of capitalism favored by the white business titans of modern America just doesn’t leave a lot left over for the white working class. There simply aren’t enough middle management positions available for all the white folks living here, so either they’re going to have to exclude Black and Latino labor from low-skilled jobs (enjoy harvesting those tomatoes and making those license plates yourself, Chad), or white folks are going to have to compete with everybody else for the same exploitative work. Musk and his wealthy oligarch class can make a lot of money off a neo-apartheid system. Everybody else? Not so much.

I’m not going to hold my breath waiting for the white working class to figure out why they still can’t afford eggs, though. The history of this country tells me that poor whites will put up with pretty much anything as long as they feel Black people are getting it worse.

History doesn’t always repeat itself, but it does often rhyme. What I see now is a white South African manchild who is trying to reinstall the white world order of his homeland but reworked for our digital, late-stage-capitalist times. An American neo-apartheid system will share many of the economic goals of South Africa’s old system, but it won’t *be* the same. It’ll be different and unique in its own horribly oppressive, illegal, and immoral way.

Still, something apartheid-like can happen here, is already happening here, and it will continue to happen here, if this is what white folks want. I can't stop white people from getting what they want; I can only remind them what they're asking for. And I can remind Black folks that, no matter how much crypto Musk offers you to sing and dance for his amusement, this guy will have us working in the mines if he continues to be given unchecked power. **N**

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