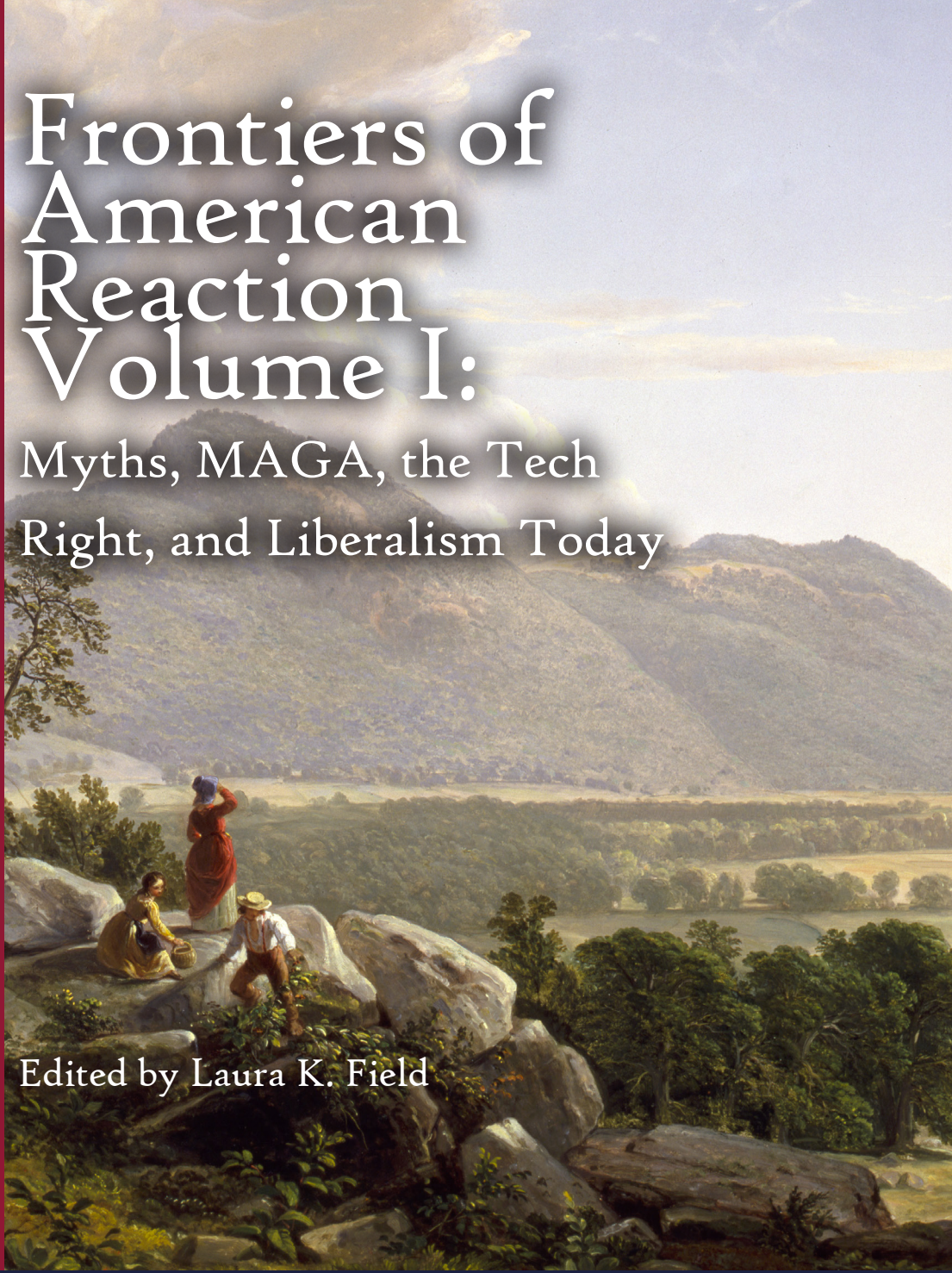
Frontiers of American Reaction Volume I:

Myths, MAGA, the Tech Right, and Liberalism Today



Edited by Laura K. Field

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illiberalism Studies Program

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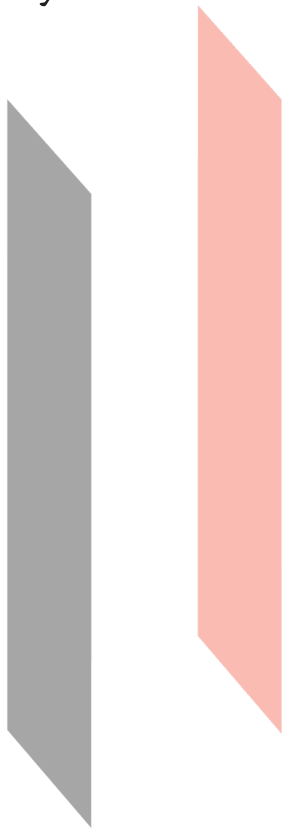

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Introduction: Mapping the Frontiers of American Reaction

The Illiberalism Studies Program (ILLSP) is delighted to present this short collection of essays from our "Frontiers of American Reaction" series. These essays, published between 2022 and 2026, take stock of the cultural, political, and spiritual tumult that has come to characterize American politics—in some instances looking to the past to understand the origins of our moment, and in others looking at the thinkers, ideologies, and activists who are working on new visions of the future. We have published dozens of essays over the last few years, by thoughtful scholars from across the country and around the world. There was a lot to choose from; these were some of our favorites.

We have divided the collection into three thematic sections.

The first set of essays, "MAGA, Myths, and MAHA," all deal with distinct cultural undercurrents that shape contemporary American politics. Richard Slotkin, Susan McWilliams Barndt, and Alex Zakaras have each written essays exploring the deep spiritual forces behind MAGA, often represented through symbols and art. These include the "Lost Cause" narrative and symbols of the old Confederacy, Hunter S. Thompson's explorations of anomie and anguish in the aftermath of World War II (as represented by the Hells Angels), and the reactionary melodrama of Paul Kingsworth's *Against the Machine*. Josh Cherniss picks up a spiritual thread, too, in an essay about Trumpism and the allure of ruthlessness. For Cherniss, an ethos is "a feature of character and outlook, which shapes how one engages with the world," and he argues that ruthlessness, which is characterized by "the suppression or rejection of all scruples, doubts, consideration for others," is an especially attractive ethos when the world seems out of control.

Looking beyond the instability and anomie, Chloé Delaporte writes about the rise of the Christian film industry, looking back at the history of Christian filmmaking as well its growth in the present. There is "an entire evangelical film ecosystem," she writes, that has metastasized alongside Trump's rise. "Long limited to sports movies set in the Bible Belt, biopics, or depictions of biblical moments," she explains, "Godlywood films are diversifying and becoming less proselytizing in order to reach the widest possible audience." Norah Mackendrick rounds out this first set of essays with a refreshing take on MAHA. She explores MAGA's complicated relationship to science, and argues that, far from rejecting science outright, MAHA deploys science as a political tool in distinctive ways; it is, first and foremost, "a political strategy that speaks the language of scientific rigor while fundamentally reshaping who counts as a legitimate expert and whose knowledge matters."

The second section is called "On the Right and NRx." These essays discuss the figures and ideas that constitute the "Neoreactionary" movement and today's tech right—some of the most dynamic "intellectual entrepreneurs" shaping contemporary politics. Here, ILLSP's very own Julian Waller provides an early charting of the ideological ferment on the American right and a sampling of the substantive visions of its various factions. The historians Joshua Tait and Christian Ruth explore some of the historical antecedents to today's neoreactionary ideologues—with Tait highlighting the impact of James Burnham's concepts of Caesarism and Managerialism, and Ruth examining America's surprising pro-monarchist history. Benjamin R. Teitelbaum, Suzanne Schneider, and Arnaud Miranda (also an ILLSP member), each offer new insights into Neoreaction and the tech moguls of Silicon Valley. Teitelbaum offers a brief introductory overview of this sector of the American intellectual landscape, Schneider considers its (often misunderstood) relationship to libertarianism, and Miranda introduces us to Curtis Yarvin (aka "Mencius Moldbug"), one of the key figures of the so-called "Dark

Enlightenment." Taken together, these essays offer a portrait of the excitement and ambition that are fueling the Neoreactionary movement—as well as of its often explicit authoritarianism.

Our final section considers the reactionary right's relationship to liberalism and modernity and poses big questions about the future of humanity. Matthew McManus reviews Harvey Mansfield's recent book, *The Rise and Fall of Rational Control,* through which he considers the modern fixation, traceable back to Machiavelli, on control. In thinking about the future, Mansfield recommends a liberalism "attuned to the virtue of citizens" and to soulcraft. Here there is a clear connection to Alexandre Lefebvre's *Liberalism as a Way of Life*. Lefebvre argues that liberalism should be viewed not just as a political system of neutral procedures and laws, but also as a comprehensive worldview with its own sets of norms and values. For our collection, Lefebvre's book is reviewed by ILLSP associate Laura Field, who suggests that a healthy political future should have recourse to both kinds of liberalism—political liberalism and "lifestyle" liberalism.

In an essay that refocuses our attention on economics, as opposed to grand narratives, the historian Henry Tonks offers a compelling, fine-grained look at what has gone wrong with American liberalism. For Tonks, the problem on the left is not so much a failure of economic vision—it is that the Democratic Party's "new core constituency, the metropolitan professional class, had a diminishing material interest in or connection to the New Liberals' program for industrial policy." In other words, it is not that the policies were not there—it is that they could not gain real traction in a party so transformed by neoliberalism. The resulting stagnation helped to create the vacuum exploited by MAGA. Travis Quigley further argues that today's illiberalism is partly due to the nationalization of politics, and our collective neglect of all things local. With so much emphasis on national issues, he writes, "the stakes come to seem so high that the other side cannot be allowed to win, and the ideological lines come to be so sharp that compromise cannot even be considered." A reorientation towards local rather than national politics could help citizens gain real experience in liberal democracy and so revive their commitment to it.

To contend with the rising tides of illiberalism, citizens in liberal democracies around the world will perhaps, as Harvey Mansfield contends, need to recover their sense of civic virtue. They will certainly need to rekindle their capacities for bold new visions, be they economic or cultural, local or technological. We hope these essays can help develop the terrain for such new visions and explorations.

The ILLSP Team

Part I

MAGA, Myths, and MAHA

Trumpism's New "Lost Cause": National Myth and the Struggle for America

Richard Slotkin

Our country is in the grip of a prolonged crisis which has profoundly shaken our institutions, our structures of belief, and the solidarities that sustain America as a nation.

It's as if Red America and Blue America are two different countries, each with a different understanding of who counts as American, and of the purposes for which our government exists. To explain and justify its beliefs, each appeals to a different version of American history and the symbol-rich repertoire of stories through which we have remembered that history—our *national mythology*. Such myths are part of the cultural structures that allow modern nation-states to function. We are born to our families and home communities. We have to learn to think of ourselves as "Americans": as spiritual descendants of ancestors not related to us by blood, but made kindred by our participation in a shared and ongoing history. No modern nation is more dependent on its myths than the United States of America, because the ethnic origins of our people are the most diverse of any nation.

National myths develop through long-term and persistent usage in every medium of cultural expression: histories, school textbooks, newspapers, advertisements, sermons, political speeches, popular fiction, movies. They are the form in which we remember our history; but they are also, and most critically, the means through which we turn history into an instrument of political power. In any major crisis, one of our cultural reflexes is to scan our memory archives, our lexicon of myths, for analogies that will help us interpret the crisis, and precedents on which to model a "heroic" response.

The flags flown by the rioters who stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021 symbolize the myths the MAGA movement lives by. Those displaying the face of their leader were the largest and perhaps most prevalent. But others carried historical resonance. The classic "Betsy Ross" flag, with its circle of thirteen stars, invoked the revolutionary aspect of the Myth of the Founding, which treats the work of the Founding Fathers as a form of Holy Writ. The so-called "Gadsden Flag," yellow with a coiled rattlesnake and the motto "Don't Tread on Me," also invoked the Revolution in support of the contemporary anti-tax and Gun Rights movements. The "Stars and Bars" flag invoked the Lost Cause of the Confederacy, and the White South's struggle first to defend, and then to re-establish the antebellum order of White supremacy and cultural illiberalism. The last of these is the one most critical to the MAGA movement.

The Myth of the Lost Cause was fabricated during the period of social and political violence that overthrew Radical Reconstruction and established the regime of Jim Crow in the post-war South (1865-1890). It celebrates the virtues of the Old South, its religious conservatism and patriarchal family structure, its firm hierarchies of race and class. It laments the destruction of that culture by Radical Republican reformers and their Black allies and justifies the violent post-war struggle of Southern Whites to redeem its traditional social structures and cultural values.

The Myth framed the conflict over Reconstruction as an existential struggle between conservative Southern Whites and an alliance of freed Blacks and Northern Radicals, so-called "philanthropists"—a term roughly equivalent to our "liberals." The stakes were succinctly defined by Thomas Dixon, Jr. in his 1902 novel *The Clansman*, which became the basis of the epoch-making film *Birth of a Nation* in 1915. The Radical politician Stoneman asserts the primacy of democracy: "Manhood suffrage is the

one eternal thing fixed in the nature of Democracy . . . The Negro must be protected by the ballot." The Southern leader Cameron replies: "The issue, sir, is Civilisation! Not whether the Negro shall be protected, but whether society is worth saving from barbarism."

In the novel, and in historical fact, the "Redemption" of the South is a cause that justifies the terrorist violence of the Ku Klux Klan and other vigilante organizations. Between 1882 and 1915 there were on average two lynchings every week, well-publicized communal events, often involving torture as well as hanging. Violence also took the form of "race riots" or pogroms against whole Black communities, ranging from the small rural town of Rosewood, FL to major cities like New Orleans, Atlanta, Memphis and Wilmington, NC. The Lost Cause also justified the destruction of political democracy. Between 1890 and 1915 Southern states revised their constitutions to deprive Blacks of the right to vote, using devices like the literacy test and poll tax which also disenfranchised large numbers of poor Whites. The political result was the creation in most Southern states of one-party rule, a quasi-authoritarian regime in which all or nearly-all Blacks and many poor Whites were disenfranchised.

MAGA's account of recent history follows the Lost Cause script to a similar conclusion: America became the greatest nation when its political and economic institutions were run by White men, and its cultural standards were set by White Christians of primarily native ancestry. Then the Sixties happened, Blacks and Latinos moved in, gays and lesbians proliferated, and intellectuals won honor for telling White people that everything they stood for was wrong. Liberal displacement of traditional cultural authority was mirrored in the demographic "replacement" of native-born Whites by non-White immigration, also promoted by liberals. The result has been a "culture war" between liberals and conservatives, in which the stakes are existential. As former US District Attorney Joseph DiGenova told listeners to Laura Ingraham's Fox News podcast, "We are in a civil war . . . The suggestion that there's ever going to be civil discourse in this country for the foreseeable future is over."

Trump made himself the hero of that story by explicitly framing the 2016 election, and the conduct of his administration, in Lost Cause terms—as a fight to save American civilization. Thus, if Republicans lose, "there won't be another election," and "If you don't fight like hell you won't have a country." This new Lost Cause carries with it the central features of the original. Chief among these is the belief that to save White Christian "civilization," extraordinary methods are justified. MAGA's embrace of violence was signaled by Trump's 2016 campaign rhetoric, his refusal to condemn the right-wing violence at Charlottesville—defending statues of Confederate heroes became a campaign pledge—and his cultivation of Gun Rights extremists. When violence came on January 6, to overturn the results of the 2020 election, MAGA partisans saw it not as an outrage but as a fulfillment of their expectations.

The new Lost Cause is the struggle for Trump's restoration. To that end a majority of Republicans have endorsed the January 6 insurrection as "legitimate political speech." As in the Reconstruction/Jim Crow era, vigilante violence and threats of violence are being used to intimidate election officials, school boards, judges, and District Attorneys. Trump and his supporters, aided by experts at the Heritage Foundation and the Federalist Society, aim to create a one-party, quasi-authoritarian state by using the Justice Department to prosecute political opponents, and politicizing the civil service, and exploiting their domination of state legislatures and restrict voting rights.

MAGA's use of myth gives its adherents the sense of righteous empowerment that comes from association with a deeply rooted historical tradition. But its embrace of Lost Cause symbolism carries with it a commitment to the myth's political action script of cultural and political authoritarianism. Thus, MAGA has become a distinctly American approach to fascism: more neo-Confederate than neo-Nazi, an amalgam of American exceptionalism, racial and ethnic bigotry, Christian nationalism, and neoliberal economics. With one of the two major parties committed to such a program, the future of liberal democracy will be at risk in national elections for at least the next decade.

Hells Angels in the White House: Trumpism and the Politics of Total Retaliation

Susan McWilliams Barndt

Consider the sieg-heiling. When Elon Musk threw up his arm at President Trump's second inauguration, the hot takes started rolling in. Was it a Nazi salute? Was it not? Did it reveal Musk to be a white supremacist? Autistic? Just a jerk? In a world filled with controversies, this one merited its own Wikipedia page. And while everyone's thoughts flailed every which way, I thought of the Hells Angels. This was their kind of shit. They would have loved it.

In 1965, after spending almost two years with the Hells Angels, Hunter S. Thompson issued a warning to the United States. The warning wasn't about the Angels themselves, or about the other motorcycle clubs they inspired. The warning wasn't about the drug culture, which the Angels were rushing to exploit. The warning wasn't about American journalism, which Thompson loved to bash for its superficiality and sensationalism.

Thompson's warning was much bigger and more dire than any of that. His warning was about the rise of a new politics on the American right: a politics of "total retaliation." Starting with an article in *The Nation*, Thompson insisted that the Hells Angels were more than cultural outlaws. They were a cultural omen.

Eight years ago, just after Donald Trump's first election to the presidency, I wrote my own article for *The Nation*, arguing that Thompson's account of the Angels predicted MAGA. Although I've never been less happy to have an argument hold up, I think that argument does. Today, with Trump reinstalled in the White House, I want to revisit what Thompson says about total-retaliation politics. I don't think there are many better guides to what has been happening, and what might happen yet.

All-American Anomie

Thompson's bird's-eye view is this: the conventional story about postwar America is wrong. The conventional story—what ChatGPT will tell you today—is that the United States, after World War II, grew into prosperity, expanded civil rights, and became a global superpower. Thompson tells another story: after World War II, the nation lost a sense of mission, so much so that President Eisenhower had to create a Commission on National Goals to figure one out. In this "society where even the highest authorities seem[ed] to be grasping at straws," alienation started to take hold. "America," says Thompson, "has been breeding mass anomie since the end of World War II."

There are different ways to respond to alienation, especially when new money is changing hands and new technology is changing everything. Some people will respond in a constructive spirit, trying to work together to improve the status quo. They act constructively because they can envision a transformed status quo in which they share in making the rules (or the money, or the tech).

But not everyone is able to envision themselves that way. So other people will chomp at what one Angel called the "destructive bit"—and dream of burning everything down. These people are not "visionaries," says Thompson. They are "diehards."

Thompson's ground-level view is this: try to understand what it feels like, to feel like a loser. Try to understand what it feels like to have blown all your options or had all your options blown. Try to understand what it feels like, to know the fact of your losing but not the reason for it. Try to understand that anger and desperation and shame. Try to understand the "paradox" of that position, that "a man who has blown all his options can't afford the luxury of changing his ways. He has to capitalize on whatever he has left, and he can't afford to admit—no matter how often he's reminded of it—that every day of his life takes him farther down a blind alley."

Then: Try to imagine how good it feels, when you find others who get you—and attach force to your feelings. Try to imagine how good it feels, just to get some attention.

This, Thompson says, is how you start to understand the Hells Angels: their cultic insularity, their self-destructiveness, their vindictiveness, their nihilism, their attraction to strongmen, their love of spectacle, their joyous rejection of civility and social norms. (Today, on the Hells Angels' website, the group acknowledges that "Hells" has an apostrophe missing. But "it is you who miss it. We don't."). Thompson put it best:

Most Angels understand where they are, but not why, and they are well enough grounded in the eternal verities to know that very few of the toads in this world are Charming Princes in disguise. Most are simply toads, and no matter how many magic maidens they kiss or rape, they are going to stay that way … Toads don't make laws or change any basic structures, but one or two rooty insights can work powerful changes in the way they get through life. A toad who believes he got a raw deal before he even knew who was dealing will usually be sympathetic to the mean, vindictive ignorance that colors the Hells Angels' view of humanity. There is not much mental distance between a feeling of having been screwed and the ethic of total retaliation, or at least the kind of random revenge that comes with outraging the public decency.

This is also how you start to understand how a politics of total retaliation might emerge. "If they are the forerunners or the vanguard of anything," Thompson writes, the Hells Angels are the vanguard of "a fast-growing legion of young unemployables whose untapped energy will inevitably find the same kind of destructive outlet that 'outlaws' like the Hells Angels have been finding for years." In the last decade, that legion has found an outlet in MAGA.

Total Retaliation: Society without Restraint

Most of the Hells Angels were—like most of MAGA's key constituency are—working-class young men. Thompson was good at understanding working-class young men and the quality of their alienation in a rapidly globalizing, technologizing society. He cautioned that a failure to tend to the inner lives of working-class young men would be a great failure, indeed—as the Democratic Party is finding out.

But Thompson also understood that even if the Angels were *mostly* a working-class-young-man phenomenon, the Angels weren't *merely* a working-class-young-man phenomenon, and I suspect he would say something similar about MAGA. For Thompson saw, concealed in all the pearl-clutching about the Angels, deeper feelings of envy and desire. Thompson says that there is a little part in each of us—call it ego, call it sin, call it evil, call it whatever—that fantasizes about breaking things and doing whatever we want. And in a culture of growing alienation, that part of us gets louder. Two weeks ago, a friend—a southern-Californian, Birkenstock-wearing massage therapist—told me, "I'm ready to see some things burn down." She advised me to stock up on ammo.

Total-retaliation politics doesn't *just* tap into the desire for revenge against a cultural and political elite—the desire to "own the libs." Total-retaliation politics taps into the part of each of us that chafes at civilizational restraint. Total-retaliation politics vibes with Rousseau's assertion that "man is born free, but everywhere is in chains." Total-retaliation politics doesn't wield a scalpel *or* a hammer. It wields, like Musk, a chainsaw.

In that, like the French Revolution that Rousseau's words helped bring into being, the politics of total retaliation risks throwing out the baby and the bathtub when draining the water (or, erm, the swamp). The politics of total retaliation feeds on "random revenge" and, when unleashed, is hard even for its champions to contain. As Thompson learned when the Angels beat him up, even its allies can be targets.

The politics of total retaliation are very different from the postliberal politics championed by Patrick Deneen, among others. It is telling that Deneen recently complained (via tweet) that Musk and his team at DOGE "lack political vision." But Deneen does not seem to understand that he and Musk are not playing the same game; in total-retaliation politics, the lack of vision is part of the point.

And while it may seem curious that two billionaires—Trump and Musk—are the faces of MAGA, Thompson makes it make sense. Billionaires have so much money that they can do almost whatever they want and probably get away with it. Billionaires embody the total-retaliation fantasy of a life without civilizational restraint. They are living the dream. With their money, they've beaten the system, or broken it.

Horror *sans* Meaning

Consider, again, the sieg-heiling. The Angels did that before it was cool, or at least before it was streamed. Many of them had swastikas sewn on their jackets or tattooed on their arms. At the time, it generated controversy. Were they actual Nazis? Were they maybe just ordinary racists?

When Thompson asks some of the Angels about this, they shrug him off. They say they don't think about that stuff much, but those swastikas sure get attention. Racism isn't the point. Capturing other people's attention—breaking their brains—is the point.

The politics of total-retaliation are brain-breaking politics. Total-retaliation politics thrills at divorcing words and symbols from meanings— "he didn't really mean what he said," or "he didn't really mean what you say that gesture means"—because doing so breaks down language. That is, it breaks down the basic tool that enables law and politics and, like, civilization.

Thompson says: it would be easier if we were merely dealing with racists. He ends *Hells Angels* with a warning from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "The horror! The horror!"

The Ruthlessness is the Point: Trumpism and the Ethical Allure of Ruthlessness

Joshua Cherniss

Donald Trump, and the MAGA movement that has coalesced around him, pose two great puzzles for those who would like politics to make some sort of rational sense. First, how was an authoritarian mountebank, running a shambolic, shameless campaign, elected for a second time? And, what drives the MAGA movement—what explains its support, and its sometimes baffling set of policies? In answering both questions, many factors—racial and ethno-national resentment and bigotry, misogyny and masculine fragility, distrust of and umbrage at a remote elite, economic deprivation, insecurity, and pessimism, and sheer fear provoked by a fast-changing, confusing world—have played a part, and should be explored by those best qualified to do so.

Here I discuss a related, but distinct, issue: the *ethical* dimension of Trump's appeal. To examine Trump in terms of ethics may seem like trying to understand the desert in terms of water. But by ethics I mean something both wider and more precise than moral decency or probity. I refer to ideals of what a person should be or do; the general sense of how human beings should behave, and what sorts of characters they should have or cultivate, to be worthy of admiration, or at least respect. Trump, and the strong-man, authoritarian populism of which he is a tentacle, exercise an ethical appeal. It is an affirmation of an ethos of ruthlessness.

The Ethos of Ruthlessness

Ruthlessness as an *ethos*—a feature of character and outlook, which shapes how one engages with the world—consists in the suppression or rejection of all scruples, doubts, consideration for others, and remorse in pursuing objectives, whether these be personal gain, political power, or social transformation. The ruthless person may or may not have deep-seated convictions or allegiances. But when such a person sets their mind on a goal, they pursue it with (in Nathaniel Hawthorne's words) an "inveteracy of pursuit that knew neither rest nor conscience." The ruthless person, further, denies—or simply fails to consider—that those harmed by their actions may have a just complaint that merits rectification or conciliation.

There has never been a lack of ruthlessness in politics; but Trump and his ilk raise ruthlessness to heights of pride and ostentation. Their speech drips with it. During his first term, Trump declared that he would achieve "total domination" through the use of force by "very tough, strong, powerful people." Giving a foretaste of his second term, he promised that his deportation regime would be "a bloody story." Trump's "border czar" promises to "bring hell" to those who oppose the administration's draconian measures. This tough talk has been taken up by those who provide ideological justification for the Trump administration's arbitrary and cruel abrogation of normal procedure, due process, and decency. Thus, one MAGA intellectual refers to those who disagree with his conception of Americanism as "zombie[s]" and "human rodent[s]." Elon Musk attacks one of the main antitheses of ruthlessness—empathy—as "civilizational[ly suicidal," and a "bug" in "Western Civilization." A podcast directed at young, internet-savvy conservatives is named, simply and revealingly, "Ruthless."

While some Trump voters ignored or disbelieved such declarations, others heard them loud and clear—and voted for Trump not in spite but because of them. One voter interviewed by the New York Times,

asked to describe Trump in one word, replied "ruthless." She elaborated: "I believe in a lot of things that Trump has said and done. Other things I wish would be different. But he's ruthless in that he doesn't give up. With anything he does, he's not shy. He doesn't tiptoe around anything." Though avowedly "undecided," this voter clearly expressed a preference for Trump. After the election a swing voter in Pennsylvania told a journalist that he recognized Trump's dictatorial tendencies, even likening him to Hitler—and, in the next sentence, declared that he had voted for Trump.

For many Trump supporters, as Adam Serwer declared, "The Cruelty is the Point." We may be inclined to see this as reflecting sheer sadism or nihilism, or a lack of moral education. But the *wrong sort* of moral education may also play a role. Signals sent—through religion, entertainment, and the forms and norms of media—which identify ruthlessness with strength, courage, truthfulness, or authenticity, seep into our imagination of the world and ourselves. Ruthlessness has an intrinsic attraction in a world that often seems out of control. It garrisons the mind against the stress of uncertainty, the pain of regret. It lends a feeling of strength, a patina of psychological power, a glamor of toughness.

Legitimating Ruthlessness: From Ethos to Ethics

Politics—particularly democratic politics, where people are constantly pressed to provide *reasons* for their preferences—carries with it a certain pressure toward *legitimation*: to *justify* why we think that a particular ethos, no less than a party or policy, *deserves* affirmation and obedience. We thus move from ruthlessness as an *ethos* to ruthlessness as a deliberately endorsed *ethic* or norm.

There are several recurrent ethical justifications for ruthlessness, observable in the history of political practice, theory, and ideology.

The first rationale for an ethic of ruthlessness is avowedly anti-*moralistic* (which is not the same as *immoral*); it is frequently identified with political "realism." On this view, ruthlessness in winning power and using it to one's advantage is simply what politics *is*. In the words Thucydides attributed to the Athenian delegation to Melos, "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." It is win or lose, kill or be killed. In a realm of often unprincipled struggle, how can one survive, when faced with the ruthlessness of others, without hardening one's heart, stopping one's ears, getting one's hands dirty?

This line of argument, always powerful, increases in plausibility—and widens in what it can excuse—when politics is identified with *war*. Those engaged in a truly "life and death struggle," must grasp and use power without restraint or scruple: "Who aims at the end cannot reject the means." Thus Trumpist intellectuals call for "ruthless offense" to "save America," while Trump suggests using violence against the "enemy from within." Such rhetoric, matched by increasing militarization of law enforcement and immigration control, is all the more powerful when the enemy is identified as sub-human—as Trump does in referring to opponents as "vermin." Here (and elsewhere) Trump offers a toned-down echo of an author with whose speeches he is reputedly familiar. As Adolf Hitler graphically asserted, "in this contest there are only two possibilities: Either the enemy will walk over our corpses, or we will walk over his." Fomenting a sense of danger, of being under attack—as Trump and other populist leaders have constantly done, harping on immigration, terrorism, and crime—creates a frightened public convinced of the need for, and justice of, ruthlessly brutal defensive action. At a more purely psychological level, the evocation of fear and resentment, mounting to hatred, warps perception and discourages careful *thought*, which can inhibit ruthless action. Faced with drastic danger, and the malevolence of enemies offers a reason to turn against reason, since delay or deliberation will leave one vulnerable. We must hurt "them," before they hurt us; and because they wish to hurt us, they deserve to be hurt. And the worse we hurt them, the safer we will be.

This merges with a second rationale for ruthlessness, which sees it as justified insofar as it contributes to achieving some noble ideal. Realism teaches that one cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs; *ruthless moralism* holds that, if the "omelet" in question represents a morally worthy outcome, no number of eggs are too great to break. This is a familiar feature of the revolutionary *Left*. But people of various political persuasions may come to embrace the principle of "*fiat justia perat mundus*": "Let justice be done though the heavens may fall." Justice may mean redistribution or rescue, but it may also mean retribution towards transgressors. For many Americans, Trump appears as a bringer of justice both to the put-upon American worker, and the criminals who have done him (it is most often him) wrong. Certainly Trump—with his emphasis on punishing "illegals" and his declaration that "I am your

warrior … I am your retribution"—speaks to this morally self-righteous justification for such abhorrent actions as family separation, the use of military-grade violence against protestors, and the persecution of government officials. And morally-inspired—or excused—ruthlessness also has a distinctively right-wing variant. As Albert Camus reported a "German friend" telling him in 1938, "The greatness of my country is beyond price. Anything is good that contributes to its greatness."

Trump, the convicted felon and sexual assaulter, is not a plausible champion of law or morals. Nor does it seem that this former registered Democrat is wedded to any ideology (except perhaps nativism). The man who sneers at those who have suffered and sacrificed for their country as "losers" clearly is not inspired by high ideals. His ruthlessness is pure, without purpose or referent. This may be part of his appeal. Trump's supporters can project their own ends—economic regeneration, American strength internationally, an end to imperialism and establishment of world peace, religious revival, or vanquishing political gridlock and corruption—onto him, and assume that his ruthlessness will allow him to achieve these goals where others, hemmed in by irksome scruples and procedural niceties, have failed.

The assumption that Trump will work toward some desirable end, however ludicrous it may appear, is revealing. For some, naked ruthlessness is a sign of honesty, a guarantee of being in earnest—even though anyone who has embraced an ethos of ruthlessness will hardly balk at deception and betrayal. Willingness to resort to drastic action appears to many a sign of conviction. After all, how dedicated can one really be said to be to a goal for which one is *not* prepared to lie, betray, or kill? Leaving aside for the moment the validity of this association of conviction with ruthlessness, it is worth noting that—as Trump shows—the inverse is not true. Willingness to lie, torture, or kill does not guarantee conviction or integrity.

That this is difficult for many to recognize reflects a third ethical rationale, which identifies ruthlessness with *virtue*— perhaps the highest virtue. On this view, ruthlessness is equated with strength, manliness, greatness. The relevance to Trump, with his slogan of "Make America *Great* Again" and appeal to the testosterone-drenched "Manosphere" is obvious. Political commentators often invoke the idea of a "culture war," centering on matters of gender and sexuality, religion, and nationality. We might also think in terms of an "ethical war" between proponents of very different ideas of virtue or excellence. For some, ruthlessness, hectoring, confidence and cruelty are qualities to display with pride. For others, these are contemptible; it is in compassion, thoughtfulness, humility, forbearance, and continence that true nobility lies.

The Weaknesses of Supposed Strength

While ruthlessness involves a projection of strength, these rationales, on examination, prove shaky; they may reflect inner weakness—intellectual, moral, psychological—on the part of those who embrace them.

The first, "realist" rationale reflects a cynicism, or despair, which is often exaggerated—and likely self-confirming. Embracing a politics of ruthlessness generates a ruthless politics, marked by the instability and destructiveness of a war of all against all, which ultimately makes a desert of social life. In *The Republic* Socrates explains that the tyrant—defined by his unconstrained appetite, and ruthlessness in satisfying it—is the most miserable of people, because he has no true friends. Those who expect to fare better with the *collective* ruthlessness of movements, with their supposed solace of solidarity, would do well to remember the tendency of revolutionaries to turn on one another. Ruthlessness does not guarantee success, though it does ensure pain. And this pain is seldom restricted to the "other side." (Just ask the Russians who have suffered from Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the Israelis who have died as a result of Netanyahu's empowering of Hamas in order to tank a two-state solution, or the Gazans slaughtered in the Israeli response to Hamas's massacre).

The moralistic justification for ruthlessness reflects a certainty about one's justness or rightness, which is seldom well-earned. It may also reflect a naïve confidence about moral consensus. Surely, Trump voters may think, everyone (or everyone who is not brainwashed by "woke") must agree that making America stronger is a good thing. Which ends are right is, or should be, self-evident. The question is whether one is able, and willing, to adopt the best means to the end—and have the resolution to see things through.

But people do *not* agree about the priorities and purposes of politics, any more than we agree about the road to salvation. We do not agree about what a stronger America would look like, or about how to get there. In the absence of thoughtfulness and openness to persuasion—and the retention, even as one chooses a course of action, of the knowledge that others who disagree may be (at least partly) right—it seems likely that the dogmatic pursuit of justice or greatness will yield disaster—and ultimately, a war of all against all.

The ruthlessness embodied by Trump, Musk, and their lackeys ultimately drives toward civic collapse—and fosters ethical degeneration. Claiming superiority, the apostles of ruthlessness degrade themselves. Recognizing only the law of the jungle, they become bestial. Behind the mirage of "greatness" lies vindictiveness, dishonor, and the bully's mix of cruelty and cowardice. And the moral rot tends to spread. Republicans who once took inspiration from Lincoln, Reagan, and John McCain first excuse, then emulate, buffoons and crackpots like Matt Gaetz, Pete Hegseth, and Marjorie Taylor Green.

Despite its weaknesses, a politics of ruthlessness will be hard to resist. Insofar as it is not rational—or more than merely rational—it cannot simply be refuted by reasons. Even if it proves disastrous in the long (or medium) term, it often succeeds in gaining power or setting the agenda. If it cannot do good, it can do great harm—and prevent *others* from doing good.

Working our way back from a politics and an ethical culture of ruthlessness will be a long and arduous task. Proponents of liberal democracy value qualities—openness, tolerance, generosity, fairness, humility—which should still be celebrated, and cultivated, even if they do not conduce to political success in this moment. The question is whether we possess, or can develop, another, rather different quality—that of strength. Not the strength of ruthlessness, but that of fortitude, endurance, and fidelity to ideals, expressed not in self-defensive acquiescence, but in the ability to keep resisting—with insistence as well as tactical flexibility—even in the face of repeated defeat, until the time (if it ever comes) when there is a breakthrough. It is not at all clear that most or many supporters of liberal democracy possess these qualities or have sufficient reserves of strength to endure the crushing of dreams and lives. Perhaps our current challenge will call them forth.

Godlywood, Godsploitation, and Faith-based Movies: The Rise of the Christian Film Industry

Chloé Delaporte

Christian cinema has been around for a long time, but over the past 20 years or so, we have seen the rise of a quasi-autonomous industry, structured around studios, producers, and specialized distribution networks, which is now sufficiently established for a dedicated term for it to emerge: Godlywood. Donald Trump's first (2017-2021) and second (2025-2029) presidential terms have served as a springboard, facilitating the development of evangelical films on the fringes of mainstream Hollywood production, which is itself in the crosshairs of a president who wants to reform it.

Christianity and Film in the 20th Century

At the beginning of the 20th century, Christian religious institutions feared the emergence of the new medium of "cinema," warning of the outrageous nature of movies, denouncing their immoral and often obscene character, and pointing out the risks to the health and well-being of women and children. The first American censorship laws were passed by cities (starting with Chicago in 1907) and then states (Pennsylvania in 1911, Ohio and Kansas in 1913) under pressure from conservative groups acting in the name of Christian values. However, several prominent figures recognized early on the potential of cinema for evangelizing the masses. Reverend Herbert A. Jump, for example, pastor of the South Congregational Church in New Britain, Connecticut, published a pamphlet in 1911 entitled *Religious Possibilities of the Motion Pictures*, in which he drew thematic parallels between the Bible and film narratives.

Several national attempts at self-regulation took place in the 1910s (e.g., the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry was established in 1916) and in the 1920s ("Thirteen Points and Standards" in 1921, "the Formula" in 1924, "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" in 1927), but it was ultimately the mobilization of Catholic bishops against talking pictures, along with the creation of the Legion of Decency, that led to the adoption in 1934 of a production code (the *Motion Picture Production Code*), implemented by the Production Code Administration (PCA) under the authority of Joseph Breen. Throughout the classical period, Hollywood cinema was subject to Christian values as expressed in the code.

Following the weakening of the code in the 1950s and its official abandonment in 1966 (replaced in 1968 by the current rating system), films that were further removed from Christian values appeared on screens, sparking religious mobilization around certain productions. In the 1970s and 1980s, the popularization of cable television encouraged the development of specifically Christian channels (a phenomenon that had already existed since the 1950s), which broadcast films identified by local religious leaders as compatible with Christian values. The production of officially Christian films multiplied, supported by local churches and often broadcast within evangelical megachurches, but it was not until the late 1990s that it really took off.

In 1999, *The Omega Code* (directed by Robert Marcarelli) was released in US theaters. This apocalyptic thriller was financed and distributed by Trinity Broadcasting Network, headed by televangelist Paul F. Crouch (his brother Matt had created an evangelical production company, Gener8Xion Entertainment, in 1993). With a budget of $7 million, the film managed to generate more than $12 million at the box office, despite disastrous reviews. This positive signal to Hollywood studios and film production

investors was confirmed by the box office success of a second film in 2004, *The Passion of the Christ*. Directed and self-produced for less than $30 million by Catholic actor Mel Gibson, the film was a box office smash despite several controversies, grossing more than $600 million worldwide upon its release. It was particularly well received by the evangelical community, which recognized the potential of faith-based film production, not only for television or physical media (e.g., DVDs, Blu-ray), but directly for the big screen.

The Establishment of an Autonomous Evangelical Network

In the 2000s, the first specifically evangelical production companies emerged: Five & Two Pictures in 2002, Believe Pictures in 2003, Crystal Creek Media in 2005, Pure Flix and Fox Faith (under the umbrella of 20th Century Fox) in 2006, Advent and Elevating Entertainment Motion Pictures in 2007, Lightworkers Media (under Amazon MGM Studios) in 2009, and Hard Faith in 2011. The first to quickly gain notoriety was Sherwood Pictures, founded in 2003 by Baptist pastor Alex Kendrick, who was then serving at Sherwood Church (Albany, Georgia).

After a few small critical successes on DVD (*Flywheel*, in 2003), Sherwood Pictures produced *Facing the Giants* in 2006, which marked a turning point: produced for $100,000, this film about an American football coach who trains his team using the Gospels grossed over $10 million at the box office, despite limited distribution (441 screens). The pastor-filmmaker's subsequent films (*Fireproof*, the highest-grossing independent film of 2008, and *Courageous* in 2011) confirmed the trend and helped identify Christian audiences as an important target for film producers. In 2013, Kendrick founded the Kendrick Brothers company with his two brothers, Stephen and Shannon. In 2015, it produced *War Room*, which topped the box office in its second week of release; shot on a budget of $3 million, the film grossed over $67 million in North America.

Evangelical cinema is the product of an entire network that helps, as a starting point, with the training of young evangelical filmmakers: Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, a private institution known as the most conservative university in the United States, has a film department where students are encouraged to make proselytizing films using state-of-the-art equipment, funded by the university's generous donors. Grand Canyon University, a private Christian institution located in Phoenix, Arizona, which also has a film department, even coproduces films (such as *The Last Supper* in 2025, from Pinnacle Peak Pictures, the new name of Pure Flix after 2021).

The evangelical network also relies on influential media outlets, such as Movieguide, created in 1985 by Ted Baer (who also founded the Christian Film & Television Commission), which has been handing out its own awards to films celebrating Christian values since 1993, the Movieguide Awards, broadcast on the Hallmark channel for several years. To accompany the distribution of Christian films, dedicated festivals have sprung up: in 1993, the Merrimack Valley Christian Film Festival was inaugurated in Salem, New Hampshire (it ceased in 2017); in 2011, the International Christian Film & Music Festival in Orlando, Florida; and in 2014, the Christian Worldview Film Festival, launched by Alex Kendrick, in Sherwood, Oregon.

There is an entire evangelical film ecosystem, from film production to distribution, especially since streaming platforms now make it possible to easily distribute content online, particularly to younger generations, which was previously reserved for DVD and television. Pure Flix, founded in 2006 by David A. R. White (son of a Mennonite pastor), launched its streaming service in 2015 (since acquired by Affirm Films, the evangelical division of Sony Pictures). In 2019, the company Vision Video (founded in 1969 as Gateway Films to distribute Christian films) also launched its streaming service, Redeem TV. VidAngel, founded in 2014 in Utah as a film content censorship service (automatically cutting explicit language and scenes from films and series streamed online), changed its strategy in 2021: under a new name (Angel Studios), the founders are launching an online platform for Christian films, partly funded through crowdfunding campaigns and aimed at young audiences, such as *Tuttle Twins* in 2021, which was announced in July 2025 for distribution in Argentine schools as an educational tool.

VidAngel was responsible, for example, for the distribution of the series *The Chosen* (2017-), produced by the Christian company Out of Order Studios (OOS). Winner of several Movieguide Awards, it has been broadcast since 2021 on generalist platforms such as Amazon Prime Video and Netflix. In a way, Evangelicals succeed where Mormons in part fail: while there is a Mormon film industry, it remains confined to Utah (around the LDS Motion Picture Studios in Salt Lake City) and entirely under the

control of the LDS Church, with few exceptions of managing to distribute films outside specialized circuits (one is the series *Granite Flats*, produced by BYUtv and broadcast on Netflix).

In Trump We Trust

The emergence of a Christian film industry, mainly Evangelical, and its evolution is not only the result of the growth of this community worldwide (665 million people today compared to 100 million in the 1970s) and in the United States (although the proportion of Americans declaring themselves to be Christian has fallen, Evangelicals are growing and now represent almost 91 million people in the US, or about 1 in 4 Americans). It also owes much to a prominent supporter: Republican President Donald Trump, for whom the American evangelical community votes at a rate of over 80%. Trump even benefited from the production of a propaganda film promoting his election and casting him as America's savior in 2018 (for the midterms): Stephen Schultze's *The Trump Prophecy*, co-produced by ReelWorks Studios and Liberty University and adapted from the book by Mark Taylor and Mary Colbert, published a year earlier.

The current head of Liberty University, Jerry Falwell Jr., has joined a faith advisory commission at the White House called the Evangelical Advisory Board, which lobbied the appointment of three judges to the Supreme Court, who eventually, in June 2022, helped un-constitutionalize the right to abortion (on the collusion between Trump and Evangelicals, see the 2018 documentary *In God We Trump* by Christopher Alan Maloney). Important to Evangelicals is the fight against people's right to control their own bodies and reproduction, forming the narrative thread of many Godlywood films. One example is *Unplanned* (Cary Solomon and Chuck Konzelman, produced by Pure Flix in 2019), promoted as the "true story" of a family planning manager who changed her mind about abortion.

Long limited to sports movies (especially American football) set in the Bible Belt, biopics, or depictions of biblical moments (such as Danny Carrales' *Pilgrim's Progress* in 2008), Godlywood films are diversifying and becoming less proselytizing in order to reach the widest possible audience. As Sister Nancy Usselman, film critic and Christian cinema influencer, puts it in a French documentary on Godlywood, "You don't have to say it. You just show it." Christians (2 billion people worldwide in 2025) represent a significant segment of the cinema audience, with the Christian cinema industry seeking to reach beyond the American evangelical community alone.

Alongside the development of Godlywood, we are also witnessing a kind of renaissance of "Godsploitation"—films and series about faith, religion, or iconic figures that even mainstream studios and broadcasters have been investing in since the box office success of *The Passion of the Christ*. Faith-based movies target both Christians and the general public with adventure or fantasy stories with subtle biblical subtexts. In the 2000s, Walden Media produced *The Chronicles of Narnia* franchise; more recently, Amazon MGM Studios coproduced the series *House of David* with the Wonder Project (the company of Jon Erwin, one of the Erwin brothers), which launched in early 2025 on Prime Video, where it quickly rose to second place for most-watched content.

However, not all Godlywood and Godsploitation films are unanimously acclaimed by Christians, even evangelicals. Criticism of self-proclaimed "Christian cinema" is growing, and not only because of the poor quality of some productions. The falsification of historical facts, the caricatured portrayal of characters, the Manichean representation of relations between believers and nonbelievers, the simplification of social claims, and unbridled ultranationalism and patriotism, featuring the instrumentalization of Christian values in the service of a political agenda, often generate more criticism than they do support from Christian critics and some audiences, which do not all recognize themselves in this portrayal of Christianity and demand a different kind of cinema.

Franchises such as *God's Not Dead* (five films produced by Pure Flix between 2014 and 2024), for example, are widely criticized within the Christian community itself, in specialized magazines and websites such as *Christianity Today*, the Gospel Coalition, Religion Unplugged, Decent Films, and Patheos. As Nathalie Dupont, a French Godlywood researcher and expert, notes, the explicitly propagandistic film *The Trump Prophecy* manages to divide America further, as some evangelical Christians have disagreed with the film's stance.

Since his second term, Trump has singled out Hollywood as an industry in need of reform: denouncing DEI policies (and launching an FCC investigation into Disney), announcing tariffs on films shot abroad,

requests from the commerce secretary to studios, unions, and industry lobbies, appointing three special "ambassadors" (Mel Gibson, Sylvester Stallone, Jon Voight), and vowing to "restore" the Hollywood of yesteryear—white, heterosexual, Christian. These attacks foreshadow the Trump administration's derision towards the Hollywood industry, which its supporters consider too "woke," and show how open the path is for the development of a parallel, Godlywood industry. Trump's policy agenda risks stumbling over the proselytizing ambitions of the Christian film industry, whose hitherto nationalist and patriotic vision has hindered its evangelization ambitions at the heart of the evangelical project.

Global Godlywood?

The current challenge for Godlywood, both in terms of proselytizing and economics, is to internationalize its distribution networks, drawing on the growing evangelical communities in several countries. In February 2025, Angel Studios partnered with other studios around the world, notably in France (Saje Productions), Germany (Kinostar), Australia and New Zealand (Rialto), the Philippines (Crystalsky), Singapore (Shaw), Sri Lanka (Slyline Entertainment), Africa (Filmone, Empire), and South America (Role, Santa Barbara Films, Paka Paka), notably in Brazil (Paris Films).

In Brazil, a historically Catholic country where one in three residents in 2025 identifies as evangelical, the Godlywood film *The Forge: The Power of Transformation*, produced by the Kendrick brothers, achieved impressive box office results in 2024. An autonomous Christian-evangelical film industry is taking shape there; as in the United States, it is driven mainly by pastor-producers such as Edir Macedo, who in 2018 financed the film *Nada a perder* (*Nothing to Lose*), about his own life, through his company Record. Countries such as South Korea and the United Kingdom, where evangelical communities exist and are growing, may also soon become big Christian cinema markets, too. The coming years, then, will determine the extent to which Godlywood can go global.

Refusing "the Machine": Paul Kingsnorth and the Reactionary Mind

Alex Zakaras

Paul Kingsnorth's star has risen. Since his latest book, *Against the Machine*, was published last September, he has recorded countless podcast interviews and delivered high-profile public lectures. His apocalyptic view of the modern world, along with his yearning for pre-modern Christendom, has found resonance especially on the political right. Rod Dreher, the Trump-supporting Christian reactionary who moved to Hungary in 2022 to enjoy the blessings of illiberal democracy, has called Kingsnorth a "prophet."

But his ideas have also found traction among a wider readership. Last fall, Kingsnorth was favorably reviewed in the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *New York Times*, which praised him as an iconoclast and a spiritual seeker. These reviewers are captivated partly by his biography. Kingsnorth began his career as an environmental writer and anti-globalization activist before declaring his disillusionment with the progressive left. He is a poet and novelist whose work was long-listed for the prestigious Booker Prize. In 2014, he renounced urban civilization, moved to rural Ireland to live off the land, and began homeschooling his children. He was Wiccan and a Buddhist before converting, in 2020, to the Romanian Orthodox Church. He positions himself as a freethinker who, in a world swimming in artifice, has both feet firmly planted on the ground.

Against the Machine, which is full of reflections on Kingsnorth's own personal travails, is not entirely bereft of wisdom. In its strongest moments, it explores the truly radical ways in which consumer capitalism in the digital age is remaking human relationships, changing the way we see and think, capturing and monetizing our attention. Kingsnorth sees our rush to embrace new technologies, heedless of their human and ecological costs, as a kind of collective derangement animated by our complacent faith in technological progress. His urgent call to scrutinize the ideological underpinnings of this faith is timely and important. Buried in this 300-page screed against modernity lie the makings of a good book, a useful book.

But that is not the book Kingsnorth chose to write. The volume he produced instead is useful mainly in illuminating the pitfalls of reactionary thinking. Kingsnorth surrenders completely to his melodramatic impulses, presenting modern history as an apocalyptic contest between Good and Evil. He refuses to strive for conceptual or analytical precision, leaving his analysis a mess of contradictions and conceptual muddles. He eschews complexity and intellectual humility in favor of caricature and oracular self-importance. Worst of all, he rehashes right-wing talking points and lends tacit support to reactionary authoritarianism at a time when its destructive power is growing across the world.

Demonic Modernity

Against the Machine unfolds in a series of short chapters that weave together personal anecdotes and high theory. They transport us across time and space, from the supermarket aisles where Kingsnorth realizes that "everything is fake" to imperial Japan in 1853 to the English Civil War. Through these travels, we learn that the entire sweep of modern history has been driven by a single dominant logic: the logic of the Machine. Since the Protestant Reformation, this Machine has been colonizing human civilization and ruthlessly squeezing out anything that opposes it. It is a "totalising, utopian" project,

writes Kingsnorth (153). And he describes its goal variously as the enslavement of humankind, techno-totalitarianism, or the transformation of human beings into machines (147, 183, 227).

If this story brings to mind the plotline of a 90s action thriller, this seems to be what Kingsnorth intends. The book is peppered with references to The Matrix and the Terminator movies—with the Machine cast in the role of Skynet, the AI superintelligence that wipes out most of humanity in a nuclear holocaust and then sends Arnold Schwarzenegger back through time to wreak havoc.

Kingsnorth's main storyline evinces only slightly more subtlety: it features a titanic struggle between Good and Evil, with the fate of humanity hanging in the balance. Evil is embodied, of course, in the immensely powerful Machine that he describes, by the end of the book, as a "demonic" force and as the "Antichrist." The good, meanwhile, resides among a ragtag band of misfits and rebels who have stared evil in the face and found the courage to resist it. These include the nineteenth-century Luddites who famously burned mechanized looms to preserve their artisanal craft; the seventeenth-century Fen Tigers who carved their meager subsistence out of the swamps of Eastern England and fought the Crown's plans to drain them for farmland; and latter-day back-to-the-landers—like Kingsnorth himself—who have renounced urban civilization to cultivate their garden.

What is the Machine, exactly? Try too hard to answer this question and the book's main argument starts to crumble. The truth is that Kingsnorth offers no careful definition of his own master concept. Instead, readers are treated to a parade of sprawling generalizations and loose juxtapositions that encompass everything he dislikes in the modern world, from AI to Covid vaccines to public schools. He declares, for example, that "[t]he contemporary Western gaze is the gaze of the Machine; of Enlightenment Man, of cosmopolis, of reason, of money" (265). In an earlier chapter, he sums up the Machine with a different list: "Progress; 'openness'; an objection to limits and borders; therapeutic individualism; universalism; the rejection of roots, place and history; pure materialism; the triumph of 'reason' over 'superstition'; scientism; commercialism and the primacy of market values" (42). Later he presents "sex" and "the screen" as essential Machine values (133). What does Kingsnorth think he's conveying with this jumble of mismatched abstractions? If there's any single sentiment being expressed here, it's the conspiratorial feeling that *everything is connected:* Kingsnorth may not be able to explain it to us clearly, but he knows intuitively that it's true.

To be fair, Kingsnorth does make some attempt to locate the common thread that unifies these disparate facets of modern life. The main culprit, apparently, is the "deep desire for control" that animates the modern thirst for scientific knowledge and the quest for new technologies. He discerns this impulse in the left's attempts at social reform and their faith in moral progress (69). He sees it in the relentless pursuit of efficiency that drives modern capitalism, overpowers "human-scale ways of living," and enmeshes everything in its widening web (118). All of this, he suggests, springs from the same psychological source: our compulsion "to know the world, and to bend it to our will"—and to transgress any limits we encounter along the way (75). By "the world" here, he means not just the natural environment but societies and cultures, other people, and human nature itself. If you squint hard enough, you can see the outlines of a coherent story.

But open your eyes and it falls apart. This "desire for control" is so broad that it can be found lurking everywhere: in the search for better cancer treatments, in the effort to deconstruct caste hierarchies, in the mass murder of European Jews. All are examples of human beings striving to impose their will on "the world." This desire also seems to encompass some of the ascetic and spiritual practices that Kingsnorth himself recommends. "The purpose of *askesis,"* he writes late in the book, "is self-control. Learning this will allow us to avoid the various pits and snares of life which knock us off the path that leads to holiness—wholeness—and onto the path which leads to pride and self-love" (303). The intentional living that Kingsnorth celebrates, which requires a certain quality of attention and a capacity to know and subdue our own desires, is clearly an attempt to regain a measure of control over our minds and lives in a world full of commercialized distraction and dissipation. Likewise, the local, sustainable economies he lauds reflect a deliberate plan for communal living. Kingsnorth is not, it turns out, suggesting that we relinquish control and set ourselves adrift in the currents of time and history.

Nor does Kingsnorth acknowledge the ways in which modern societies, under the influence of liberal ideas, have surrendered control by imposing limits. Before Protestant thinkers began calling for the separation of church and state and theorizing the rights of individual conscience, medieval governments claimed vast powers over the inner lives of their subjects. The Inquisition and the

Albigensian crusade—during which a quarter million Christians in southern France were massacred for their heterodox beliefs—illustrate this tendency clearly enough. Likewise, modern feminism was born out of the impulse to limit men's discretionary control over their wives and daughters. In fact, just about every struggle for social or political reform can be described simultaneously as an effort to assert and to disrupt control. What usually matters, in all of this, is not the desire for control as such, but who gets to exercise it, and to what end, and within what constraints. My point here is that Kingsnorth's story is too simplistic to be illuminating.

Some small part of Kingsnorth understands that the intellectual's role is to explore and illuminate complexity. Some part of him understands that it's absurd to assimilate all of modern history to the narrative genre of an action flick. At various points in the book, we find the briefest acknowledgments that modern life—Machine life—might not be all bad. He interrupts his discussion of the evils of urbanization, for example, to note that "it would be daft" to deny *all* of the supposed richness of urban living. In a few short sentences, he grudgingly acknowledges the value of "art galleries" as well as some other "anonymous, seedy fun" (81). But Kingsnorth can't help himself: his heart isn't in it, and he reverts quickly to his melodramatic screed. Soon, he's describing cities as "black holes" that destroy human agency, eviscerate human culture, consume the natural environment, and ruthlessly privilege profit over any other human value (83-85).

Readers familiar with the social and political thinking of the new, reactionary right know that this apocalyptic vein is all too common. It is an understandable temptation: the worse you can make modern life look, the more plausible your yearnings for some pre-modern halcyon become. But there is a more specific rhetorical strategy at work here, too. These writers begin by identifying some genuinely sinister aspects of 21st-century life—such as the dangers posed by unregulated AI, our epidemic of screen addiction, or the moral catastrophe of unchecked climate change. They argue that these dangers are connected by some iron logic to other aspects of modernity that offend them, from feminism and LGBTQ rights to vaccines or the separation of church and state. Having thus revealed the inner spring that makes liberal modernity tick, they then admonish us against half measures: to save everything good and true from this looming apocalypse, they claim, we have to take down the entire "system." This is how you talk yourself into sympathizing with the reactionary political movements that are cresting across the world, with liberal democracy in their sights.

The Dictatorship of Reason

Like many other reactionary treatises, *Against the Machine* displays a recognizable intellectual method—you might call it *oracular essentialism*. Like an oracle or prophet, Kingsnorth has seen the shape of things to come. He has peered into the annals of human history and understood the logic that unites it all. Having grasped this timeless essence, he can then ignore the innumerable complexities and countercurrents that hint at alternative conclusions. One hallmark of this method is the impulse to reduce complex empirical or historical phenomena to two-dimensional caricatures. Another is a loose and highly selective treatment of historical evidence. To insist that an oracle marshal his facts carefully would, after all, seem pedantic, if not insolent.

We find this method at work throughout the book. Thus, we learn that the Reformation unleashed radical individualism and set the modern West on a course, inexorably, to pure materialism and irreligion (72-3). We learn that scientific inquiry tends, invariably, toward the tyranny of technology and the banishment of the sacred (76). We learn that the Enlightenment, and the French and American revolutions inspired by its ideas, gave rise to the "dictatorship of reason in the West," whose "inevitable result" was wanton violence, from "religious bloodbaths to the Napoleonic wars." Its natural endpoint, of course, was the holocaust, which Kingsnorth describes (quoting Canadian historian John Ralston Saul) as a "perfectly rational act" (62).

Reason comes in for especially harsh treatment in *Against the Machine*. Kingsnorth sees its displacement of faith and spirituality, and its denigration of intuitive wisdom, as the key to our modern discontents. Of course, he never explains exactly what he means by "reason." The closest he gets is in an extended discussion of French sociologist Jacques Ellul's idea of "technique," which stands for "the translation into action of man's concern to master things by means of reason" (116). Ellul was concerned, mainly, with the quest for efficiency. He argued that modernity is increasingly structured by a compulsion to optimize every aspect of human life, which snuffs out spontaneity, variety, and meaning. Here again is Kingsnorth's "desire for control," projected onto an impersonal system—comprised of modern states,

growth-dependent capitalist economies, and invasive technologies—which demands ever greater regularity, legibility, and productivity. Ellul was an insightful thinker, and there is power in this analysis.

The kind of reason Ellul described is what philosophers call "means-ends" rationality: the quest to find the most efficient means to achieve some given objective. It has delivered cheap solar panels and indoor plumbing as surely as gulags and nuclear bombs. But there are other expressions of reason, too. In fact, philosophers from the Enlightenment onward have used the term in a broader sense, to describe the effort to justify ourselves to one another—among equals—by giving reasons and evidence. They have insisted, especially, that *power* needs justifying. A society is more rational, in this sense, to the extent that its power relations can be justified to all members in a way that respects their dignity and autonomy. The opposite of rationality is arbitrariness—as in the arbitrary power of the despot who justifies himself to no one. Democratic ideals are an expression of this second conception of reason.

These two contrasting ideas of reason suggest different ideas of progress: efficiency maximization on the one hand, mutual justification on the other. And although these ideas sometimes go hand in hand, they have often diverged dramatically. Consider just one example: the industrial revolution was launched, in part, through the cotton plantations of the American South, which were organized around a brutally efficient form of slave labor. A new generation of scholars has painstakingly documented the ruthless quest for efficiency that dominated these plantations, as slaveholders found ever more ingenious ways of terrorizing enslaved people into frantic productivity. Here is a horrific example of Ellul's technique, unbound by any moral constraints. On the other hand, the abolitionist movement that arose in the 1830s in the United States mobilized a different idea of reason, inflected with Protestant universalism and the moral principles of the Scottish Enlightenment. The most radical of these abolitionists aimed to reconstruct American society along egalitarian lines, as a racially inclusive democracy. They believed that racial hierarchy was a manifestation of prejudice and arbitrary power and wholly unjustifiable among rational human beings.

Kingsnorth's entire position about modernity depends on the claim that these two forms of reason (and progress) are either identical or inseparable. In fact, he acknowledges no distinction at all. To his eyes, both look like hubristic assaults on customary ways of life, perpetrated by innovators and reformers who were, at best, breathtakingly naïve. Unlike them, Kingsnorth has divined that the essence of human reason is the tyranny of "technique" and declared it to be profane.

There are, of course, deep and interesting questions to consider about the many tangled legacies of the Enlightenment, and how its diverse ideas of reason relate to one another, both historically and philosophically. Many smart historians and philosophers, from Max Weber to Hannah Arendt to Sven Beckert, have done their part to help untangle this complicated web. Paul Kingsnorth is not one of them. Instead, he often resorts to oracular pronouncements that would make these thinkers blush. "Liberal modernity, in short, is doomed," he announces at the conclusion of a chapter that rails at the simplistic utopianism of Tech Bros (63). Or even better (cue the Matrix soundtrack): "*What fuel does this [Machine] run on?* … very soon, you are going to understand the answer before you have even asked it: The fuel is nature. The fuel is life. The fuel is you" (italics in original; 69-70).

It may seem odd to read such sentences in a book that warns so pointedly against intellectual hubris. Kingsnorth abhors the hubris of the rationalist who believes that everything can be known to the "deductive, logical, reasoning mind" (235). What he fails to acknowledge is that Enlightenment reason, at its best, is an intellectual discipline designed to hold other forms of hubris at bay. These include the hubris of the obscurantist or mystic who, dispensing with the need for sound evidence and analytical clarity, mistakes his own feelings and intuitions for the essence of things—and then compounds his errors by proselytizing. Kingsnorth does himself no favors when he places the terms "fact checked," "peer reviewed," and "the scientific method" in scare quotes, thus heaping scorn on the aspiration to intellectual rigor itself (285, 215).

Authoritarian Nostalgia

It is difficult to understand the significance of any book without considering its intellectual and political context. *Against the Machine* was published in the United States at a time when right-wing politicians are stoking virulent xenophobia, brutalizing immigrants, shattering Constitutional limits, eviscerating humanitarian aid, assailing medical and scientific expertise, vilifying gay and trans people, and unleashing masked paramilitaries to clean up urban "cesspools"—all in service of a hazy vision of

the golden past. Anyone who launches a reactionary treatise into this conflagration runs the obvious risk of adding fuel to it. In fact, it is easy to imagine Donald Trump's acolytes persuading themselves that they're striking virtuous blows against the Machine. The fact that Kingsnorth praises pro-Trump intellectuals and appears on podcasts hosted by right-wing propagandists only throws this danger into sharper relief. What then does he have to say about all of this?

There are a few passages scattered across the book in which Kingsnorth distances himself from the illiberal politics of the authoritarian right. In a chapter that praises the ethnostate and draws inspiration from the right-wing nationalist Yoram Hazony, for example, Kingsnorth includes a very brief warning against the vilification of immigrants: "Blame the immigrants if you like," he writes, "—it's always the easy option—but they didn't strip the soul out of the nations of the West" (203). Such admonitions raise more questions than they answer. First, why are they so tepid and fleeting? Considering the strident tone that Kingsnorth employs throughout most of the book, his lack of conviction here is unmistakable. In the same chapter, he insists that the dangers of excessive nationalism are overshadowed by the left's desire to uproot nations altogether "in some pseudo-egalitarian frenzy" (204).

Kingsnorth's moral scruples raise deeper questions, too. Let us assume that he rejects xenophobia and ethnic chauvinism. Let us assume that his nostalgia for the pre-Enlightenment world does not include a penchant for religious persecution, feudal exploitation, patriarchal domination, or divine-right authoritarianism. Let us assume that the few cryptic lines in this book about "justice for communities" and "a fair and balanced moral, social, and economic order" are sincere (281). (In his podcast appearances, he sounds sincere about these things.) Where do such ideas come from? On what moral principles do they rest?

One of the strangest conceits in the entire book is Kingsnorth's notion that he can just insert these beliefs—like so many light copyedits to a completed manuscript—into the ethos of the medieval peasantry (or, for that matter, the Fen Tigers, the Cossacks, the Marsh Arabs, or the other renegade peoples he admires). In one of the few paragraphs that outline his recommendations for the future, Kingsnorth calls for radical decentralization, localism, and de-urbanization. He wants a "moral economy" premised on neighborly love, not competition. Like the agrarian essayist and poet Wendell Berry, he yearns for a politics of place which "aims to limit rather than multiply our needs." And he wants all of this to be realized "without excluding the outsider" (284). Reading between the lines, it seems that he also wants democratic local governance, with voting power distributed to everyone, not just white Christian men.

Does he really fail to see that this egalitarian vision—in the Western mind at least—is among the hard-earned fruits of the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the great modern revolutions that he spends the book condemning? Does he not recognize it as an expression of the universalism he scorns? As a Christian convert, Kingsnorth would presumably rest this vision of localist harmony on the ethical teachings of Christ. But Christ's moral outlook was itself radically universalist. And until Protestant reformers began to secularize it into a doctrine of individual rights, of government by consent, and of rightful resistance to tyrannical rule, it had precious little bearing on the way Western societies were governed. The Enlightenment—in both its secular French versions and its devout Scottish variants—finally brought this intellectual project to fruition.

Here is another way of posing the same question. It is easy to imagine right-wing readers dismissing Kingsnorth's perfunctory appeals to justice and inclusion as evidence that he has not completed his own break with the Machine. After all, the book teaches us that reason and universalism are features of the Machine-mind, which does violence to everything customary by trying to remap human society along "straight lines," producing a soulless conformity (292). The original modern reactionaries—including the French Catholic Joseph de Maistre—saw moral equality and individual rights as emblems of this very conformity. What are these ideals if not "straight lines" imposed on the delightfully crooked stuff of medieval custom? The same arguments can be found, only a few years later, among Christian defenders of American slavery who denounced the airy, geometric abstractions of the Declaration of Independence as unsuitable for organic human cultures. As far as I can tell, *Against the Machine* offers no explanation of why Kingsnorth's own analysis should not compel him to follow a similar trajectory.

Whose Freedom?

Another, related perplexity centers on the ideal of freedom, which stands out as the single most important moral standard in the book. The Machine is evil because it threatens us all with slavery or totalitarian control. The goal of the resistance, writes Kingsnorth, must be "some form of free survival" (294). Like virtually all the other key concepts in the book, freedom is never carefully defined or explained. Sometimes—in his paean to the Fen Tigers, for instance—Kingsnorth seems to be describing what philosophers call *autarky*. A people or nation is free, in this sense, so long as they are not ruled by outsiders. This is hardly an attractive ideal: it is compatible with slavery and other forms of profound subjugation—as long as they're practiced by insiders.

At other points in the text, however, Kingsnorth seems to be holding up an idea of *individual* freedom as his lodestone. He writes, for example, about his own personal struggles to resist the colonizing incursions of technology, consumerism, and intolerant groupthink. These passages show him trying to live life on his own terms, governed by his own reflective ideals. And Kingsnorth seems to want this not just for himself but for others too; not just for white men but for everyone. These are the passages in which Kingsnorth makes common cause—despite himself—with some of the classic texts of Western liberalism, from Mill's *On Liberty* to Thoreau's *Walden*. How they're supposed to fit with his nostalgia for the medieval past is anyone's guess.

The ugliest passages in the book, by contrast, are those in which Kingsnorth refuses to acknowledge this very yearning for freedom in others. He mocks progressives for their desire to "topple statues of long-dead slave traders" without acknowledging what these statues mean to Black people living in their shadow (140). He derides contemporary feminism as "a device for filling workplaces with females" but offers no serious discussion of the condition of women in any pre-modern society (41, 187). He assures us that the psychological anguish of transgender youth is not "the real issue"—the real issue, it turns out, is the billionaire transhumanists who are using these kids to pursue an agenda that points toward "nanotechnology, 'cyberconsciousness software' and perhaps, ultimately, the end of their physical embodiment altogether" (178). These passages stand out for their lack of empathy—and their lack, even, of any real intellectual curiosity. Kingsnorth simply isn't interested in the struggles for liberation, or the many forms of oppression and marginalization, that do not fit neatly into his Machine narrative.

This lack of empathy underwrites another, final failure. In the brief sections of the book devoted to constructive solutions, Kingsnorth counsels us either to abandon modern life and model ourselves on the Amish, or to practice a more moderate agrarian localism with an internet connection—like him. If this were a how-to guide written for affluent but disaffected urbanites, these might be adequate (if bracing) suggestions. But this is a book with much bigger ambitions: it proclaims that "the West must die" and that we should do what we can to hasten its demise (265). What would this demise portend for the billions of people who can't relocate their families to rural Ireland and buy a plot of land to cultivate? What would it hold in store for city dwellers, for religious and ethnic minorities, for people who need advanced medical treatment? Kingsnorth has nothing to say about any of this. In this sense, his positive vision is an abdication, a refusal to give serious consideration to the questions his own book poses.

This abdication, too, is a familiar feature of reactionary thinking, which tends to exhaust itself in the gleeful work of cataloging the supposed horrors of modern civilization. In the fleeting moment, near the end of the book, where he seems to acknowledge the inadequacy of his own solutions, Kingsnorth reverts to his preferred genre. "Sometimes the ridiculous ideas are the only ones worth having," he writes—like sending "two halflings to throw a ring into a volcano under the nose of the dark lord. It was madness. But it worked" (317). Readers interested in charting a morally serious path forward will have to look elsewhere.

Renegade Science: The Politics of MAHA's Illiberal Health Agenda

Norah MacKendrick

Is Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) anti-science? The question seems straightforward enough. After all, the MAHA movement's figurehead, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., promotes debunked theories about vaccine dangers, champions raw milk despite clear evidence of its health risks, and cites retracted studies to support his positions. When Kennedy became the United States Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) in February 2025, public health experts and mainstream media outlets characterized Kennedy and MAHA as anti-science and a threat to evidence-based medicine. The narrative appears clear-cut: here is an illiberal movement rejecting scientific authority in favor of conspiracy theories and folk wisdom.

While MAHA is firmly situated within an illiberal administration—and one that has done real damage to mainstream scientific funding streams and institutions—this straightforward answer misses something crucial. MAHA does not reject science; it zealously invokes it. References to gold-standard science appear throughout official MAHA documents and speeches. Kennedy and his advisors constantly proclaim their commitment to evidence-based medicine, rigorous research, and reproducible studies. These principles are enshrined in an HHS report, authored under Kennedy's leadership, called "Implementing Gold Standard Science." The puzzle, then, is not whether MAHA embraces or rejects science, but rather *how* it deploys science as a political tool. What work does science do for MAHA?

To answer this question, and as part of a larger project trying to tease apart where MAHA fits within neoliberal and illiberal politics, I examined the discursive politics of MAHA. By discursive politics, I mean the stories these political actors tell about health threats, scientific authority, and who gets to speak on behalf of truth. I analyzed official documents and media events published in the months leading up to Trump's election to the White House through to the end of his first year in office. I combed through transcripts from a four-hour senate roundtable, as well as HHS reports, the dietary guideline's scientific report, as well as dozens of press conferences and promotional videos. What emerged was not simple anti-science rhetoric, but rather a sophisticated form of what I'm calling populist science—a political strategy that speaks the language of scientific rigor while fundamentally reshaping who counts as a legitimate expert and whose knowledge matters.

Three themes dominated these materials, each revealing how MAHA constructs its relationship to science and expertise. This relationship reveals an illiberal project aimed at stoking fear around the future of the nation while redefining what counts as trustworthy science and expertise.

Health Catastrophism

The first theme that emerged from my analysis is apocalyptic: chronic disease as an existential threat to the nation. The language used by policy actors is vivid, dark, and urgent. At a senate roundtable in September 2024, a defining moment that launched MAHA into the political mainstream, Kennedy declared that if a foreign nation did to America what food and chemical companies have done, we would consider it an act of war. Calley Means, a health savings account entrepreneur and Kennedy's future policy advisor, warned that chronic disease poses a genocidal-level threat to the nation. His sister Casey, an unlicensed Stanford-educated physician and now nominee for Surgeon General, proclaimed

that 90 percent of American deaths come from a "weaponized food system." Speakers at the roundtable made several references to the United States' poor ranking in health measures relative to peer nations.

The first official MAHA report, released in May 2025, declares that today's children are the sickest generation in American history, and their deteriorating health threatens national security itself because the country's youth are not fit for military service. When Kennedy and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth hosted their "Pete and Bobby" fitness challenge at the Pentagon, Hegseth proclaimed: "Make America healthy again. Fit, not fat. We're going to have a war fighting force with young men and women who are prepared to defend the nation."

And what has caused this catastrophe? According to the first MAHA report, it is ultraprocessed foods, food additives, toxic chemicals, and vaccines. Thousands of synthetic chemicals in food, water, and air pose risks to children's neurodevelopmental and endocrine health, the report warns. Here, MAHA references genuine peer-reviewed science: research does support connections between environmental chemicals and rising rates of certain cancers, neurodevelopmental disorders, and reproductive problems. Major professional societies representing endocrinologists and pediatricians endorse these findings. Yet, MAHA leaders' claims that vaccines seriously endanger public health have no robust scientific evidence to support them. Evidence points to the opposite fact: vaccination programs have translated into lower overall mortality, in the United States and globally, and have contributed to dramatic reductions in childhood mortality specifically.

Corruption in Science

The second major theme is that of widespread corruption of scientific bodies and government agencies by the food, agriculture, and pharmaceutical industries. Over a third of MAHA materials attribute the nation's ill health to conflicts of interest within government agencies like the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The MAHA report dedicates a section to corporate capture and the revolving door, citing billions in lobbying dollars influencing dietary guidelines and suppressing unfavorable research. Future FDA Commissioner Marty Makary, appearing at the 2024 Senate roundtable, painted a dark picture of pharmaceutical companies that will stop at nothing to profit from chronic illness, a message he continues to share in his official media appearances. Kennedy has repeatedly asserted that conflicts of interest between regulators and industry have suppressed science that would have improved public health outcomes.

This critique of corporate power contains some truth. Activists and scholars studying contemporary food systems have long documented how corporate lobbyists influence regulatory agencies and lawmaking, how industry funding shapes nutrition research, and how conflicts of interest pervade public health institutions like the FDA. Corporate power certainly does distort science. The problem is not that MAHA identifies this dynamic; it's how it selectively applies this critique of power.

MAHA leaders have their own conflicts of interest, which are never mentioned when these leaders rail against corruption in the civil service. Several advisors and expert panel members have ties to wellness companies and health savings account firms that stand to benefit from MAHA policies. These leaders are not immune to lobbying from the very sectors they purport to challenge. For instance, the first MAHA report identified agricultural pesticides and processed foods as serious threats to children's health, but several months later, its strategy plan recommended only small tweaks to the country's agricultural and food policies. Outsiders saw this as evidence of industrial interests working behind closed doors to shape MAHA's agenda. In MAHA's framework, only some conflicts matter. Science funded by pharmaceutical companies is suspect; science that supports MAHA positions is rigorous. Experts affiliated with mainstream institutions are captured; experts aligned with MAHA are independent. The accusation of corruption, conveniently unspecified, can be deployed against any institution, study, or finding that contradicts MAHA's agenda.

MAHA leaders present themselves as "renegades" and as "juggernauts against convention" seeking truth at any cost. Kennedy makes this explicit in an interview with Fox News: "Trust the experts is not a function of science or democracy. It is a function of totalitarianism and religion." The statement is remarkable. Kennedy, speaking as the nation's top health official, denounces trust in experts while asking the public to trust him and his team; he appeals to democracy while consolidating control over what counts as legitimate expertise; and he champions science while rejecting the institutional structures through which scientific knowledge is produced, validated, and disseminated. At a MAHA

summit in the fall of 2025, Vice President JD Vance praised Kennedy for being unafraid to think in new ways. Kennedy responded by declaring that people like him advance science because they are willing to challenge orthodoxies and advance heterodoxies.

Kennedy's vision of science and corruption is profoundly reshaping the agencies under his control. In June 2025, citing conflicts of interest, Kennedy fired all 17 members of the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP), a critical scientific body that advises the CDC on vaccines. The fired members had few conflicts of interest, yet Kennedy chose to replace them with established vaccine skeptics. When Kennedy and MAHA leaders delegitimize core government agencies regulating medicine and food as "captured" institutions, it is a critique of regulatory failure that lays the groundwork for consolidating health authority under executive control.

The Construction of "Gold Standard Science"

This brings us to the third and most revealing theme: MAHA's construction of what it calls gold-standard science. The phrase gold-standard science appears throughout official materials, press conferences, and interviews with MAHA officials. What exactly is gold-standard science? An HHS document, responding to an Executive Order released several months earlier, lays out nine tenets, all reasonable enough, at first glance. For instance, research must provide falsifiable hypotheses, be reproducible, make data available to others, and clearly communicate uncertainty. But HHS requires that gold standard science meet all nine tenets, making for an impossibly rigid framework that will disqualify a large swath of public health research from consideration in public policymaking.

MAHA's silences matter as much as its discourse on what science is and is not. These silences offer a clue into how its version of populist science fits into a larger illiberal administration. While lamenting America's chronic health crisis and poor life expectancy relative to peer nations, MAHA leaders systematically ignore decades of epidemiological research (the kind of peer-reviewed science they claim to champion) showing that the underlying causes of these problems include income inequality, inadequate social safety nets, poverty, racial segregation, lack of affordable housing, and privatized health care. The nation's declining fertility rate—a key MAHA concern—cannot be understood without examining racial disparities in infant and maternal mortality and restrictions in access to reproductive health care. Yet MAHA materials never mention these factors.

These omissions are striking and undoubtedly ideological. MAHA's silence on the underlying causes of maternal mortality aligns with the administration's objective to limit access to abortion and contraception. The lack of any attention to structural causes of chronic disease seems to me to relate to the administration's hostility to language about diversity, equity, inclusion, and social inequalities.

Politics Over Science

Under MAHA, public health is subsumed under and placed in the service of partisan, illiberal politics. Health becomes a matter of military readiness and replacing a corrupt (liberal) establishment with new institutions that reject the language of racial and social equity, in favor of one that celebrates a rigid new orthodoxy of so-called "gold standard science."

MAHA, like the administration it is situated in, loves simple dichotomies and embraces contradictions: good science versus bad science, independent researchers versus captured ones, truth-seekers versus profit-motivated liars. It positions its political leaders as uniquely able to discern truth from propaganda, uncontaminated by the conflicts that pervade mainstream institutions. It demands evidence while dismissing vast bodies of research. It invokes peer review while dismissing scientific consensus built on rigorous peer review.

Returning to our original question: Is MAHA anti-science? The answer is both no and yes. No, because it accepts basic scientific methods, empirical inquiry, and evidence-based reasoning. Yes, because it rejects the existing institutional arrangements through which scientific knowledge is produced, validated, and translated into policy. In short, MAHA embraces science while also fundamentally restructuring scientific authority. Rejecting commonly accepted —if flawed—scientific traditions, MAHA decides, unilaterally, whose knowledge counts, which institutions are legitimate, what questions can be asked, and which conflicts of interest matter.

And so, MAHA pretends that its new version of science is and will be immune from the problems that have long dogged mainstream science, without (so far as I have seen), offering good reasons or evidence that it will be. The record so far tells a much more mundane story of power-seeking and intellectual narrowness.

MAHA claims to liberate truth from corrupt institutions but instead establishes controversial new orthodoxies from on high. It promises to serve the people, but at the same time advances specific political and economic interests. Understanding MAHA requires recognizing that its relationship to science is not one of simple acceptance or rejection. Rather, it is perhaps above all else a political project that involves reconstituting expertise itself by determining who gets to speak with authority about health, risk, and the future of the nation. One of MAHA's central claims is that mainstream scientific institutions are fundamentally political—and there is, of course, some truth to that. But the same is true of MAHA science, and arguably to a much greater degree, given how it elides traditional mechanisms of transparency and review.

It is too early to predict the scientific landscape of the future, but MAHA and MAHA science can't be ignored. They will need to be challenged and negotiated with by mainstream scientists and scientific institutions—and the politicians who care about their work.

Part II

On the Right and NRx

The Illiberal Right Moves Beyond Critique

Julian G. Waller

> "Liberalism needs an enemy to maintain its sacramental dynamism. It can never rest in calm waters, basking in the day of victory; it is essential that at any given moment there should be a new battle to be fought." - Adrian Vermeule, "Liturgy of Liberalism," *First Things*

> "Few want to admit the reality of the situation, but Americans are now divided over the building blocks and the purpose of human civilization. Many do not consider what underlies all the factionalism amidst the noise, but this does not change the sordid reality. There is no possibility of reconciling this fundamental opposition unless one side or the other wins." - Matthew Peterson, "The Way Forward," *American Mind*

> "The right response to any abomination of power has nothing to do with the abomination. The right response is to capture as much power as possible— normally, all the power. Each abomination is just one more count on the endless rap sheet of the old regime." - Curtis Yarvin, "Manual for Monarchy," *The Asylum*

It is not hard to find evidence of a legitimacy crisis in many Western democracies, and perhaps especially in the United States itself. Today, questions abound about the basic trustworthiness of the political opposition, even as unease grows surrounding cultural change, institutional stability, and the political, economic, and environmental legacies we will leave future generations. This sense of social dislocation and uncertainty has serious consequences, not least deep political discontent across the partisan spectrum.

One unexpected aspect of this crisis has been the explosion in ideological ferment on the American political Right. Distemper with the *status quo* has generated a panoply of niche ideational trends and intellectual entrepreneurs promoting visions of our common future very different from old partisan assumptions. As more and more of our political and social discourse moves to online venues, the contours of that discourse have gotten weirder – even compared to the distant era of 2010.

In general, we can describe this diverse ideological ecosystem on the American Right as characterized by a shared 'illiberalism,' in the sense that proponents self-consciously reject the assumptions and norms of 21st century liberalism, as expressed in political, economic, or sociocultural forms. Ideology is, of course, more than just opposition or grievance, but a coherent and systematic worldview justified on intellectual or ideational grounds, to which a substantive political project that can be derived and acted upon.

In fairness, the academic label of 'illiberal' can be a bit misleading, if only by implying greater structure and coherence to a wide-ranging sprawl of ideas, political thinkers, online communities, and actual politicians than is truly warranted. We are currently better placed to note rather a general 'family resemblance,' identifying a fairly clear line of critique – against pervasive liberalism, autonomic individualism, and moral-cultural fragmentation – than a single set of answers or a unified political movement, *per se*.

The American set of illiberal views is quite diffuse, and certain strands even stand in opposition to others. Even so, some have attempted to attach the umbrella term 'the New Right' to its most substantive expressions, while others prefer the 'dissident' Right or other monikers such as 'postliberalism.' But

given all of this – what has emerged from all this ideological creativity in online corners, and most importantly, does any of this actually matter for real American political life?

The 'Dissident' Ecosystem, An Insufficient Snapshot

Every article attempting to enforce order on all this ferment will run up against problems of categorization. Some groups are indeed collections of likeminded intellectual colleagues, others are just a disjointed set of very different writers arguing for similar solutions or moral frameworks. Some are self-evidently 'dangerous' to democracy as it exists in American today, others are quite obviously compatible. Association by implication is a major analytic problem here. Cue further distinctions and nuances. Yet a taste of selections taken from the ideological diversity on the Right includes the following:

- 'national-conservatives' seeking restoration of both economic and cultural nationalism and a defense of cultural specificity;
- heterodox self-help evangelists merging sharp commercial instincts with self-actuated solutions to political and social dissatisfaction;
- Catholic 'integralists' and 'postliberals' arguing for a revision of society away from secularism and towards a religious, communal approach to human flourishing;
- Silicon Valley-adjacent promoters of tech-optimistic social projects seeking to remake cadres of future elites in their own image;
- collaborative publication projects of post-left and illiberal-right thinkers and cultural critics;
- provocative and Nietzschean 'vitalists' developing counter-cultural philosophies of life based in extreme masculine fitness;
- and even a small selection of outright 'authoritarian theorists' making unobscured arguments about the deficiencies and failures of democracy itself.

These movements have largely developed online and among niche internet publication outlets, yet their real-world impact beyond the realm of ideas has begun to show fruit. It is no longer unusual for even major establishment figures on the Right to describe the US government as a hostile 'regime,' or new, conservative-inflected organizations to describe domestic institutions as so captured by ideological opponents that they are better off being destroyed than rehabilitated.

We are beyond backlash and well into the world of actual Reaction. More to the point, this reaction is no longer merely rhetorically expressed but has begun to take substantive form.

From Illiberal Critique to Substantive Projects

Perhaps most important for any serious analysis of these ideological tendencies is to recognize that the movement from critique and naysaying to substantive political projects is now thoroughly in motion. It is no longer sufficient to simply mention that there are groups with growing readerships that do not support the *status quo* of modern American politics and society.

Indeed, laundry-list overviews such as those above actually obscure where the real action is today. While many of the most full-throated challenges to liberalism remain largely confined to written works and idle 'sh*tposting' in online fora, outgrowths from these ideological spaces are now appearing in the real political world, and in very distinct ways.

It is instructive here to take a few examples from these many varieties of illiberal thought to spell out what the translation from online ideas to actually existing American politics and society has looked like so far.

Illiberal Ideologies in Action

One small group that has achieved oversized influence – and attention from other corners – within the illiberal intellectual milieu is a selection of conservative Catholic thinkers known as *integralists*. In brief, their philosophical and theological commitments amount to a form of forthright political Catholicism that at its more maximalist demands a substantively and thoroughly Catholicized American state and society.

The Catholic integralist project thus far remains a marginal one at the level of theology or political philosophy. If one is a Catholic intellectual, indeed the integralist challenge is part of a much larger debate about the Church and her relationship to modernity. But for the short- and medium-term of American politics, one can rest assured that breathless assertions of creeping Papal theocracy or incipient 'clerico-fascism' are mostly a waste of analytical effort.

Yet one much more interesting outflow of integralist and integralist-influenced discussion circles has been the development of a more practical effort at revitalizing the concepts of the natural law and the common good for American legal-constitutional interpretation. This has taken initial form as a project for 'common-good constitutionalism,' spearheaded by the integralist Harvard professor Adrian Vermeule as a replacement for the philosophical and functional failures of legal originalism. Indeed, it has already engendered a full debate in the American legal field and holds a growing cohort of adherents among conservative law school students.

Another ideational strand with real-world implications has been the '*national-conservative*' project, a halfway house between the more protectionist and nationalist elements of the GOP establishment and harsher repudiations of the entire post-Cold War direction of American liberalism. Here we find the clearest associations with actual aspiring politicians, such as J. D. Vance in Ohio or Blake Masters in Arizona, as well as ambitious current-set politicos like Josh Hawley and Ron DeSantis. Although others on the Right sometimes suggest see 'NatCons' as a kind of reskinned Republican Party redux, the national-conservative tendency rather distinctly echoes European statist right-wing parties of Central and Eastern Europe.

The national-conservatives are by far the most mainstream among the illiberal strands of the Right today, yet it is clear that they read widely across the broader field of dissident right-wing thought. Indeed, in some ways they seem to be a clearinghouse for very different ideological tendencies to find purchase in the actual American political system. In this sense, for now they also provide the function of buy-in into existing democratic electoral politics that other illiberal sub-groups otherwise do not yet touch in overt ways.

Finally, as far as substantive projects are concerned, it is still unclear what to make of the harshest critics of the modern American polity themselves. These are the '*authoritarian theorists*' such as the tech-aligned 'monarchist' Curtis Yarvin or the Bonapartist advocate Charles Haywood. These writers (who are read far more widely and in more influential circles than you might think) counsel the need for outright authoritarian regimes as superior successors to American democracy.

Although deep in the weeds of online writing, they have been given growing attention in both illiberal publications such as those hosted by the conservative Claremont Institute, as well as features in mainstream media, including the *New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *Vox,* and Tucker Carlson. Indeed, a surprising amount of vocabulary and framings used in illiberal Right circles can be traced to these figures. And some illiberal politicians are even open about reading these sorts of work as well.

These real advocates of authoritarian rule are being read by more people than ever, and their radical evocation of living under a hostile regime has found fertile ground, even if their solutions are not accepted. Of course, readership and a certain terminological cast does not mean a constructive (or if you like, destructive) authoritarian project yet exists in full. There is no real authoritarian party or mass social movement waiting in the wings to overthrow the US government, despite the popularization of a Caesarist projection of America's future. And true authoritarian theorists may be ill-fitting with other, more institutional elements of the illiberal Right. Yet the mainstreaming of doubts about democracy is itself a notable development, to say the least.

Where Do We Go from Here?

All of this amounts to a lesson in reading modern day politics – and the subterranean dynamics that spur its new manifestations – with eyes wide open. With apologies to the thoroughly-misread Francis Fukuyama, history has obviously not ended, and post-Cold War American liberalism is far away from its last or only stop. We are in an era of political disequilibrium, not stability, and this crisis of legitimacy is not going to go away any time soon. And the illiberal Right, once known more for critique than anything else, is growing up.

To take an evolving example, a recent conference at the Franciscan University of Steubenville managed to bring together national-conservatives, integralists, and postliberals together in a pow-wow on political economy and its moral order. These are only two of the many ideological strands of American illiberalism (in some ways its largest and smallest set of adherents, respectively) and with major disputes about right religion, the nation, and ultimate loyalties, as well as a history of personal tensions between them.

Yet the conference illuminated a real consensus view that a political alliance at the ideological level was certainly possible. The national-conservative focus on national developmentalism, economic protectionism, American nationalism, and foreign policy retrenchment could indeed mesh with the muscular social conservatism and activist Catholicism of integralists and postliberals, despite potentially fundamental differences over metaphysical commitments and approaches to politics. One critic jokingly termed this on social media to be a kind of "Pro-Life New Dealism," which was quickly taken on as a compliment by many of the conference speakers. Other critics, as is tradition, rather preferred recourse to accusations of fascism.

It remains to be seen how the 2020s will shake out in American politics, let alone in the realm of political thought and ideas. The discontented Right is quite clearly the most ideologically creative in this moment, although what that means for the future of politics will remain uncertain for some time. Yet the switch from critical, ideological writing to concrete action is by far the most important takeaway from the last six years, and observers (critical or otherwise) are best served looking where ideas meet reality.

Neither Left nor Right, but Tech

Benjamin Teitelbaum

In a recent interview, cryptocurrency venture capitalist and author Balaji Srinivasan argued for a new typology in American politics.

"Just calling it 'tech right'—yes, we are focusing on the fact that it is to the capitalist, progress right of the [...] Democrats today. But, after this election, it is quite possible it will be to the internationalist left of the Republicans tomorrow."

He was speaking about the increasingly distinct influence of Silicon Valley tech figures, many surrounding Peter Thiel, on American politics in general and American conservative politics in particular. But Srinivasan wasn't describing "tech" like one right-wing interest group or internal faction among others. Instead, it was a free-floating cause, a political identity of its own, with its own goals and history. He said of its roots

> Lots of tech people were attacked in [San Francisco] by crazy people on the streets that Democrats released. Another part is BLM burning things down. Another thing is seeing the internet censorship. There are many drivers. I'm certainly not—it's not monofactorial. It's a combination of Democrats doing a terrible job, overall decline [...] preexisting people who were on the right but who were also on the internationalist left, and this counter-elite emerging.

Indeed, in his conception, the cause of "tech" wasn't coherently left or right. Counter-elite was a more durable moniker. This new tech movement was born in response to the failures of institutions in US society; it was pushed by figures who found courts, governmental science agencies, journalism, and universities to be hollow bodies for spawning and consuming credentials. Tech renegades, in contrast, sought innovation and creation unbridled by the superstitions of prestige and the stodgy sensibilities of self-affirming, homogenizing bureaucracies. Progress—a meaningful career and a meaningful life—entailed detaching oneself from official society, stealing away to a lawless frontier, and finding something new.

And now, years after watershed moments like the alleged postwar slumber of American innovation and the opening up of the internet in 1991, the tech counter-elite is ascendant. It bolstered a successful US presidential candidate (in the form of Peter Thiel's support for Donald Trump in 2016) and more directly produced the current Republican Vice-Presidential candidate, JD Vance. Vance first met Thiel in 2011, after a speech the latter gave at Yale Law School, where Vance was a student. The aspirant of the Vice Presidency called this interaction "the most significant moment of my time at Yale Law School." Vance was so inspired by Thiel that he made a career pivot and went to work for the venture capital firm that Thiel cofounded, Mithril Capital.

Interest or Ideology?

This movement isn't synonymous with the tech industry, nor do its ambassadors reside primarily in Silicon Valley. Its hotspots also include Austin, TX, El Segundo, CA, Nashville, TN, and the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Peter Thiel is legitimately regarded as a focal point of a network linking most of its prominent personalities, though others like Netscape co-founder and venture capitalist Marc Andreesen play a distinguished role in the creation and popularizing of its intellectual and expressive codes among a larger, mainly online audience.

Were we to listen to public statements of the actors themselves, we might think their support for Trump is but a banal lobbying initiative; that renegade tech is supporting Trump only because he is more friendly to crypto-currencies, because he may put tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, and because of his hostility toward the progressive identity politics that these tech figures see as, at best, a distraction. As sitting Secretary of Transportation, Pete Buttigieg put it to T.V. host Bill Maher this way: "We've made it way too complicated. It's super simple: these are very rich men who have decided to back the Republican Party that tends to do good things for very rich men."

Indeed, there is nothing new about an economic sector operating as a discrete political force; nothing new, even, about membership in a particular industry serving as a banner for a wider political identity. Workers, farmers, merchants, and teachers' parties dotted the European political landscape during the 1900s (and in some places continue to today), each with a platform that extended beyond the narrow concerns of industry and profession.

Yet some of the current tech actors trace their origins to the mobilization of, if not technologists per se, then the futurists of the early 1900s and their boldly anti-nostalgic, anti-sentimental, and anti-collectivist vision for the future. Marc Andreesen, for example, obscurely cites the Italian Filippo Marinetti in his *Techno-Optimist Manifesto*—Marinetti being in part radical anarchist, in part fascist artist who called for a rejection of tradition and the emancipation of the individual from institutions.

Like the futurists of the past, the new tech operatives are turning toward the political right despite a great deal of right-left ambiguity in their ideological profile. Some of their values appear plainly progressive liberal. Whether it comes from a romantic vision of finding and pursuing frontiers, or a free-market call for states to compete with each other for citizens, they seek a world of mobilized individuals whose membership in political communities is contingent. Contingent, that is, on the opportunities afforded (or surrendered, they might say) by the state. This is no agenda of nationalism; not the place for loyalty to history or to origins.

Nor is there any inherent mandate for politics to be organized around collective will. If new tech is left-wing in its embrace of freedom of movement and association, we see its reactionary credentials in its relative disinterest in equality and democracy. Following on the ideas of Albert O. Hirschman, they aspire to a world that doesn't so much sanctify the right to "voice" as much as it does the right to "exit." And indeed, if we look at the lives of the main actors in this world, they strive, not to destroy democracy—as their more amplified opponents might claim—so much as to outflank and escape it.

Marinetti came to embrace an anti-democratic ideal for a future society run in part by an elite of intellectuals and artists. For him, the cause of liberating the creative capabilities of the individual from the yoke of tradition and institutionalization would produce a distinction and hierarchical ordering that ought to manifest in the worlds of both aesthetics and of governance. Such an explicit anti-egalitarian political vision is absent among the new tech thinkers today, and it could be at variance with their yearnings for decentralization. But it is implicit in the ways they talk about IQ differences and in their conspicuous eschewing the of language of equality and equity that is otherwise essential to so much contemporary political discourse.

The Metaphysics of Renegade Tech

My casual impression is that it is a powerful cause, too, and I believe this is for two linked reasons. First, as Marry Harrington argued, renegade tech stands out within the wider landscape of political commentary for its optimism. Whereas nostalgia grips the populist right and the liberal forces mourning the populist right's undeniable intrusion into their history, the anti-nostalgia of the tech world stands out as an exhilarating and rare assertion of hope. For an indication of how exceptional this is in our politics, look at the way the 2024 Harris/Walz campaign treats its erstwhile banner message of "joy" like a novelty.

Second, the movement's intellectuals are attempting to articulate a more comprehensive metaphysics for their cause, to make it about more than economics and machines. Without doubt, the most memorable lines in Marc Andreesen's *Techno-Optimist Manifesto* were not about regulation or frustration with the rate of innovation, but instead these: "We believe in the romance of technology, of industry. The eros of the train, the car, the electric light, the skyscraper. And the microchip, the neural network, the rocket, the split atom." To say that the cause of tech might not only make us wealthier, not only make

performing our material tasks easier and more efficient but also provide experiences of beauty and the sublime—to say such things is to extend the cause beyond that of an industry lobby group.

And it is just one of multiple conversations aspiring to equate the cause of tech with the broader cause of humanity. Networks surrounding Peter Theil have birthed a small, but growing intellectual production focused on discussing and writing about what I am calling technopolitical theology, about the ways that our political life and the course of technological innovation interact with concepts from theology, that of Christianity in particular. While this has for the past years been my primary focus of research, and although that research is ongoing, I can say that its focus is more often than not on the various actors and stages operating in what Giorgio Agamben, building off of Walter Benjamin, calls messianic time; that is to say Christ, the Antichrist, the katechon, and the apocalypse—sometimes as actually existing entities, other times as metaphors (divinely or humanly-inspired) conveying real insight about history and society. The narratives themselves often portray technologists as saviors and demons, depending on how their products contribute to processes of governmental centralization and the cataclysm prophesized to anticipate the Second Coming of Christ and the End Times. While the ideas themselves deserve careful analysis and consideration, so too does the social work they may accomplish. For they transform the venture capitalist, the innovator, and the tech CEO from soulless mercenaries into players in a cosmic battle for good and evil.

The Heart of the Matter

What's at stake in all this is not whether the ideas and expressions of this world could become popular. They derive from and speak to a narrow demographic, riffing on concerns that could hardly be regarded as common or practical. And there is likely little internal incentive to change that: after all, a cause envisioning a future beyond democratic, electoral politics has less reason to endure itself to the masses. No, what matters is that these thinkers are showing sensitivity to the importance of narrative and meaning in our social and political lives. They know that a cause focused crudely on the production of things could not possibly lay claim to the future; it would fail to inspire the action and audacity to seek change. And so, they seek a message that appeals to the heart, knowing, perhaps, that the primary audience for these messages is themselves.

Modern Monarchists and the Roots of American Illiberalism

Christian Ruth

On January 18, 2025, supporters from *Action Française* and other French monarchist groups paraded around Paris to mourn the death of King Louis XVI, who was executed at the start of the French Revolution. Chanting "anarchy today, monarchy tomorrow," the torch-bearing monarchists represent a small but vocal ripple in France's body politic. Generally conservative, these groups tend to exist alongside mainstream political parties with which they have historical affiliations. The now dominant French conservative party, National Rally, for example, has its roots in the old *Action Française* that emerged during the late 1800s, and which later supported the Vichy government during the Second World War.

These French monarchists are certainly not alone: there are monarchist movements in most European countries, even those that did not exist with their current borders or names when there were thrones to sit on. Sometimes these movements are dangerous, as the Reichsburger movement in Germany, which sought to overthrow the government several years ago, demonstrates. Others are incredibly niche. The Danubian Restoration Movement (DRM), for example, is a youth-led organization of students in the United States, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, and Austria that seeks to resurrect the Austro-Hungarian empire by organizing Habsburg descendants. They might not march through Paris, but they do organize on Discord, a gaming and messaging board app, on Facebook and Reddit, and advertise on YouTube via "The Monarchist Channel."

And now these European movements, which seek to resurrect a glorious past over the tumultuous present, have been joined by a growing number of *American monarchists*. These groups are seeking to install a kingly (or Caesar-like) ruler in the Land of the Free. Though the historical contrast with Europe is striking, American monarchists have also found a good number of historical, legal, and political precedents to work with. That, combined with anarcho-capitalist visions of a decentralized, federalist state, gives the monarchist movement in the United States a distinctly—and terrifying—American character all of its own.

Curtis Yarvin and Neoreaction

No one has a better claim to having kick-started the American wing of modern monarchism than tech-advocate and far-right blogger Curtis Yarvin (sometimes better known by his old pen name, Mencius Moldbug). Yarvin, who has catapulted into mainstream political discussion over the last 10 years, started out as a blog writer in the early 2000s by discussing the downsides of modern culture, rejecting democracy in favor of monarchism, and advocating for the necessity of embracing corporatization and technological revolution as a means of fixing global politics. The impact of his ideas on the New Right is hard to overstate. Most notably, the concept of "the Cathedral," which he argues is the amalgamation of mainstream liberal news media, universities, politics, and national institutions, has become a powerful rhetorical construct within the illiberal right's lexicon. "The Cathedral" has been echoed by now powerful Silicon Valley tech giants like Peter Thiel, and politicians like Vice President J.D. Vance, who have cited Yarvin as an influence, and are currently working hard to dismantle the ephemeral "deep state" that "the Cathedral" embodies.

His early writings, which were picked up by and expanded on by far-right figures like accelerationist Nick Land, became the foundation of the "Dark Enlightenment" philosophy that has swept its way across the intellectual milieu of Western right-leaning political thought. The advancing wave of "postliberal"

thinkers, who espouse a variety of illiberal ideals, both draw on and influence the broad umbrella of "Dark Enlightenment" thought that people like Yarvin helped craft. Patrick Deneen, a prominent postliberal thinker, has recently articulated a vision for how a techno-populist (or DOGE-MAGA) alliance might work.

The Dark Enlightenment movement, also sometimes called the "neo-reactionary movement," or NRx, is not a single entity. Yarvin's advocacy for monarchism, which became one of the flashpoints that differentiated him from many other right-leaning commentators of the 2000s, has also shifted over time, reflecting Yarvin's chimerical nature. Moreover, not all modern monarchist movements are the same. If you were to compare Yarvin with the members of *Action Française,* for example, the overlap between their ideas would be significant, but not totalizing. Fundamentally, Yarvin advocates for a monarch-like figure who acts as a corporate CEO for the country, making unilateral decisions and running what he calls the "gov-corp" as a preference over the messy realities and inefficiencies of democratic government. *Action Française* wants a genuine return to the righteous monarchs of their national history—whether that is realistic is an entirely separate discussion—and so the concepts are not perfect parallels. This does not mean, however, that *Action Française* is unaware of the far-reaching changes currently happening within the American government.

Yarvin's advocacy for a kind of corporate, tech-driven, monarchical system has caught on with some Silicon Valley-adjacent CEOs. Elon Musk, who is currently wielding the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) as a chainsaw to cut through a swathe of government bureaucracies, is an obvious example. But Peter Thiel, Marc Andreessen, and Balaji Srinivasan have all joined in the chorus of tech voices emulating Yarvin's call for a cutthroat, corporate-style government. As *Action Française* members write in their newsletter, the emergence of technocrats like Musk as a new aristocracy provides a strange, but for some, welcome, bridge between public and private entities. Zuckerberg, Bezos, Musk, and others represent, they argue, a "new dynasty" of American politics oriented around high-tech postliberalism. The extent to which the Europeans want to emulate the American tech monarchists, however, is far less than their desire to make political inroads in the unsettled political geography of Europe.

American Monarchism's Deep Roots

The critical distinctions between American monarchists and their European counterparts lie in their respective histories. The phrase "American monarchist" conjures images of loyalists during the Revolutionary era. After all, when else did Americans of any stripe yearn for a king? By contrast, European countries generally have long histories that stretch back through the feudal era and the fall of the Roman Empire, where monarchical government was the only form of political organization, and where faith and law extended only as far as a king or queen's purview spread. Which is to say, monarchism has a long history in Europe, one that merges national identity, religious affiliation, and political ideology in ways that Americans cannot easily relate to directly. Since the founding era, Americans' civic attachments have been forged by republican norms and a republican constitution.

And yet, few though they may be, there have always been Americans who have entertained the idea of a monarch, or some kind of less democratic system, to overcome what they see as the limitations of democratic governance. Prominent early debates between Federalists and Anti-Federalists, such as those between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson over the United States' banking system, reflect the inherent tensions within the American political system over the size and scope of the executive branch's power. Prominent monarchists, like famed American architect Ralph Adams Cram in the early 1900s, drew on anti-Enlightenment ideas and Romantic-era notions of medieval history to justify their disdain for democracy. Dissent over the creeping power of the presidency since the founding has often evoked discussions of whether the President could become a de facto king and has led to robust debate over the role of the executive branch.

These are debates that went on even as presidential power steadily increased over the last hundred and fifty years of American history. As Cram enthused when President Franklin D. Roosevelt began to exert muscular executive power during the crises of the New Deal, it was about time a powerful president grabbed "the bull by the horns" to fix the problems America faced, democracy be damned. Yarvin himself has echoed this view, arguing that FDR's muscular presidency during the New Deal, which pushed against the boundaries of executive power, is exactly the kind of interventionist, monarchical presidency one would need to emulate in order to course correct the country and erode democratic

norms. The historical reality that FDR was constrained by several waves of electoral losses and Congressional pushback against his ambitious New Deal plans is less discussed by Yarvin or the coterie of illiberal voices that draw on FDR as an unusual inspiration.

The umbrella of NRx and Dark Enlightenment supporters is vast, and some within legal institutions and think tanks have indeed spent the last several years advocating more and more vocally for an "imperial" presidency in the style that Cram would have backed. Buttressed by legal interpretations, namely the "unitary executive theory," which allocates vast amounts of authority to the executive branch, advocates like law professors Christopher S. Yoo and John Yoo, and thinkers like Michael Anton at places like the Claremont Institute, have carved out the idea of a theoretical executive that could easily sidestep other branches of government. Legal scholars Adrian Vermeule and Eric Posner have especially leaned on this reasoning, arguing that the Constitutional framework is already in place to allow a powerful executive, because the system of checks and balances inherent to the American government has been "broken" for decades. In the face of the tumult of the modern world, they argue in *Executive Unbound* (2011), the United States has allocated more and more power to the executive branch through organic debate and necessity. Ultimately, they claim, populist responses to bad presidents are the natural check on a truly unfettered executive, not the glacial mechanics of the legislature or the courts—a line of reasoning that seems to be playing out in real time.

Visions for the Future: Caesar Meets Techno-Anarchism

Anton, who is on friendly terms with Yarvin and who recently became President Trump's Director of Policy Planning Staff, has made waves within far-right circles by proposing a theoretical "Red Caesar." Such a figure would suspend peace time law, unilaterally sweep aside the established American federal government, the bureaucratic state, and any forms of dissenting resistance on the Left, and usher in a conservative paradise—the exact qualities of which are up for debate.

Just as with the actual Julius Caesar, this Red Caesar would be a king in all but name, and the logical casualty of their rise would be the American Republic. Anton argues that such a Caesar would, in fact, restore a "semblance" of American unity through unilateral action, cutting through the chaotic democratic process and ending the sociopolitical unrest of what he calls a "cold civil war" between the Right and Left. Doing so, he claims, could involve eviscerating the "unmanageable" bureaucratic state or enforcing legal bindings on democratic norms to achieve the defeat of left-leaning cultural ideas. As he phrased it to critics, conservatives simply have no choice if they are to overcome the litany of problems they identify, and radical action is needed: "Dr. Conservatism needs to do better than his habitual 'Sorry about the cancer, here's a bottle of aspirin.'" Some within the NRx movement are ecstatic about the idea, while others remain troubled about the full disintegration of American democracy, even if they wish to delimit it to one extent or another. For American monarchists who explicitly want a king, these avenues are attractive because, unlike monarchist movements in Europe, there are no real royal bloodlines to resurrect or a shared heritage to draw upon, and so a new dynasty would have to be created whole cloth.

The most radical futurist visions arguably come from people more fully aligned with the NRx movement, like Thiel, Andreessen, or Srinivasan. They might not agree with the necessity for a monarch but still wish to fracture American democracy by default through extensive corporate ascendancy. Srinivasan, for example, has argued extensively for the creation of independent corporate states. Thiel and Andreessen have endorsed the "Freedom City" concept, where corporate power would establish and maintain cities on federal land dedicated to innovation, housing promotion, and other solutions to what they see as an over-regulated and anemic American economy. The extent to which a "Freedom City" would be subject to primarily corporate rather than federal oversight has led to fierce debate over the idea, though then-candidate Trump did endorse it in 2023.

The surge of tech influence over American politics, particularly among technocrats aligned toward NRx ideals, has deeply changed the tenor of illiberal discourse and opened up possibilities for disruption that seemed remote even just a few years ago. Yarvin, who has always been deep inside technology spaces, is also the founder of Urbit, a decentralized computer operating system and server platform that echoes the intentionality of the "Freedom City" by deregulating and privatizing online spaces. While libertarian idylls of the early 2010s focused on trying to prevent the government from taking over healthcare, the hyper-technological reach of the present day leans into almost anarcho-capitalist spaces.

Musk, Thiel, and others leverage artificial intelligence and other cutting-edge technologies to justify gutting the federal government and privatizing critical segments of the economy and political life in ways that neoliberal politicians had never dreamed of doing. It echoes, ironically, the systems of control that the medieval era epitomized: feudal land holdings by private individuals who also embody the state, giving heft to the claims by some scholars that we have entered into a "neofeudal" era of economic and political life. The tech wing of the NRx movement argues that CEOs, as Yarvin has often claimed, are in fact the most qualified individuals to run the complexities of a powerful country—after all, they ran complex companies. The blurry line between a CEO-president and a king is not something America's political systems are well equipped to debate.

All-American Neo-reaction

Perhaps what is especially surprising about the efficacy of monarchical thinking on the illiberal right in recent years is just how easily it can mesh with stereotypically "American" frameworks, institutions, and cultural touchstones. The historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. first coined the term "imperial presidency" six decades ago, around the Nixon administration and the Watergate scandal, to describe the advancing power of the executive and its threat to American federalism. Executive power has only increased since then, however, and the various factions of illiberalism have all offered justifications for a powerful, energetic executive that fits the imperial label Schlesinger so disdained.

For religiously affiliated illiberals, and social conservatives such as Patrick Deneen, the necessity of limiting progressive causes, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and LGBTQ rights feeds into, and justifies, their drive to exalt a powerful executive to sweep aside liberal foundations and build a new cohesive, conservative American culture from the ground up. In this regard, they tap into the same drive that powered the religious Right in the 1970s and 1980s but bring it to new heights. Yarvin and the more tech-oriented wing of the NRx elevate the corporate monarch as a knowledgeable decider: someone with an anarchic, extremely capitalist bent who can cut through the bureaucratic red tape to deliver boardroom-defining positions and eradicate resistance—like any good CEO would within a company. New technology like AI facilitates the process but also gives justification to the powerful executive and the corporate wing: they have, after all, initiated the creation of wondrous new things. Imagine what else they could do for the country at large! This speaks to the influence that corporate magnates and industrial power-men have always had when it comes to defining periods of American history and culture, whether it be an Andrew Carnegie in the Gilded Age, or the heyday of the 1980s fervor over Wall Street culture personified by characters like Gordon Gecko.

Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian debates over the role of the executive seem comparatively tame when juxtaposed with the suggestions of a Red Caesar or a CEO-king. Yet they speak to the same basic dynamic: a tension that has always existed at the heart of the American system over what power the President should have, and the scope and role of democratic governance through Congress and the rule of law. The fact that illiberal proponents have so flagrantly and quickly advanced their ideas does not mean their ideas are necessarily foreign to American intellectual soil. In fact, the rapid advancement of illiberal politics into the core of American governance speaks to how quintessentially *American* those ideas have always been in our history, and in the continued debate over rejecting or accepting them in turn.

Understanding Neoreaction: A Focus on Curtis Yarvin

Arnaud Miranda

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Since the inauguration of Donald Trump and his subsequent policy measures, the name of an intellectual movement has emerged that is said to be the secret inspiration behind the new administration: neoreaction, also referred to as the "Dark Enlightenment." At the head of this movement is blogger Curtis Yarvin, very close to Peter Thiel, Marc Andreessen (billionaire and informal advisor to the president), as well as political figures like Vice President JD Vance and administration officials like Michael Anton. Yarvin is said to have inspired Elon Musk's DOGE as well as the Gaza plan. Determining the precise influence of neoreactionary ideas on the new administration is difficult without an in-depth field investigation. However, we can already examine neoreactionary thought. Where does it come from? What are its normative proposals? In other words, what is the political theory of neoreaction?

Where Does Neoreaction Come From?

To fully grasp the specificity of the neoreactionary movement, we must recognize it as a genuine intellectual counterculture. Neoreaction emerges online, through blogs and forums, and through the virtual meeting of two key figures: Curtis Yarvin and Nick Land. We can identify two founding moments in the structuring of the neoreactionary constellation.

In April 2007, Curtis Yarvin, an American engineer, launched his blog *Unqualified Reservations* under the pseudonym Mencius Moldbug. His first post, "A Formalist Manifesto," clearly outlines his political project. In it, Yarvin presents himself as a committed but disillusioned libertarian. Libertarianism, which aims to limit or abolish the state in favor of unregulated liberalism, is here an "extremely obvious idea" that "has never been successfully implemented." The mistake of libertarians, he argues, is that they see their ideology as "the culmination of democracy," whereas democracy is fundamentally "inefficient and destructive" (Yarvin acknowledges his intellectual debt to Hans-Hermann Hoppe, a disciple of Murray Rothbard).

Between 2007 and 2008, thanks to a provocative style and prolific output, Yarvin built a base of readers, mainly from American libertarian circles. Firmly rejecting progressivism as one of the reasons we cannot rid ourselves of democratic absurdity, Yarvin defines himself as a reactionary, or even neo-, post-, or ultra-reactionary. The term "neoreactionary" will be adopted around 2010 to describe neoreaction as a full-fledged intellectual movement.

The second key moment is Nick Land's discovery of Yarvin. Land is a former philosopher from the University of Warwick and a leading figure of the CCRU, an avant-garde intellectual collective. Advocating an accelerationist perspective, Land criticizes the "miserabilism" of the left that tries to contain capitalism's harmful effects—instead, we should embrace and intensify its motion. This unconditional accelerationism leads him to adopt a pro-capitalist position and to become interested in Yarvin's thought. Starting in March 2012, on his blog *Urban Future* (now deleted), he published a series of articles titled "The Dark Enlightenment." This series will give neoreaction significant online notoriety and help establish it as an intellectual counterculture.

Neoreactionary Political Theory

If there is a neoreactionary political theory, it is found in Yarvin's writings; he, from his first post, declared his ambition to "build a new ideology." While Yarvin presents it as a development of libertarianism, he describes it as formalist and neocameralist. Let us try to explain these terms.

The fundamental element of Yarvin's thinking is the question of the efficiency of political systems. A political model is good if it manages to avoid violence—that is, the emergence of conflicts with uncertain outcomes. In this framework, politics is a struggle between order and chaos, within which "good is order." Any other concern, such as poverty or climate change, is insignificant. The goal is not to reimagine a fairer social order but to strengthen the existing one. This approach, which Yarvin calls *formalism*, is focused solely on constructing an efficient political engineering system. From this formalist standpoint, Yarvin analyzes the American state as a massive enterprise bogged down in inefficiency. Because political leaders are stuck in democratic mysticism and obsessed with social justice, American politics lacks coherence. No one really knows who is in charge or for what purpose.

To solve this, Yarvin proposes abandoning democracy and restructuring the government as a sovereign corporation (*sovcorp*), run by a CEO. This CEO would make government decisions based on what is most effective for ensuring the state's prosperity. And if you are not satisfied with the services of that government, you are free to choose another. For Yarvin, this formalist response is essentially a return to absolute monarchy. He therefore calls himself a "royalist" or "restorationist" and sees the government-corporation CEO as nothing more than a monarch. According to him, monarchy is an extremely stable political form, unlike democracy. Yarvin calls his model *neocameralism*, in reference to the cameralism of Frederick II of Prussia (a mercantilist theory tied to monarchy, aiming to increase the state's economic prosperity). However, old cameralism is not Yarvin's only reference—he views city-states like Dubai and Singapore as prototypes for future neocameralist states.

Avoiding Confusion: Neoreaction, Conservatism, Alt-Right, Accelerationism

To avoid misunderstanding the ideological nature of neoreactionary thought, it is important to clear up some intellectual confusions.

First, although Yarvin is a defender of order, this is not simply conservative thought. Yarvin does not promote the preservation of moral or religious values (he presents himself as an atheist or nontheist). He harshly criticizes conservatives who, being the corollary of progressives, are incapable of thinking about power as it is. According to Yarvin, conservatives are inherently tied to democracy. The reactionary nature of Yarvin's thought lies in the desire to dissolve politics into authoritarian economic engineering (he praises, in this regard, the prosperity and "relative absence of politics" in Singapore, Dubai, and Hong Kong).

Although neoreaction and the alt-right share a rejection of traditional conservatism, the two movements should not be confused. The alt-right is ethnonationalist, in that some of its factions explicitly promote the idea of white racial superiority. Neoreaction, by contrast, is formalist and elitist. Neoreactionaries despise populism as inherently democratic: any political change must come from above. Of course, these intellectual constellations are not impermeable and may converge strategically. Thus, when Yarvin denies being a supremacist, he hastens to add that he still reads them with interest.

Neoreaction is sometimes equated with accelerationism because of its connection to Nick Land. While the two currents converge, we must be precise. Land is an accelerationist before he is neoreactionary. He views neoreaction as an effective tool to destroy the "great braking mechanism" that is progress, but still sees it as "accelerationism with a flat tire." Conversely, although Land undeniably contributed to neoreaction's popularity, Yarvin does not cite him and remains largely impermeable to the accelerationist perspective. Neoreactionary thought is, above all, a thought of order.

While we have sought to define and contextualize neoreactionary thought through its leading figure, Curtis Yarvin, it would be a mistake to view it as a unified or homogeneous ideological bloc. Like any intellectual constellation, neoreaction is marked by internal contradictions—a subject we intend to explore further in the near future. Beyond the recent attention it has received lately, the political success of reactionaries will likely depend on their ability to carry their project beyond these contradictions.

Stop Calling them Libertarians: How the Tech Right Learned to Love the State

Suzanne Schneider

Nearly thirty years ago, the writer Paulina Borsook penned an influential essay, "Cyberselfish," that explored the naïve libertarianism of Silicon Valley's rising elite. Unlike the last generation of scientists who worked at Caltech or the Jet Propulsion Laboratory— "beneficiaries of government largesse" who acknowledged and embraced government as a force for good—the tech workers Borsook encountered suffered from selective amnesia. They seem to have forgotten how the road to Silicon Valley was paved with public funding, from the development of the Internet and microprocessors to the support for research universities that pioneered discoveries and trained computer engineers:

> These are the inheritors of the greatest government subsidy of technology and expansion in technical education the planet has ever seen; and, like the ungrateful adolescent offspring of immigrants who have made it in the new country, they take for granted the richness of the environment in which they have flourished, and resent the hell out of the constraints that bind them. And, like privileged, spoiled teenagers everywhere, they haven't a clue what their existence would be like without the bounty showered on them.

There is still much to recommend Borsook's piece on the "revenge of the nerds"—and particularly the nature of rule by "those whose greatest strengths have not been the comprehension of social systems, appreciation of the humanities, or acquaintance with history, politics, and economics." Yet, nearly three decades on, there is also reason to doubt whether "libertarian" remains an adequate descriptor of Silicon Valley's dominant political culture—not least because the libertarian label obscures the nature of the "broligarch" assault on American democracy.

From Libertarianism to Turbocapitalism

It's often taken for granted that tech billionaires like Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, and David Sacks are libertarian warriors facing off against big government: bio-hacked knights in self-driving cars out to slash regulation, public spending, taxes. Rather than relying on the stories that tech elites spin about their political commitments, it is more instructive to look at their behavior: from the demand for a government bailout of Silicon Valley Bank to the critical role that federal funding has played in the success of Elon Musk's companies, to the tech set's pivot toward defense technologies in an attempt to capture lucrative military contracts. Among the lucky recipients of the latter are Anduril Industries, the defense startup whose founder achieved infamy by creating an exploding VR headset that kills the user if they die while playing a video game. As Anduril President Christian Brose stated in a recent interview, "We have relationships with the current administration – it's not secret that our founder has given money to Trump and is very supportive of Trump and has been for a very long time." As he added, "At the level of vibes, it's good."

Peter Thiel's own political evolution is instructive in this regard. Though never abandoning the libertarian label, Thiel has thrown his support behind the National Conservatism movement and its protégé, Vice President J.D. Vance. As I've noted elsewhere, national conservatives have broken with libertarian principles on everything from free trade to industrial policy, the centrality of individual

freedom, and pro-natalism. In a 2020 article for the libertarian outlet, *Reason*, Brian Doherty expressed alarm that Thiel's change of heart signaled a world in which "ideas libertarians once thought were reasonably and blessedly settled on the right…are now up for grabs." And indeed, the NatCon project represents an aggressive attempt to use state power to inculcate a particular type of public virtue. As Doherty noted about Thiel's address at the 2019 National Conservatism conference in Washington, D.C., "The dog that never barked in Thiel's long disquisition on national conservatism was any concern about government size, scope, or spending. Nor was there any nod toward the moral value and material fecundity of free markets."

In truth, there were indications long before 2020 that Thiel's self-professed libertarianism ran afoul of his actions. The most obvious of these is Palantir, the massive data mining and surveillance company that Thiel co-founded in 2003, which has become synonymous with the invasion of privacy on a grandiose scale. As Bloomberg News wrote in a 2018 profile, the company "is using War on Terror tools to track American citizens." The CIA was an early investor and customer and government agencies—from ICE and domestic police forces to the UK's National Health Service and the Israeli Defense Ministry—account for the majority of Palantir's revenue. Today the company enjoys a higher market capitalization than Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and General Dynamics combined. We cannot take seriously the supposed libertarianism of a man who co-founded a surveillance company fueled by government contracts.

Like many of his cohort, Thiel has been particularly influenced by the writing of Curtis Yarvin, a computer engineer turned philosopher of the so-called Dark Enlightenment. Yarvin identifies first and foremost as a monarchist, calling for a revolution to overthrow American democracy and install a CEO-sovereign-qua-absolute-dictator who will govern the country like a start-up. Notably, Yarvin does not believe that the public sector is innately inept or that small government can cure what ails us. As he writes in an essay that lays out a vision of "the maximal state":

> When we think about how government works, we are used to thinking of the public sector as inherently less energetic and efficient than the private sector. While this is often true, it is not inherently true. It is a specific, contingent situation, resulting from specific prerequisites both public and private.
>
> When the government is properly rebooted, the energy of the public sector becomes greater than the energy of any startup ever. This energy may still be inefficient. It is not inherently inefficient, though.

Tellingly, Yarvin reaches for colonial metaphors to describe the model he would like to implement in Western democracies. He suggests that El Salvador—whose president, Nayib Bukele, has emerged as a right-wing hero for making Bitcoin legal tender and imprisoning immigrants deported by the Trump administration—would be the perfect place to pilot a "sovereign reboot": overturning the existing government and replacing it with a "startup regime" staffed by "YC founders, McKinsey veterans, Google engineers, SpaceX rocket scientists, hedge-fund masters, etc." But successfully executing the plan would require breaking with the libertarian impulses popular among the tech set: "Under a startup regime in an old Third World country—possibly even an old First World country—the central government is the most energetic and efficient way to accomplish anything. This runs contrary to almost every expert's political intuition."

Yarvin proposes a new fusion of the public and private sector, one in which the state identifies key competitive industries, nationalizes them to optimize their performance, and then eventually privatizes them. He even coins a new term to refer to this new political-economic amalgam: *turbocapitalism*. As he explains, "Under turbocapitalism, the state establishes a new private sector using public-sector energy, by first scaling up a high-efficiency productive sector, then privatizing it." The model he has in mind for these state-run monopolies is "the classic joint-stock company" that colonized the globe in search of raw materials and markets—one in possession of "durable, centralized, absolute executive authority fully confident in its own legitimacy and permanence."

Prior to last January, Yarvin was little known beyond the tech world and scholars of the New Right. The ascension of Elon Musk to grand vizier—and the subsequent havoc that DOGE has unleashed on federal agencies and workers—has spurred many to take a closer look. You will not find a skeleton key to the Trump administration hiding in Yarvin's medley of sophomoric arguments, meaningless historical

anecdotes, and winks to white nationalists. What you will find, however, is a clear articulation of Silicon Valley's shifting ethos: libertarianism may have worked for our ancestors, but current conditions require a more aggressive stance. The democratic state must be captured and dismantled—not in the name of freedom, but in that of efficiency, profit, and a certain type of law and order.

Catastrophes Lurking…

Referring to this political orientation as libertarian not only misses much of what is intellectually noteworthy. It also understates the danger by failing to recognize the stakes and vision of those who stand opposed to the democratic project, whether in the United States or abroad. What other terms might be better suited for the moment? Techno-feudalism is one option: a scenario in which the seizure and dismantling of state capacity—even of the state's traditional monopoly on violence—creates a highly stratified society characterized by tiered access to basic social services, from medical care to firefighters. The crucial factors separating this dystopian vision from an Ayn Rand fantasy (which even Milton Friedman dismissed as too extreme) are a) the realization that the state's democratic mechanisms must be dismembered; so that b) public resources can be "productively" redirected to pad the profit margins and market caps of patriotic entrepreneurs.

Perhaps there are other, older terms and frameworks that can still yield fresh insights. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt described imperialism as a process in which the owners of capital convinced politicians and citizens alike "to identify the economic interests of a relatively small group with national interests as such." Unable to achieve their goal of endless accumulation without "the expansion of the national instruments of violence," businessmen set out to conquer both the mechanisms of government and logic of politics. They "became politicians and were acclaimed as statesmen, while statesmen were taken seriously only if they talked the language of successful businessmen."

The disastrous consequences of this merger of economic power with political violence were first felt in the colonies, but in turn came home to haunt the metropole in the form of totalitarianism. Describing the era of high imperialism that extended from 1884-1914, she wrote, "Some of the fundamental aspects of this time appear so close to totalitarian phenomena of the twentieth century that it may be justifiable to consider the whole period a preparatory stage for coming catastrophes." It's a lesson well worth recalling as our own catastrophes lurk on the horizon.

The New Anti-Managerial Caesarism: How Two Concepts from James Burnham Came to Define the New Right

Joshua Tait

In the twilight of a democratic-managerial regime, "the masses will seek to transmute even a haberdasher into a mask of Caesar." So prophesied the 20th-century writer James Burnham.

The New Right's ideas are usually not new. Their concepts usually have an older lineage within the broader American Right, which helps to make the ideas accessible and meaningful to their contemporary purveyors. Among the New Right thinkers who have emerged in the past decade to explain Donald Trump (and to staff his administrations), the concepts of Managerialism and Caesarism both have growing currency. These concepts represent some of the New Right's most significant deviations from conservative republican constitutionalism, and they share an intellectual history. Both were theorized and popularized in American right-wing circles by the cult theorist James Burnham, who saw Caesarism as a political corollary of the "Managerial Revolution" he diagnosed.

For all his faults, though, Burnham strenuously opposed the Caesarism he worried may be inevitable. His successors and admirers have proven poor students, mistaking the disease for a cure, and toying ominously with embracing their own Caesars.

Caesarism and MAGA's "Red Caesar"

Caesarism has had a range of meanings. For a brief time, it served as an academic term of art for authoritarian regimes ruled by a charismatic leader and endorsed by plebiscitary votes—think Mussolini, de Gaulle at various points, and Napoleon III. Napoleon III was so emblematic that Bonapartism was frequently a synonym for Caesarism.

More recently, New Rightists have begun experimenting with Caesarism as a plausible future for American politics. The "New Right now often discusses a Red Caesar, by which it means a leader whose post-Constitutional rule will restore the strength of his people," notes Hillsdale's Kevin Slack. Michael Anton, formerly of Hillsdale's Washington, DC, satellite and currently the Director of Policy Planning Staff in the Trump Administration, probed the possibility of Caesarism in his 2020 book, *The Stakes: America at the Point of No Return*. Anton defines Caesarism as "authoritarian one-man rule partially legitimized by necessity." Although he officially thinks a Red Caesar—a strongman representing Red State America—is unlikely to succeed, he nonetheless surfaces Caesarism, Red or Blue, as a realistic possibility.

As the root word "Caesar" implies, Caesarism is built on a Roman analogy that claims the American republic is in near-terminal decline. Right-wing influencer Dave Reaboi has made much hay out of this parallel, describing the present moment as the "Late Republic." You only need a cursory knowledge of Roman history to know what came after that: namely, the death of the republic and an empire under the rule of the Caesars. Fittingly, the most absurd figure associated with Caesarism, Charles Haywood, prefers the term "Augustan." Haywood, a former haircare magnate with intellectual and political

pretensions, openly favors Caesarism, writing, "I like, if not love, the idea of Red Caesar" and "Let's get on with it."

Historically, conservative intellectuals have opposed Caesarism, generally seeing it as a left-wing or at least statist phenomenon. Anton and Slack's Hillsdale connection is not a coincidence, since the college is closely linked with the Claremont Institute and its brand of West Coast Straussianism. Indeed, Reaboi and Haywood have frequently engaged with Claremont or Claremont-adjacent enterprises, too. The Caesarist undercurrent at Claremont makes some sense insofar as West Coast Straussianism's fixation on statesmanship has always had a personalist element to it, and under Trump this statesmanship has undergone an authoritarian shift. Of all the conservative think tanks, the Claremont Institute shifted toward Trump the earliest and most emphatically. It may be that toying with Caesarism—a concept they are officially ambivalent about—performs a psychological function, a mode of abstract distancing, that allows Claremonters to engage with (and, in a way, to legitimate and defang, since Caesar as a historical figure is ambiguous overall) the often unstatesmanlike and ideologically amorphous Trump in a way that feels familiar. There is a parallel here to Evangelical leaders' framing him as the good Persian king, Cyrus.

A theme in Burnham's work saw Caesarism—sometimes Bonapartism—as the signal threat posed by democratism, or an unreflective faith in democracy. Unless thoroughly disciplined by republican myth and normative constitutional structures, Burnham argued, mass democracy reduces complex challenges to binary choices, usually between charismatic candidates or largely symbolic slogans.

There is perhaps a minor parallel to be found in the thought of West Coast Straussianism's key thinker, Harry Jaffa. From entirely different premises to Burnham, Jaffa dedicated nearly half of his *magnum opus*, *The Crisis of the House Divided*, to a sophisticated and ultimately negative assessment of majoritarian democracy. In his more intemperate writings, Jaffa would equate majoritarianism divorced from his favored guiding principles with Nazism.

In *The Machiavellians*, published in 1943, and *Congress and the American Tradition*, published in 1959, Burnham suggested that a two-way process pushed democracies toward Caesarism. On the one hand, he wrote, successful democratic leaders undergo a "psychological metamorphosis," identifying themselves with the party or nation: "Criticism of the group is personal libel against the leader; criticism of the leader is subversion and treason against the group." On the other hand, the logic of democracy necessarily turns the "will of the people" into the "will of the majority" in a plebiscitary vote. The leaders elected in a majority vote in turn, Burnham claimed, wield their victory with the moral certainty of "the Divine Right of Demos" that overrides traditions, norms, and paper barriers. Caesarism, for Burnham, "is a popular, a democratic despotism, founded on democratic doctrine, and, at least in its initiation, committed to democratic forms." And while Caesarism, "in fact rather than in theory, denies democracy, it does so by bringing democracy to completion."

Burnham as the Theorist of Managerialism

Burnham's other concept, Managerialism, is both more original and more mainstream. Managerialism holds that there exists a distinct class of "managers." Neither working class nor capitalists, managers are technicians whose claim to power rests on their ability manipulate the complex economic and technological systems of an industrialized and post-industrialized society. The managerial class, consciously or not, seeks to advance its own interests and to justify its dominant place in society. The idea has a strong pedigree across the political spectrum, especially through the concept of the "professional-managerial class" (although with totally different emphases and implications for the Left and the Right). The concept is currently in vogue. The Substacker and rising New Right thinker Nathan Levine, pen name NS Lyons, promoted the concept in a recent *New York Times* op-ed: "What is commonly called populist politics," Levine wrote, "can be more accurately described as part of an anti-managerial revolution attempting to roll back the expansion of overbearing bureaucratic control into more and more areas of life."

In 1941's *The Managerial Revolution*, Burnham divined that an epochal shift was underway. He saw capitalism and its attendant liberal ideology giving way to the new managerial regime. He predicted that soon a new ideology would emerge to justify this new world order. Burnham saw the managerial revolution advanced in Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany, where apparatchiks wielded the awesome power of the state, and partially in FDR's transformation of the American state in the New Deal.

In a tetralogy spanning his break from Trotskyism to his role as a foundational figure for American conservatism, Burnham outlined his sometimes perceptive, sometimes hysterical view of the modern political order. A conscious "Machiavellian" and an ex-Marxist, he paid close attention to the ways in which (in his view) political structures worked beneath the rhetoric and assumptions of modern liberal democracy. In particular, his *Congress and the American Tradition*, part of a larger conservative literature that emphasized congressional supremacy over the executive, warned presidential expansions of power would soon eclipse America's traditional republican government entirely.

Intriguingly, Burnham discerned a particular link between Managerialism and Caesarism. To him, Caesarism was not only the likely outcome of democratism, but of Managerialism as well. Traditional republican politics made little sense in a mass society. Thus, in *Congress and the American Tradition*, Burnham wrote:

> Within the emergent managerial society the typical political form links a huge, pervasive governmental bureaucracy with a Caesarism-tending political leadership sanctioned by mass plebiscites. This combination, supported by a bureaucratized military and police apparatus, operates primarily through administrative decree while using an assembly as recording device and sounding board.

Although he, citing Amaury de Riencourt, predicted the rise of Caesars globally, including in the United States, Burnham detested Caesarism. In fact, despite his pronounced tendency toward catastrophism, within the conservative movement, Burnham was something of a political moderate, at least domestically. Working from his idiosyncratic outlook, Burnham wanted to balance elites and maintain a fruitful cycling of elites within America's governing structures in order to sustain political freedoms.

Sam Francis and Burnham's Long Shadow

In his op-ed for the *Times*, Levine was right to cite Burnham; he also included Samuel T. Francis, a conscious student of Burnham's thought. The late Francis is a controversial figure, a fact that Levine elides. He was fired from the *Washington Times* for racist writings, and before his death in 2005, he associated openly with white nationalists. But Francis has been "rediscovered" since 2016, since his Burnhamite populist analysis seems awfully prescient regarding Trumpism.

Francis saw the contemporary American order as a liberal managerial state that took its justification and motivation from progressive egalitarian dogmas. Within the counter-institutions of the conservative movement, Francis was often in the minority. He and his peers, the "paleoconservatives" and the then-"New Right," felt frustrated and denied patronage by—as they saw it—the half-way conservatives like William F. Buckley who gate-kept and calumnied them. Francis synthesized a range of paleoconservative and New Right ideas, including the need for an alliance with a "Middle American" voting bloc to smash progressive elite hegemony, and worked them into his Burnhamite framework.

One place Francis deviated from typical conservative articles of faith, even among the diehards of the New Right, was on the wielding of state power. "The New Right must abandon the political style of the Old Right," Francis declared. It must recognize the extent to which the managerial class had infiltrated "Congress, the courts, the bureaucracy, the media." Given this analysis, he therefore called for the Right to use "the 'Caesarist' tactic" as a "spearhead" against the managerial administrative state. "Only the presidency is capable of dismantling or restructuring the bureaucratic-managerial apparatus that now strangles the latent dynamism" of the Middle Americans whom Francis hoped the New Right would ride to power.

Francis specifically looked to Nixon and his vice president, Spiro Agnew, as progenitors of his new vision. He also cited the conservative academic Jeffrey Hart, who in the fallout of Watergate advocated for conservatives to make a "drastic shift" in their conception of executive power. "The only way" the federal bureaucracy could be "diverted, cut back, or eliminated" was "through the action of a powerful President who is willing virtually to go to war within his own executive branch in order to carry out his mandate," Hart wrote in 1974. Equally, the power of the media to set nationwide narratives necessitated a potent executive response.

Hart and later Francis came to see Caesarism less as a threat than as something preferable to the progressive administrative state (or, in their view, soft left-wing Caesarism). They diverged from

Burnham partly for generational reasons. Hart was 25 years younger; Francis was 42 years younger. The rise of communist and fascist states that formed the backdrop of Burnham's intellectual development were relics by the 1970s and 1980s when Hart and Francis wrote.

More importantly, for Hart and Francis, right-wing control of the presidency had become a tantalizing possibility. The collapse of the New Deal coalition in the late 1960s, and the subsequent coalescence of a right-wing alternative that powered Nixon in 1972 and would later elect Reagan and Bush, changed the political calculus for right-wing intellectuals long denied access to the presidency. Against the conservative tendency to favor congressional supremacy over the "imperial presidency," Hart and Francis began an alternative tradition that elevated the executive, based on right-wing competitiveness in presidential—what Burnham once considered plebiscitary—elections. The ramifications of this shift are clear in the turn toward the "unitary executive theory" in conservative legal thinking.

Echoes of Watergate

The divergent paths conservatives have taken are perhaps seen most clearly in these thinkers' contrasting responses to the Watergate scandal.

Nixon's landslide reelection in 1972 was essential to the conservative movement's early days because it served as proof of concept. The long theorized conservative majority *was* real, or at least it proved capable of electing right-of-center candidates.

Burnham's sincere dislike for Caesarism and centralized power helps to explain his actions during Watergate. During the scandal, when many conservatives' first instinct was to obfuscate Nixon's possible culpability in the break-in and to blame the media, Burnham pushed the conservative magazine *National Review* against Nixon (over internal opposition). He saw in Nixon, who combined major plebiscitary victories with cynical use of the bureaucratic state, as a step toward the political program he feared. "Even if the U.S. is fated to be transformed into a Caesarist empire," Burnham wrote at the time to his son, "and even if that is necessary to its survival, I still don't like Caesarism."

For other parts of the Right, including Francis and Hart, Watergate proved that winning elections wasn't enough. Burnham recognized Nixon's downfall as the republican order working itself out; in fact, he participated in it. Francis and others, though, came to see it as a slow-motion coup. The Watergate scandal showed how an alliance between the media and administrative (or managerial) state could bring down a democratically elected leader and subvert the will of the people. It all but demanded a new kind of strongman response.

Hart, Francis, Levine, and some of the Claremonters today, see Caesarism as part of this longer historical trajectory—as a way of righting much older wrongs, and as a weapon for defeating the administrative state they revile.

They are, however, very poor students of James Burnham, having inherited some of his analytic categories and his catastrophism, while at the same time dispensing with his judgment and aversion to Caesarism, and to an overweening executive. They have transformed Caesarism from a force to be diagnosed and averted into a possible pathway forward, to be tolerated and perhaps even encouraged. In this respect, they are like elites in Germany and Italy and Spain, who, out of fear of Communist revolution, backed right-wing strongmen who left millions dead and their countries in ruin.

Whether Trump proves to be their man, or that turns out to be someone else entirely, our contemporary Caesarists risk parlaying America's political institutions into the service of a Caesar who demands his due. American democracy—and Republicanism—are made all the worse for their bad judgment.

Part III

On Liberalism and Modernity

Good Liberals, Bad Cave: A Review of *Liberalism as a Way of Life*

Laura K. Field

If you pay attention to the MAGA New Right, you will notice a pattern whereby their premier thinkers often wax allegorical about the liberal order in terms that echo Plato's image of the cave. The names they confer upon liberal democracy are varied and motley: We hear of the "administrative state" and the "managerial elite," the Cathedral, Longhouse, Gynocracy, and Davoisie. Postliberals like Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeule speak of "Liberalocracy" and "Sacramental Liberalism"; others of the "Negative World" or simply the "Regime." But from these various right-wing factions, you will hear a chorus of red-pilled agreement: The liberal democratic way of life is emasculating and unholy, hypocritical, socially corrosive, and unstable. Perhaps above all else, it is dishonest: "They are lying hypocrites!" the chorus exclaims.

Into this counter-revolutionary fray waltzes the political theorist Alexandre Lefebvre, with his wonderfully unconventional book, *Liberalism as a Way of Life*. Lefebvre, originally from Canada and now based in Australia, is not writing for America's New Right reactionaries, but their arguments clearly inform and shape the book, and presumably he is hoping to reach some of their audience, too. But this is the rare and refreshing book about liberalism that does not seem secretly intimidated by the Right. Lefebvre hears the right-wing chorus, acknowledges the truth of some of what they have to say, and then moves on to defending liberalism on his own terms and providing some inoculation juice against the illiberal red pill. For reasons that I will get into, *Liberalism as a Way of Life* is not the book that I would have written about liberalism, but I am so glad that liberals have this work from him.

Concessions of a Liberal

Lefebvre, refreshingly, makes a number of concessions to liberalism's critics right upfront. He concedes that liberalism does dominate modern Western societies; he concedes that liberalism is not neutral but rather is its own form of regime in the classical sense: its values constitute our broader civic values, impact us as citizens, and help make us into the people we are. Lefebvre uses a water metaphor to convey the point: Liberalism is, as the title of chapter 1 puts it, "the water we swim in"—to the point where the younger fishes among us take it entirely for granted and have trouble recognizing that the water even exists. "Liberal principles, values, and sensibilities," Lefebvre writes, "have become so pervasive as to be mistaken for common sense and even human nature" (12-13). In other words, he acknowledges, we live in a liberal cave: "Its ideals and sensibilities are indeed omnipresent in the public and background culture of Western democratic societies" (13).

Lefebvre's other big move is to concede that there is much about cave liberalism that is bad: he even has his own name, "liberaldom," for the pathological version. Liberaldom may indeed be bad, but that doesn't mean you should give up on the real thing. For Lefebvre, the fact that liberalism isn't fully neutral is not such a big deal. But the fact that liberals don't live up to their own ideals—the fact of genuine hypocrisy—is a real problem, and Lefebvre gives it its due.

His "liberaldom" frame is inspired by the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard's notion of (faux) "Christendom." He explains the parallels in chapter 6, "Pretend Liberals in a Pretend Liberal World." In the 1800s, Kierkegaard wrote scathing critiques of the Christians and clerics of his

era, who failed miserably to live up to the demands of the faith, and in so doing perpetuated a false or synthetic version of Christianity. "Compared with the Christianity of the New Testament," Kierkegaard wrote (and Lefebvre quotes), "[Christendom] is play acting at Christianity… [W]hat does it mean to play? It means to counterfeit, to mimic a danger where there is no danger, and in such a way that the more art one applies to it the more deceptively one can pretend as if there were danger." Lefebvre summarizes the point: "This is a world of deceit, self-deceit, and sanctimony that mocks the truth it is built on" (116).

Liberaldom is not so different; there are reasons why terms like Cathedral, Longhouse, and Liberalocracy exist. Liberaldom, he writes, "is liberalism compromised, in both senses of the word: a settlement between itself and other ideologies *and* a lowering of its standards. Liberaldom, we could say, is the craven capitulation to unliberal values that threaten to destroy your and my spirit." Lefebvre holds up the possibility of a liberalism beyond Liberaldom. He wants liberals to be better: to learn to be good liberals in a world where there are so few. This is a very unusual way for a liberal to write and speak about liberalism, but it captures what is actually at stake. And Lefebvre is adamant: "That we live in liberaldom and not liberalism is obvious," he writes, before rattling off a good list of liberalism's pathologies and deformations.

Lefebvre's standard for judging all of this is Rawlsian: at its core, liberalism aims to be "a fair system of cooperation." And it is falling short on every front, even when liberals and Democrats are at the helm. He recommends a short clip produced by the *New York Times* called "Liberal Hypocrisy Is Fueling American Inequality." Liberals are failing to live—or govern—according to their values, and the result is inequality, dysfunction, and polarization. Late in the book, Lefebvre writes: "We so often exacerbate [polarization] by claiming a monopoly on correct opinion. Bad for our society and bad for us, we fuel a culture that betrays who we claim and aspire to be" (232).

What Went Wrong?

Given the current state of affairs, the temptation for many political theorists is to blame John Rawls, the premier liberal theorist of the 20th Century. As someone who spent most of my academic life studying with Straussians, who tend to view Rawls with disdain, I am certainly subject to this temptation. To me, Rawls' work was always too arid and narrow to sustain my own personal interest, let alone justify the current world order. I wanted to read Plato and Nietzsche, psychologize, and think about the grand sweep of history; "justice as fairness" didn't stand a chance. Even though I valued liberal democracy, it seemed clear to me that it needed different, and better, champions.

Here Lefebvre thwarted my expectations, in part by articulating in precise terms the way in which Rawlsian thought *has* been to blame, and in part by doing his part to resuscitate dimensions of Rawls that so many of us fail to appreciate.

To be sure, Lefebvre's main purpose in the book is not to address or appease liberalism's critics, but he situates his work within a historical trajectory that helps us to understand where liberalism has faltered. And part of his argument is that liberalism has failed by conceding too much ground to opponents and outsiders, thereby weakening its own sense of positive vision and purpose. It is a move addressed as much to critics coming from the left, like Domenico Losurdo (who would have us acknowledge liberalism's flawed legacy more forthrightly), as well as critics from the right like Patrick Deneen (who argues that liberalism was doomed from the start). Lefebvre joins Helena Rosenblatt and others like Josh Cherniss in uncovering the moral and ethical valences of earlier liberalisms, and joins Samuel Moyn and others in questioning the neoliberal and libertarian turns among so-called classical liberals. But for me, one of the most captivating portions of the book were where Lefebvre took on Rawls' legacy.

Liberalism as a Way of Life is in some respects a paean to Rawls: Lefebvre is an impassioned and loyal student of his, and he seems determined to present a Rawls, to borrow a phrase, made young and beautiful. That such a rehabilitation is necessary is thanks to two parallel phenomena related to the legacy: Today, liberalism is way more pervasive than in Rawls' time, while at the same time being much less known to us.

Lefebvre places some of the blame for this situation at Rawls' feet and seeks to save the early Rawls from the shadows cast by his elder self. From the perspective of political theory, he seeks to revive

portions of *A Theory of Justice* in a world that has been too enthralled by *Political Liberalism*. *Political Liberalism* was a book that sought to expand the appeal of liberal democracy in part by narrowing and minimizing the ethical demands it makes on citizens, all the better to accommodate a broader plurality. Lefebvre's point is not that this framework was bad; rather, he argues that the later book served up an unnecessarily narrow version of liberalism for *liberals qua liberals*. Unlike *A Theory of Justice,* it failed to endorse, let alone inspire, a liberal way of life. The "ideal (of the liberal person)," writes Lefebvre, "is comprehensive, and covers many aspects of our character and the kind of life we want to lead; the second ideal (of the liberal citizen) is limited by comparison, and concerns only how we see ourselves in our capacity as members of liberal democracy." Rawls' later work was emphatic that a liberal theory of justice need not be tied to any specific worldview, and as a matter of history, the distinctively liberal worldview got subsequently sacrificed along the way.

Political Liberalism, explains Lefebvre, was written for people who didn't see themselves as liberal, and made serious accommodations for moral and religious pluralism. But this focus on citizenship meant leaving liberals to fend ethically for themselves. Lefebvre echoes Katrina Forrester, whose own book on Rawlsian liberalism "tells a ghost story, in which Rawls' theory lived on as a spectral presence long after the conditions it described were long gone" (71). Lefebvre agrees, at least as concerns political liberalism, which he argues has become the lingua franca of the field.

The results, as Lefebvre describes it, are shocking, but certainly ring true: Thanks in part to the success of political liberalism, "contemporary political philosophy has nothing to say about how best to live." Political liberalism obfuscates our reality in two distinctive ways. First, it obscures the growing pervasiveness of liberal ideals and sensibilities: "The firewall that political liberalism draws between comprehensive doctrines and a liberal political conception obscures this changed landscape" (80-81). Second, but perhaps more importantly, it positively preempts liberal moral self-understanding: "The philosophers best placed to tell us who we are not only have designed a theory that does not say, but, to rub salt into the expectation, too, patiently explain why the request is beyond the remit of political philosophy" (81). In other words, the liberal political frame is so committed to moral pluralism that it all but denies ethics and philosophy as proper subjects for liberals. What a mess.

The Liberal Way of Life

Lefebvre's diagnosis of the problem of contemporary liberalism—or at least of contemporary liberal philosophy—is as compelling as any I have heard, and it sets him up well to take on one slice of the project of liberal renewal that he endorses. As he observes, "The perfectionist and progressivist impulses of liberalism can—and indeed must—be redeemed if liberalism is to believe in itself again, attract a new generation of partisans, and reclaim the verve and futurity it once had." (119). But that is a very big and broad project, and Lefebvre's book is more targeted. He is not trying to widen the liberal tent, refute critics, or even convert his readers to liberalism. Rather, he is writing a work of "self-help for liberals in liberaldom" (119).

Lefebvre recognizes that, despite the extent to which our world is dominated by liberalism, liberals themselves are adrift, without good champions and role models, and without the chance for genuine self-understanding. "We who are liberal all the way down," he writes, "lack adequate models to understand how we came to be who we are" (82). He wants to help remedy that by rehabilitating liberalism as a comprehensive way of life, and putting it on a more self-aware, solid footing. Lefebvre's audience for the book is people he categorizes as "liberals all the way down." That is, people who have been brought up in liberal culture and identify with liberalism but don't really understand it and could use some principles, rituals, and forms to hold on to.

In this, Lefebvre's approach is still deeply Rawlsian, since he is working squarely within a broadly liberal purview. He is moving up from the liberal ground and monoculture to make the liberal cave visible to his fellow liberals, and then to take a tour of its best features and virtues. Liberalism is the water we swim in, which makes it hard to know, but it has a lot to recommend it: "Dive in," writes Lefebvre. "The water is just fine."

Lefebvre borrows from the French philosopher Pierre Hadot to articulate what it means to even have a way of life in the sense he means it, and then uses lesser-known passages from Rawls—with a focus on Part 3 of *A Theory of Justice*—to provide a portrait of liberal life and norms. The second half of *Liberalism as a Way of Life* is, as he puts it at one point, a trip into the deep end of the liberal waters.

This part of the book is fun to read, and Lefebvre's easy-going liberal spirit shines bright. He makes the kind of bold moral claims for liberalism that most liberals shy away from, at one point arguing, for example, that the liberal way of life is "a free and generous way of being that rivals aristocracy in quality and ambition" (129). Lefebvre includes many charming anecdotes from popular culture to illustrate the easygoing and likeable effects of liberalism; he introduces us to Mike from the *Borat* movie, whose chill tolerance and acceptance of Borat he rightly praises as an underappreciated product of liberalism. He pitches various liberal values (liberals care about reciprocity, the free self, the fair self, and so forth); he writes a pleasing chapter called "Seventeen Reasons to Be Liberal"; and he devotes three additional chapters to spiritual exercises and "soulcraft for liberals."

Though in some respects these latter were slightly too rooted in Rawlsian thought for my (admittedly prejudiced) tastes, Lefebvre succeeded in making me see the original position in new light, taught me to respect the notion of "reflective equilibrium," and revealed Socratic dimensions of Rawls' thought that I had never seen before. For example, he at times speaks in terms of liberal integralism and of the "desire to live more integrally," which to me sounds deeply Socratic. And he explains how Rawls frequently naturalized theological concepts—in part because liberalism has its origins in these other traditions—in order to "reclaim ideas that religion unduly stakes a monopoly over." That I did not know. I also appreciated his presentation of the Rawlsian notion of "public reason." Lefebvre writes that as liberals we can "listen with the ears of public reason to hear the reasonableness of other ways of being in the world" (230). He calls such listening "the spiritual exercise of public reason," and claims that three existential perks will follow from its practice: delight in others, a live-and-let-live attitude of tolerance, civility, and cheerfulness.

Ultimately, Lefebvre succeeds in rehabilitating lost facets of Rawls. While I might have wished for a book slightly less tethered to that ur-liberal philosopher, my view of Rawls has softened in reading Lefebvre. Furthermore, I can vouch for Lefebvre's claim that liberalism's radicalism can sneak up on a person, and that "conversion can be a slow and gradual process—one in which, day by day, we work to effect the change we want to become." That has certainly been my experience of liberalism over time.

Cave Liberalism?

I am probably not Lefebvre's target audience, since I have been thinking in terms of the liberal "cave" my entire adult life. But I laud his work and hope that it inspires many other volumes devoted to liberal culture and soulcraft.

I also have some criticisms. These are perhaps unfair to what Lefebvre set out to do, but worth articulating nonetheless, since they pertain to our broader political landscape and the future of liberalism within it. My concerns are threefold.

First, I wonder if Lefebvre isn't exaggerating liberalism's hegemony. While he is well aware of the challenges posed by the various illiberalisms of our time, I'm not sure he sufficiently acknowledges their cultural valences—perhaps because the power of illiberalism exists outside of the national liberal enclaves that are most accessible and familiar to liberals like him (and me). Illiberal cultural power is not so much in the universities or the sitcoms Lefebvre prefers, but it is out there: on Fox News and Joe Rogan, at CPAC and NatCon, and in the mega-churches and on the charismatic circuit. Liberalism dominates popular culture and Hollywood, but there are other cultures and hegemonic spaces all around us: they are just invisible to liberals because our world is so fragmented and dispersed. Some of us are marinating in liberalism; others are marinating in their rage against it. These things are both real.

If I am right in this first concern, then it might mean that this is the worst possible time to minimize the importance of political liberalism: Now more than ever, we need to defend liberalism as hyper-tolerant, accommodating, and pluralistic. Which is perhaps only to say that Lefebvre's defense of a liberal way of life must be made in conjunction with a powerful defense of political liberalism.

Ultimately, though, I believe the disagreements might run deeper. In reading Lefebvre's book and in reflecting on liberalism in recent years, I have come to realize that my own attachment to liberalism is related to its commitment to deep pluralism. For me, liberalism is valuable because it makes an open promise to the wild differences of humanity, allowing people to live differently, explore new ways of life, commit to things their parents hate, and live together despite different and conflicting deep

commitments. You can be a trad wife or a witch, or queer, fascist, or Quaker, and still be tolerated as a rights holder in a liberal polity. I like the liberal democratic cave because it is technicolor and multifarious, full of possibilities—not because it teaches me how best to live. To me, preserving the possibility of wild difference—and the contestation that it inevitably brings—matters more than articulating and defending liberalism as a comprehensive worldview.

The liberal cave is better than the rest because it offers what most antiliberals can't even seem to imagine: the possibility of self-directed freedom in a world of genuine choice. You can take the red pill again and again, but it won't get you that. Lefebvre's book shows that liberalism can take people somewhere good and decent; I want a cave that might still let us free.

Liberalism's Boundaries: Toward a New Local Politics

Travis Quigley

Liberal political philosophy is centrally concerned with the challenge of *pluralism*. We live in a society of many religions, cultures, and political persuasions. A standard question concerns the outer boundaries of this pluralism: what is the range of practices that can be accepted or at least tolerated, and which practices must be deemed unacceptable? How big is the tent?

I argue that our disputes over the outer boundaries of liberalism are shaped partly by its *inner* boundaries—that is, by the divisions between the different political jurisdictions within a federalist institution. It is easier to share a tent if its rooms are designed the right way.

Nationalized Politics and Its Consequences

There is something admittedly quaint about focusing on federalism and local politics. American politics is utterly dominated by national controversies, and state and local politics increasingly mirror national dynamics rather than focusing on their own backyard. This is, I suggest, an untenable foundation for liberal politics. If all we do is party-line vote based on our national party affiliations, then politics amounts to a winner-take-all battle. What this battle promotes, when fought over and over again, is not progressivism or conservatism but illiberalism: the stakes come to seem so high that the other side cannot be allowed to win, and the ideological lines come to be so sharp that compromise cannot even be considered.

Much of this is familiar. We have heard pleas for political moderation and comity, paeans to the American politics of the mid-20th century, time and time again. They seem both boring and woefully out of touch: you simply do not win elections by promising to be nicer than the other guy. Asking for a return to the old ways is hopeless if that means waiting for politicians to suddenly commit to disarmament, or for voters to suddenly favor it.

But we may, I think, learn lessons from the fundamental structure of both the American constitutional order and public opinion. We know that voters persistently approve of local politics more than national politics. This holds across a wide range of issues, from trust in political representatives to the assessment of the economy. The national economy—the single most important driver of national electoral politics—is only the aggregate of all the various local economies. But voters systematically and consistently think that their local economy is significantly better than the national economy. Needless to say, not every local economy can be above average. This single fact suggests that the American public is persistently *irrationally dissatisfied* with national politics. Because national politics dominates local politics in attentional salience, this means the public is, in some sense, irrationally dissatisfied with politics as a whole.

There is a simple logic to this: individuals have a considerable degree of choice over where they live, and therefore move, on the margin, to places that they prefer. This is often called *self-sorting*. The idea of self-sorting is sometimes elevated to a core political principle: to the extent that people are free to move, this seems to help legitimatize the coercive force of the state. I spend a lot of time on points like this in my dissertation, *Place-Based Liberalism*. But here my point is more prosaic. People obviously already self-sort to some degree: liberals move to coastal California or New York City or Colorado, conservatives to Texas or (in recent years) Florida. It only makes sense that this would result in at least somewhat greater average satisfaction with lower levels of government. But political attention is heavily

nationalized. If people are happier with local politics but more engaged by national politics, they will be more dissatisfied with politics overall than they ought to be. Further, self-sorting into different political locales will not serve as a release valve for political conflict if people are focused on zero-sum national conflicts rather than the diverse local level at which we can all be winners. (Or, more carefully, where there can be many *more* winners.)

Rebuilding Local Politics

Liberalism would be better served at both a practical and theoretical level, then, if citizens oriented themselves to a greater extent—of course not *completely*, just *more*—to local rather than national politics. I want to discuss three ways in which we might move toward a less nationalized politics. First, we might engage more deeply with the communities we interact with most in our own lives. Second, we might attempt to regulate some of the technologies that have taken attention away from our backyard and channeled it to nationalized conflicts. Third, and most fundamentally, we might try to strengthen the self-sorting logic of federalism such that citizens have greater and more practical reasons to engage in local politics.

The first approach is the simplest but least systematically actionable. Perhaps we should simply *see* that nationalized politics has become poisonously combative and look closer to home. Ezra Klein, toward the end of *Why We're Polarized*, reverts essentially to this path. Changes in political culture are not just a matter of institutions and policy. It is a worthwhile hope that people might simply decide to engage more deeply not just in local politics, but in local life more generally. No one *forces* us to learn all the key national political players rather than our city council members, or to spend our time on social media rather than in local public spaces. In general, people of all types spend significantly more time at home than they used to. This contributes to what Marc Dunkelman calls, in *The Vanishing Neighbor*, increased emphasis on the "inner-ring" social relationships of the family and "outer-ring" social relationships (so to speak) with mass media, to the detriment of the "middle-ring" of the community—in short, the level of local life and governance. If we simply made more time for the middle-ring, we would presumably care about it more and be a little less distressed by the conflicts of outer-ring national politics.

In one sense, individual action is the solution; but in another sense, it is not much of an *approach*. It is like addressing the health impacts of sedentary lifestyles by saying, "Well, people ought to exercise more." We need to understand why local politics collapsed and how to begin the process of rebuilding them. The second approach targets technological changes as its culprit, and especially the rise of ever more compelling and ever more personalized mass entertainment technologies. It is widely claimed (although it is difficult to give a knockdown argument) that social media usage, in particular, directly contributes to partisan polarization. That is probably true. But even non-political entertainment technologies contribute to political dissatisfaction by *crowding out* in-person communal activities that would strengthen one's "middle-ring" attachment to a particular place. To the extent that individuals live in atomized media environments, there is little reason for local society to be salient to them. This is especially pressing because entertainment technologies have become so compelling that they verge on addictive: not only social media (or more broadly, algorithm-driven entertainment), but online sportsbetting and, increasingly, artificial intelligence "companions" threaten to take up so much of our time that little is left for anything else. This seems like a recipe for ever-increasing discontentment, which can be directed mainly into national political conflict.

One idea, then, would be to regulate and restrict entertainment technologies directly, especially those that seem addictive (Although it is a difficult philosophical question to cash out the relevant sense of and criteria for addiction). Jonathan Haidt has recently brought significant attention to banning smartphones in schools. That would be a start, and I favor policies in this direction, both on the grounds discussed in this essay and beyond. But it is difficult to imagine such regulations going nearly far enough to address the more fundamental issues: paternalistic policy for school children is one thing, but extending that policy to everyone is quite another. Optimistically, perhaps a better school environment would lead more people to take individual action, as in the first approach. But that seems optimistic indeed.

The third and final approach is, in one sense, more dramatic but also avoids certain political and philosophical perils. My dissertation focused on the appeal (and problems) of *empowering local politics*. If local governments simply had more authority, they would presumably become more focal to

politics, at least in some cases. And to the extent that local politics became focal, national politics would be crowded out, while local self-sorting could do its work. Now, some issues here are constitutional—the US Constitution gives significant deference to states, but the purview of local authority is essentially at the discretion of the states. Constitutional reform is not a very practical path forward. But the school smartphones example is illustrative. Local governments often do have a lot of policy discretion, often much more than they actually exploit. How could we promote more *distinctive*, and therefore more *salient*, local governance?

The distinctiveness of local governance is linked to the mobility of individual citizens. Self-sorting in federalist institutions requires literally moving. The ability to move provides a fallback resolution for political disagreement—if you do not love it, you might truly be able to leave it—but also the prospect of discovery and progress. If you do not love it, you might be able to *find it*. This is not far-fetched or antithetical to American institutions: Yoni Appelbaum argues that the ability to move away from repression and toward economic opportunity and cultural cohesion was, in fact, the lifeblood of American society for much of its existence. It is only relatively recently—especially in the last fifty years or so—that American society has become, in Appelbaum's word, *stuck*.

Being stuck in one place, particularly in the era of home entertainment, does not seem to facilitate greater investment or engagement in local society. Instead, I suspect, it mainly fosters resignation: if I do not like where I live or how I am governed, and I cannot do anything about it, it is easier to retreat into the home and channel my dissatisfaction into anger at national politics.

There is, then, a natural and already-burgeoning agenda for a better and more local politics: the movement for greater housing affordability, especially as channeled through the idea of housing *abundance*. If we built a lot more housing, it would become cheaper to move, more realistic to move toward opportunity, and more crucial to govern cities in ways that make people want to move there. Local politics in America have, in a perverse twist, most potently made themselves felt via NIMBY ("not in my backyard") politics that have stifled mobility. Giving Americans back their freedom to move would, however, reinvigorate all the other (and far richer) dimensions of local governance. It is local communities that find ways to live together, or to fall apart.

Connected to the point above, I would also mention the considerably smaller niche of interest in redistributing wealth and providing welfare through cash payments, rather than in-kind transfers of goods and services. This is most often discussed under the heading of "universal basic income," but it is unnecessary to go that far when trying to complement housing reforms and promote mobility. For instance, public housing or housing vouchers tend to cut against mobility. If one has to make it to the top of a long waiting list to get public housing (or a rent-controlled apartment), then there is a massive disincentive not to leave thereafter. Similarly, if one has a housing voucher that is only usable in a certain jurisdiction. Simply giving people money significantly promotes their flexibility in these dimensions, especially with abundance reforms that make the housing dollar go further. If mobility is the flywheel of vibrant local governance, there are clear and practical paths we can take in that direction.

An "Easier" Liberalism

Some readers will recognize a lot of philosophical influences here, from Robert Nozick to John Stuart Mill to Chandran Kukathas. But I want to conclude by returning to the issue of pluralism. Here, the principal influence is John Rawls. I suggested that a fundamental problem of contemporary liberalism is the nationalization (which goes along with the polarization) of all politics. Liberal politics is fundamentally about compromise; that means its fundamental question concerns the limits of acceptable compromise.

One of the best ways to compromise is to live and let live. But that does not work very well in national politics, because we are all governed by the same national government (whether we like it or not). This is not the case locally: we are governed by many different local governments, so many more of us can get what we want there than is possible nationally. If even a handful of political issues could be taken off the national agenda and returned to the provenance of local governments, we might lower the stakes of national politics a little and make individuals a little more satisfied with how they are governed as a whole. Liberalism, as we know too well, is a hard business. Federalism and mobility might make it a little easier.

Asking Too Much? A Review of *The Rise and Fall of Rational Control*

Matthew McManus

Political philosophy ought to be taken seriously, but not too seriously. Aristotle stresses the importance of the discipline in his *Politics*, and on his masterful definition, political theory inquires into the good of the "state or political community, which is the highest of all, and which embraces all the rest, aims at good in a greater degree than any other, and at the highest good." This would seem to elevate the insights of political philosophy to not only a high, but the very highest level. And perhaps so. But this ought to be chastened by Aristotle's reminder in *The Nichomachean Ethics* that we ought only to expect as much precision as a subject matter permits. If ethics becomes ambiguated by the complexity of individual human nature, then political philosophy is an even murkier enterprise whose wisdom often lies in exposing how little we can know with certainty about what we have the most reason to care about. Where Aristotle was comfortable with this ambiguity, many moderns aspired to a much more exact science of politics.

These meta-issues were very much on my mind while reading Harvey Mansfield's stately *The Rise and Fall of Rational Control: The History of Modern Political Philosophy.* It is a very serious book, indeed, and one of the few that lives up to such a haughty tone. Mansfield was a Professor at Harvard University for decades and was famous for introducing generations of well-heeled Political Science students to the empyrean heights of political philosophy. Very heavily influenced by Leo Strauss, whose imprint on his student is clear decades on, Mansfield is famous for being one of the few remaining academics who unabashedly affiliates with the political right. This has made him something of an icon for conservatives, who look to Mansfield as *the* sage of the GOP par excellence. He's also something of a bugbear for liberal philosophers like Martha Nussbaum, who was famously acidic towards Mansfield's genteel sexism and cavalier pooh-poohing of feminist philosophy in her *New Republic* review of the latter's *Manliness.*

Now retired and aged 93, *The Rise and Fall of Rational Control* is based on lectures from Mansfield's Modern Political Philosophy course, taught over more than half a century between 1968 and 2022. It's a comfortable swan song from the Professor's professor, demonstrating a combination of deep learning and reverence admirably lightened by familiarity. Its eight chapters discuss the thinking of the rarefied set of political philosophers known by their last name: Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. More than just a scholarly exegesis, the book situates them as thinkers in the broader political discourse of modernity.

Reasoning About Rational Control

Even for a relatively canonized discipline like political philosophy, there are serious risks in trying to narratively summarize and unify it. Focus too much on the Western canon's often striking pluralism, ranging from communists like Marx to aristocratic radicals like Nietzsche, and you end up with a nominalistic story that has little to say about its unity. This is usually the approach taken by introductory texts aimed at undergrads. On the other hand, try to force an artificial unity on the material, and you end up distorting what makes a philosopher's contribution distinctive. Even worse, the latter approach is very common for those of us who want to agitate rather than just explain. It is no coincidence that grand stories about the unity of Western thought usually intend to make a partisan point. Sometimes this means insisting everyone is just a predecessor step on the road to the most rational (typically your own) system ala Habermas' recent epic and very whig Also, A History of Philosophy. Alternatively, one can tell a decline and fall story à la Strauss' Natural Right and History, where everything is, to a

degree, a regression from core insights of the past that have been abandoned and that our wise sage has rebirthed from the ash heap.

Mansfield largely carves a middle path between these two modes, while gently leaning towards the latter. He concludes that modern political philosophy, beginning with Machiavelli, is defined by the titular idea of rational control:

> With Machiavelli was born a single idea with many aspects, versions, currents, and countercurrents—the idea of rational control. Reason is to be used not merely to understand our problems but to control them. Rational control is most obvious in the modern science familiar to us, where knowledge brings power…Rational control would also come in the form of political science—a new political science to bring that idea to politics. There, this new politics would manage and reduce conflict, dependence, and slavery; it would make humans strong by making them free.

There is an overarching story in the book, with recognizably conservative contours. For as much as the idea of rational control was rolled out with considerable pomp and expectation by modern rationalists, it has turned out to be far more challenging to ground it in an intellectually satisfying way than many of its disciples expected. The very diversity that lesser commentators would fixate on testifies to this deeper unifying tension and the enduring efforts to solve it. From Machiavelli through Hobbes and Marx, the "great" thinkers of modern political philosophy each labor mightily to ground a new science of humanity, morality, and politics on firmly rational foundations, all without giving into the abstract metaphysics of the Ancients or the superstitions of the Medieval scholastics.

Mansfield is taciturn about their relative success but makes it quite clear that the project has faltered for good reasons. Nietzsche's descent into postmodernism is the clearest symptom of that; what Machiavelli began, "Nietzsche brought to an end—and with both a bang and a whimper; modern rational man proved to be what he called the 'last man.'" Postmodern man "displays an attitude critical of what is modern yet is unable to get beyond it or find a name for it. Postmodern is unable to escape modern."

One of the mildly disappointing things about the book is that Mansfield has little to say about a way out of the dilemmas he diagnoses. The book closes with a short coda, "Envoi," which predictably suggests returning to a "liberalism attuned to the virtue of citizens in the exercise of their rights. That liberalism would return from an unusually constrained self, interested only in survival, to a reliance on the soul, which contains a concern for nobility and sacrifice as well as survival." Much as it would be admirable for us to be a little less selfish and a little more noble on a day-to-day basis, the issues of our time cry out for a more comprehensive rethinking than everyone being a bit more blue-blooded. Cross-party scotch and sodas on the green do not meaning make.

Canon Wars

By and large, I truly enjoyed reading Mansfield's always thoughtful and considerate takes on these eight seminal thinkers. Even so, it is easy for me to push back on this or that detail of his readings of many of them. For instance, I am not convinced by Mansfield's claim that Kant is "primarily a moral philosopher." Given Mansfield's immediate acknowledgement that "this would be contested in favor of his theory of knowledge for which he is best known and most studied," even he doesn't seem all that confident about it. Kant insisted in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that two things filled him with awe and ever-growing wonder: the first was, indeed, the moral law within, but the other was the starry heavens above, which Mansfield does not seem concerned with highlighting. Mansfield's relative disinterest in the great destroyer's critique of classical metaphysics and his revolutionary turn to the transcendental has ripple effects on his reading of others.

Primary among these is Marx, whose own "critique" of political economy is largely sidestepped by Mansfield for an analysis of the earlier humanist works. One of the threads that connects Kant, Hegel, and Marx, well described by Allen Wood, is rooting epistemology in processes of human cognition rather than in the objects being apprehended. The reason this is important for understanding Marx is that it's hard to grasp his innovation without realizing how he essentially historicized and materialized themes that appeared earlier in Kant and Hegel. For instance, by suggesting that the "laws" discovered by bourgeois political economists did in fact help explain the modern economy, but only because they

reflected in the mind real processes taking place in the social world. Bourgeois economists categorized the laws

of the economy while failing to recognize that they were not eternal or natural, but contingent features of the given mode of production.

But I digress. Ultimately, Mansfield's learnedness is on display throughout the book. In fact, in today's day and age, it is pretty remarkable just how charitable and careful he is with the thinkers he examines. Locke is admired for his "signal success," which has earned him the "reputation of a founder." Mansfield makes clear that Marx was a "great man" who developed a "brilliant critique" of liberalism and acknowledges that, as "self-named living schools, of the eight only the Kantian, Hegelian, and Marxist establishments remain." This charitableness is a far cry from the Jordan Petersons or Gad Saads of the world. Mansfield echoes the recent literature on Nietzsche, stressing the latter's emphasis on "fascism and Nazism in the twentieth century," reminding us that Nietzsche "remains the most important intellectual source for those vicious movements." But Mansfield also describes Nietzsche as "the philosopher of excitement, a thrill to read" and is clearly attracted to the self-proclaimed Antichrist's strange "honesty" and "nobility."

It is disappointing that he doesn't extend this same level of generosity to contemporary philosophers, especially those working in schools of thought quite distant from these, like feminism, critical theory, etc. By and large, he tends to see these as lesser instantiations of what came before. That's an odd attitude to take towards thinkers of the stature of Habermas, Rawls, Nussbaum, Heidegger, Adorno, Hayek, Butler, and de Beauvoir. But even given that, what is here is enough.

The Philosophers Have Only Interpreted Part of the World…

Despite what the philosophers think, modernity and postmodernity cannot be understood through modern philosophy. But much like a microscope gives a focused, if reductive, glimpse into the minutiae of life, modern philosophy can reveal a great deal about our condition. Political philosophy, in particular, is often both acclaimed and criticized for its unique combination of depth and theoretical narrowness, as it is applied to grasp the world's complexities in thought. The value in political philosophy comes from not asking too much of it. Sometimes Mansfield asks too much.

Mansfield follows his mentor Strauss, who in turn often echoed Heidegger, in giving into a kind of idealism. Early in the chapter on Hobbes, Mansfield claims that climate change is "caused by the growth and application of modern science in unrestricted technology. Science wants to be on its own, independent of political control, which it regards as ignorant and invasive. Science should lead, with scientists at the helm, the rest of us following. But science seems not to have correctly considered the consequences of its unrestricted growth for the climate of the earth, the home of human beings."

It's hard not to chuckle at the level of abstract removal here. Is it really science that's primarily at fault for climate change? Mansfield and his tradition are correct that science isn't simply a tool that is applied neutrally to the world. The analytical and philosophical lenses we use to frame the world help determine our actions, what Marx would call the metabolic relationship, to nature. If you have a hammer, every problem starts looking like a nail. Thinking "scientifically" or "rationally" exists in a self-reinforcing relationship to how we manipulate nature. But there is a massive difference between the climate scientists who are using their knowledge to plead for reform and the engineers working for ExxonMobil who are using it to more efficiently extract and sell a product that is slowly killing us. And a lot of that difference is down to the fact that the engineers working for ExxonMobil are more comprehensively integrated into a capitalist mode of production, which, to invoke Mansfield, is what in fact seems to "have not correctly considered the consequences of its unrestricted growth for the climate of the earth, the home of human beings." Putting a stop to this process will mean spending less time rethinking our approach to science and a lot more time looking for eco-friendly oil alternatives and making sure that it is Big Oil, rather than another animal species, that goes extinct.

This tendency to live in a world of ideas and values rather than material practices, to put "ideas first" as Laura Field put it in *Furious Minds*, tends to be characteristic of conservative thinkers. As Terry Eagleton notes in *Materialism*, it's a temptation they are far more vulnerable to, since the attraction to nobility, aesthetics, and values draws attention away from the common materiality of our lives, which thinkers like Hobbes and Marx were more intimately familiar with. I suspect this feeds into Mansfield's

dissatisfying solutions to our current woes, as I talked about earlier. Unwilling to follow the Trumpists all the way in calling for "regime change," or imagining a liberalism that would fundamentally reform

itself, he's left asking us to be more reflective about our personal behavior. That would be nice, but it is (to invoke Samuel Moyn) "not enough." Not nearly enough in fact.

Despite these qualms, *The Rise and Fall of Rational Control* is well worth anyone's time. Reading it reminded me of being twenty again, taking classes with Waller Newell at Carleton, and spending my time debating *Beyond Good and Evil* well into the morning. As someone who teaches political theory for a living, it reminded me why I care about what I do—and that is high praise for any book.

Why Liberalism Really Failed: Not Betrayal but Stasis

Henry Tonks

Today's widening political gyre seems ruled by the raucous spirits of the populist, illiberal Right. But, as I have written previously, the *rise* of the illiberal Right is perhaps less important to understanding our current moment than is the *transformation* of political liberalism in the United States.

By "political liberalism" (hereafter, "liberalism"), I mean the policy ideas, governance, and formal politics of the Democratic Party. I do not mean the philosophy of classical liberalism. Nor do I mean a political philosophy substantively separate from the sphere of formal party politics. Indeed, it is possible that I do not refer to any coherent political *philosophy* at all. True, twentieth-century American liberalism boasted at least one noted theoretician, John Rawls. Yet Rawls's enduring effort to craft a philosophical statement of American liberalism, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), is an exception to the rule. Historian Gary Gerstle once described American liberalism—by which he broadly meant a reform tradition that began at the turn of the twentieth century—as "protean." In other words: American liberalism is what American liberals do.

Liberalism's transformation played out over several decades, beginning in the mid- to late-1960s, when, according to postwar America's greatest conservative public intellectual, Joan Didion, "The center was not holding." This transformation entailed the collapse of the so-called "liberal consensus" that had structured U.S. politics, policymaking, and civic life since the New Deal and the Second World War. This transformation enabled the rise of the twenty-first-century illiberal Right in the country.

For several decades, U.S. historians paid far more attention to American conservatism than to modern, post-New Deal liberalism, and this is still basically the case. Go to most academic history conferences, and you will find more people talking and thinking about the Right since c.1945 than about liberalism since c.1968. (And historians of the Right are a lot more present on Twitter.) This historiographic situation is captured in a typical title of a survey of the recent past: the "Age of Reagan." In the past decade, however, a new generation of historians has begun to pay serious attention to liberalism. Historians such as Lily Geismer argue that post-Sixties Democrats did not simply react to or mimic the Right. Rather, they had their own, distinct history. To deploy an omnivorous term from the twenty-first-century lexicon, post-Sixties liberals were co-architects, and not mere political losers, of the "neoliberal" order.

Liberalism's transformation produced a dual outcome: *political and demographic transformation* twinned with *policy stasis*. My analysis of this dual outcome diverges, in subtle but, I believe, important ways, from the emergent conventional wisdom of the new generation of historians of liberalism. Many historians partake in what I describe as the "Liberal Betrayal Narrative." But I see in this recent history neither ideological reinvention nor betrayal, but grand ambitions fatefully frustrated and constrained.

First, however, one must take some stock of what preceded liberalism's transformation.

Liberal Order in Crisis: The "Great Shift" in America's Political Economy

The rise of illiberalism, represented most significantly by the "MAGA New Right," is sometimes seen as a long-brewing symptom of America's social unraveling. Communications theorist Danielle Lee Tomson, for example, identifies a complex crisis of meaning, purpose, and "authenticity" as generative

of America's current political conditions. Donald Trump's "populist" MAGA Movement provides its voters with a narrative—a political, but also a social and economic, story —whereas mainstream liberalism offers little in the way of imaginative power. At a summer 2025 conference, Derek Thompson remarked that "stories are for children." Given that Thompson was the coauthor of a key book seeking to define contemporary liberalism, *Abundance* (2025), his comment neatly encapsulated liberals' current political impasse.

It is certainly true that liberals and Democrats lack compelling political storytellers, with the exception sui generis of Barack Obama. In my estimation, however, this failure is downstream of material conditions: it has derived from the "great shift" in the American political economy that began in the late Sixties and continued through the 1970s and 1980s. This shift saw the midcentury and postwar liberal order (also called the "New Deal order") supplanted by the "neoliberal" order.

Between the New Deal and WWII and the Sixties, the Democratic Party had built and maintained a durable political economy. This political economy consisted of: regionally dispersed industrial production; relatively high but not expanding (in fact, gradually declining) private-sector union density; a Cold War military-industrial-academic complex of high-technology research and development; and a pluralistic balance of socioeconomic interests within the political sphere. Moreover, this political economy was sustained by a fusion of Keynesian federal fiscal policy with local and regional "industrial policies" (or "developmental" policies), usually administered by the public sector in partnership with business elites. Historian Brent Cebul describes this mélange of public funds and private profit, economic planning and "free enterprise," and elite technocracy as having formed American liberalism's "enduring boundaries" in the twentieth century.

The success of this political economy into the 1960s stabilized American politics, enabling an elite civic consensus. It also allowed political leaders (especially in the Democratic Party) to gradually extend limited civil and political rights to marginalized communities of color without unduly unsettling the party's core constituents among the "white ethnic" working- and lower-middle classes. For some time, conventional wisdom was that Sixties civil rights legislation drew Black voters into the Democratic Party. But more recent scholarship reveals that this move was a decades-long product of grassroots activism for racial justice, combined with the fact that even New Deal programs, which had been racially circumscribed by Southern Democrats, offered at least some tangible, material gains to the vast majority of Americans.

Midcentury and postwar liberalism was, then, principally, a growth machine. The American political economy's capacity to generate broad-based, regionally-dispersed economic prosperity legitimated liberalism and ensured Democratic electoral viability. The great shift of the late-1960s, 1970s, and 1980s unspooled postwar liberalism's political economy and rewove it with neoliberal threads: the new American economy was globalized, financialized, and characterized by the clustering of economic dynamism in select urban enclaves.

Over time, this neoliberal political economy began to produce discontent. Despite periodic economic sanguinity— consider, say, the "peace and prosperity" of Bill Clinton's "fabulous" 1990s—the neoliberal political economy fostered interregional inequality. The liberalization of trading relations with China at the turn of the twenty-first century produced concentrated job losses; even the U.S. commentariat's most ardent neoliberals now see this as a misstep. More jobs in often lower-paid, more precarious service sectors obtained in less stable economic conditions.

Liberalism had depended on the prior settlement: its regionally-dispersed, production-oriented growth model. Therefore, the "neoliberal" order posed a serious challenge: where and how would Democrats construct a new political majority to replace the old New Deal coalition?

The answer lay in liberalism's own transformation, unfolding alongside America's great economic shift.

From the Union Hall to Whole Foods: Liberalism's Transformation

Liberalism's transformation can be summed up by a pair of 2016 statistics, courtesy of the Brookings Institution. In that year's presidential election, Hillary Clinton won 472 U.S. counties; Donald Trump won 2,584. But those 472 blue counties "encompassed a massive 64 percent of America's economic activity as measured by total output in 2015."

The great economic shift of the late-1960s–1980s ultimately produced a more spatially concentrated political economy in which many prosperous Americans worked in the "knowledge economy"—sectors like law, finance, and consulting. And 2016's inflection-point election made clear that the new order's "winner" regions furnished Democrats with their electoral base. Liberalism's center of gravity had shifted from the union hall to Whole Foods.

It should therefore be little surprise that a backlash against the neoliberal political economy might disadvantage the party *seen* to represent this system. Yes, the Republican Party under Ronald Reagan did the most to implement America's post-1970s economic order. But as the age of illiberal populism dawned, the Democratic Party had come to be most visibly, publicly, culturally identified with the neoliberal order—with the postindustrial "knowledge economy," and its cosmopolitan, diploma-toting habitués.

We should not let the rhetoric of Right-populists fool us into thinking that the MAGA New Right's Republican Party is a "party of the people." Democrats retained working-class voters in America's wealthy (and unequal) cities alongside their slice of the more upscale urban electorate; even in 2024, the year of an alleged "realignment," then-vice president Kamala Harris won a slim majority of the lowest-income voters. Conversely, the bedrock of the modern GOP's support is the exurban and rural "gentry" (as historian and podcaster Patrick Wyman astutely notes), more than it really is the working class of "left behind" regions.

Nevertheless, liberalism's demographic re-composition has been a genuine, transformative phenomenon. Democrats' winning 2020 coalition, for example, depended on a consolidation and targeted expansion of suburban support (with college towns proving particularly fertile electoral ground). And Democrats' highly-educated, often quite affluent metropolitan voters are not merely numerous, but disproportionately important to the party's personnel and door-knocking cadres—as evinced by the spectacular, seemingly durable "wine-mom" mobilization of the Trump era.

This political transformation was rooted in the very success of the midcentury and postwar liberal political economy. Postwar prosperity nurtured politically-engaged Americans who were, as the New Left's 1962 Port Huron Statement suggested, alienated from the U.S.'s affluence. The New Left provided a particular, radical-chic flavor of this political ethos. But in one variety or another, it came to suffuse American liberalism writ large.

A generation of liberal political actors entered Democratic politics between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s. I describe them collectively as "New Liberals" (think Bill and Hillary Clinton, and near-contemporaries like California governor Jerry Brown, Colorado senator Gary Hart, and policy entrepreneurs Robert Reich and Ira Magaziner). "New Liberals" shared a generational experience of the U.S.'s exponential postwar expansion of higher education, were generally urbanite or suburbanite, and promoted "quality of life issues" such as consumer rights and environmental protection. They had very little in common—sociologically, or, increasingly, politically—with the U.S.'s antediluvian labor movement. Bill Clinton was, in the admiring words of his courtier Sidney Blumenthal, "the leading meritocrat of America's first mass generation of college-educated meritocrats"—a description that is apt not only for Clinton but for all his fellow New Liberals' sociopolitical style and milieu. In a recent edited volume that explores the many manifestations of this new liberal political formation, from formal party politics to philanthropic foundations to public-interest law, Lily Geismer and Brent Cebul term these Democrats "professional-class liberals."

The New Liberals spearheaded a demographic re-composition of the Democratic Party elite that presaged the wider, more gradual re-composition of its electoral base. Political analysts often use the shorthand "diploma divide" to describe this wider re-composition: Democrats' slow-building advance to win more college-educated voters than Republicans, a trend that was incipient in the mid-1990s and blossomed in the Trump era.

Add this to Democrats' predominance in the most economically dynamic—metropolitan—regions of the U.S., and one grasps liberalism's political transformation. Democrats became, between the order-reshaping 1970s and the age of populism, the party of the "winners" of the postindustrial economy. (Until Trump 2.0, and MAGA's alliance with the Silicon Valley island of misfit billionaires, Democrats even seemed poised to secure the loyalty of postindustrial CEOs alongside that of the postindustrial middle- and upper-middle classes.)

So far, most historians of the Democratic Party would likely agree with this account of liberalism's recent history. This constitutes liberalism's political and demographic transformation. The other half of liberalism's dual outcome, however, has been policy stasis. And here I disagree with some historical scholarship.

Rethinking the "Liberal Betrayal Narrative"

The logical corollary of political and demographic transformation would be ideological transformation. Many historians identify such a transformation as having occurred within liberalism. Geismer's *Left Behind* (2022), for example, charts an ideological reinvention of the New Liberals' Democratic Party: broadly, Democrats led by President Clinton pursued "market-oriented policy solutions" and repudiated *market-crafting* government economic intervention of the sort identified with liberalism's midcentury and postwar growth machine. (Infamously, Clinton declared in his 1996 State of the Union address that "The era of big government is over.") Geismer makes the point, wholly overlooked by polemicists like Thomas Frank or Ed Burmila, that New Liberals' fondness for public-private partnerships and their emphasis on prosperity as an antipoverty program evolved from midcentury and postwar liberalism.

In other words, New Liberals' intellectual and governing predilections did not constitute a simulacrum of Reagan-style conservatism. Instead, they built upon a public-private partnership-driven approach to "market-making" established by Democratic policymakers in the New Deal era and perpetuated during liberalism's postwar zenith. Recall Brent Cebul's characterization of the "enduring boundaries" of American liberalism.

Nonetheless, even a historian such as Geismer's more revisionist historical narrative emphasizes an ideological reinvention. It argues that New Liberals took the Democratic Party from liberalism to neoliberalism, especially by embracing financialization and a postindustrial, services-based economy. This view forms the core of what I describe as the "Liberal Betrayal Narrative." Commensurate with their political and demographic transformation of the Democratic Party, New Liberals abandoned the "big government"-style economic development that whirred away in the center of liberalism's old growth machine.

This is a misreading, I believe, of the historical record. And a more accurate reading offers the clearest explanation of how liberals helped set the stage for illiberalism's rise.

New Liberals like Clinton and Robert Reich embodied a Democratic generation materially untethered from the postwar industrial economy, and unburdened by any sentimental attachment to the union wing of the old New Deal coalition. Yet their formative program for government, which they crafted in national opposition during the 1980s and sought to implement at the state level, such as in Clinton's Arkansas, offered no clear-cut repudiation of market-crafting, New Deal- or postwar-style liberalism.

Instead, the New Liberals collectively advocated a technological upgrade of the midcentury and postwar developmental growth machine. Certainly, New Liberals talked a good game about moving "beyond" or "past" the New Deal. But their program for government was a new national industrial policy, claiming inspiration from Japanese economic planning. Furthermore, the New Liberals argued that U.S. industrial policy had to target *productive* sectors of the economy. While they enthusiastically promoted technology (their original *nom de guerre* was "Atari Democrats"), the New Liberals saw their favored sectors as high-tech *manufacturing*, from advanced electronic consumer goods to semiconductor-chipmaking. (It was not a coincidence that the handful of Republicans who supported these industrial policy ideas, such as Pennsylvania senator John Heinz and Trump's future trade advisor Robert Lighthizer, hailed from manufacturing-heavy locales.)

New Liberals believed, as far I can ascertain based on my research into more than two-dozen archival collections and interviews with political players from the time, that a new industrial policy targeted at high-tech production could reconstitute the regionally-dispersed, broad-based political economy central to liberalism's earlier success, now via "future growth" industries. New Liberal governors across different U.S. regions similarly centered tech and manufacturing in their development initiatives: New Liberal Michael Dukakis's "Massachusetts Miracle," for example, prompted Bill Clinton's efforts to make Little Rock (in the words of one aide) "a little Boston." These bold visions are often forgotten in the "Liberal Betrayal Narrative," and are crucial to our rethinking of it.

Equally as important, however, is what came next. In power, the Clinton administration's New Liberals came under pressure from several directions: post-Cold War globalization, GOP midterm victories, the influence of financiers like Secretary of the Treasury Robert Rubin, and, most difficult of all, the socioeconomic position of *their own* base. New Liberals' college-educated, metropolitan base owned prime real estate on the shifting American economic landscape. They were poised to become the "winners" of the postindustrial, neoliberal order, and so they were not politically mobilized by New Liberals' bolder visions. Under the pressure of these conditions, New Liberals retreated from their grand ambitions for American industrial policy by the mid-1990s. In contrast to, say, the New Deal era— when constituencies like organized labor were set to benefit the *most* from Democratic domestic policies—the late-twentieth-century Democratic Party's new core constituency, the metropolitan professional class, had a diminishing material interest in or connection to the New Liberals' program for industrial policy.

The end result of this process of frustration and constraint was, I argue, policy stasis. Because the Democratic Party never underwent an ideological reinvention, it retained liberalism's historic commitment to safeguarding and incrementally expanding the U.S.'s social safety net. However, since the New Liberals' plans for reinvigorating a market-crafting government growth model had collapsed, the commitment to meliorative social policy evolved into an ethos that economists Ilyana Kuziemko, Nicolas Longuet-Marx, and Suresh Naidu term "compensate the losers." And we see the results still today: the twenty-first-century Democratic Party seeks to redistribute the proceeds of geographically-narrow, postindustrial growth to the majority of Americans who have no material stake in the economic system.

The historical developments that produced this arid liberal policymaking approach had all played out by the 2007-2008 financial crisis. Nonetheless, the Democratic restoration of 2008 reinforced it. The early Obama era's soaring optimism, largely a product of the president's nonpareil intellect and charisma, curdled into political disengagement. (Indeed, I believe it is possible that left-wing and liberal disappointment with the Obama era played its part in the last decade's historiographic revival of scholarship on liberalism; many members of the new generation of historians of liberalism are left-leaning millennials.)

In one sense, President Obama faced even *more* severe constraints than Clinton: the Great Recession was a far worse economic crisis than the 1990-1991 recession, and Democratic policymakers in 2009 had to contend with a political economy wrapped tighter than ever in the tentacles of Wall Street. In another sense, however, the Obama Presidency demonstrated just how limited the post-Nineties liberal policy settlement was. Despite the rhetoric of "Hope and Change," Obama's team had, in my view, a *less* expansive vision of economic policy than the Clinton brain trust of 1991-1993. Until the aftermath of 2016, then, Democratic elites had all-but abandoned the bold visions that animated their New Liberal forebears.

This post-Nineties settlement constitutes policy stasis because American liberalism has been essentially devoid of intellectual inspiration and a sustainably compelling political narrative since the mid-1990s. From the New Deal through the New Liberals' ideas about restoring America's industrial "competitiveness" in the 1980s, liberalism was animated by a vision of, policies for, and a story about broad-based economic growth. But the visions never could take off. And Liberalism has now lacked either vision, a set of policies, or a narrative for three decades. In this context, the illiberal Right—which, we must remember, first displaced an intellectually exhausted "establishment" Right—has emerged to provide its group of American voters with a new political, social, and economic narrative.

Beyond Stasis?

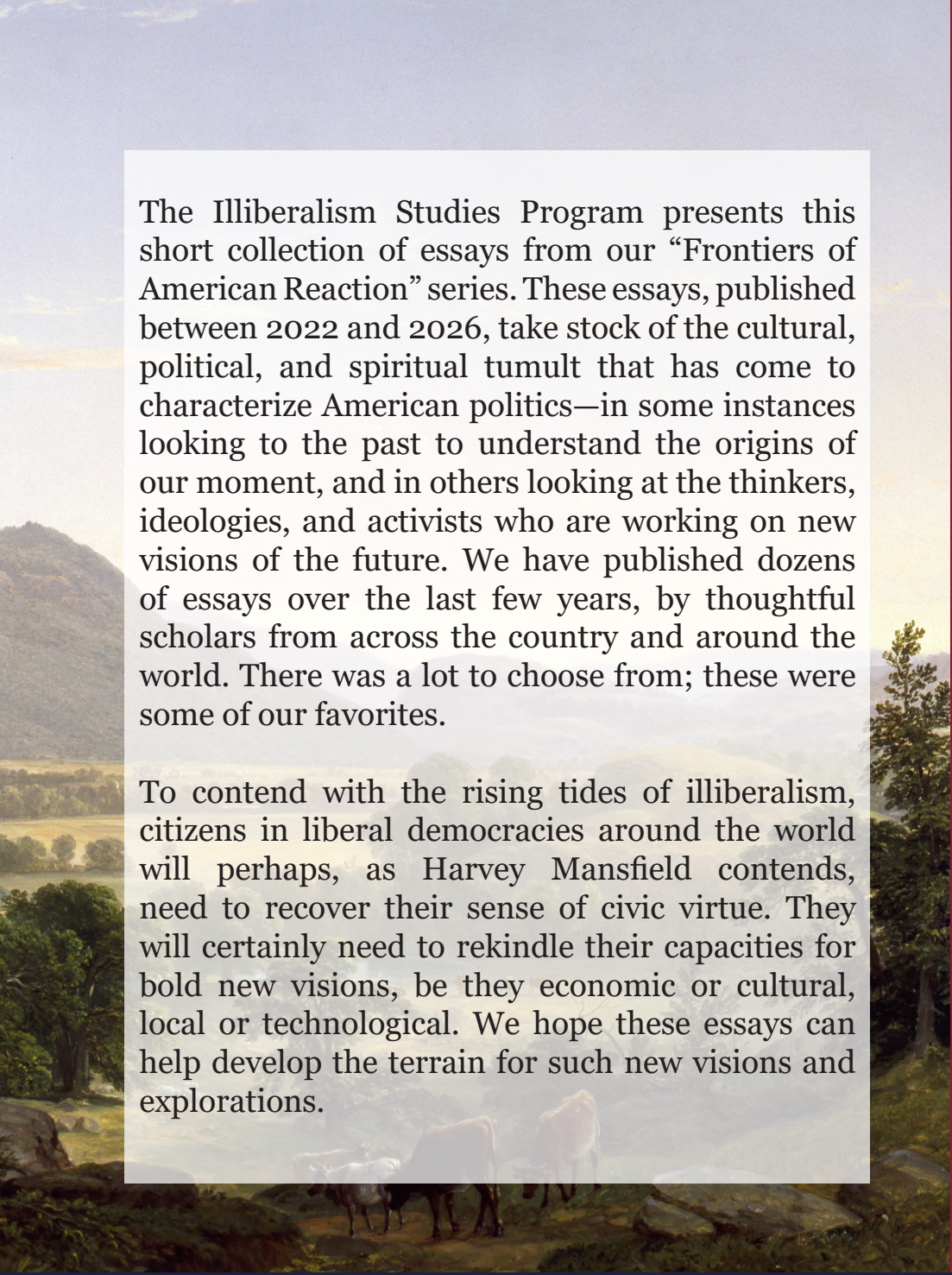
Ironically, given a popular association of "neoliberalism" with "growth," liberals' defining failure in the neoliberal order was that they did not talk persuasively, plausibly, or imaginatively *enough* about growth. Growth where, for whom, and how?

It was in this vacuum that Donald Trump and MAGA rose to power, purveying a neuralgic narrative centered—perversely enough—on a particular type of vanishing industrial job that many actual former workers, as commentator Matthew Sitman movingly remarks, hated. Nevertheless, the illiberal Right remains in power. Indeed, the threadbare reality of President Trump's narrative only *underscores* the

deleterious effect of liberalism's transformation: the MAGA New Right does not even need an especially plausible or appealing story. They have made do with any story at all!

Readers may have detected eerie parallels between the New Liberals' ideas in the 1980s and Democrats' fraught suite of economic reforms authored in the interregnum between Trump's presidencies and ill-fatedly dubbed "Bidenomics." That industrial policy agenda was an effort at reconjuring a liberal narrative about growth and prosperity—indeed, some senior Biden aides like national security advisor Jake Sullivan tried to "sell" it politically in precisely these terms.

The political failure and electoral repudiation of that transitory effort should not prevent us from grasping the existential dividends of liberalism's slow transformation into policy stagnation. While it is currently contested, the emerging "abundance agenda" *potentially* represents an effort to work out how Democrats can deploy ambitious policies more quickly and more effectively. Absent the transformation I have described here, the rise of illiberalism would be unimaginable. It is vitally important to study and understand 2026's New Right, but we must also map the contours of liberalism's transformation over the last few decades, since it too has helped to shape the unsettled political, social, and economic landscape that lies before us today.



The Illiberalism Studies Program presents this short collection of essays from our "Frontiers of American Reaction" series. These essays, published between 2022 and 2026, take stock of the cultural, political, and spiritual tumult that has come to characterize American politics—in some instances looking to the past to understand the origins of our moment, and in others looking at the thinkers, ideologies, and activists who are working on new visions of the future. We have published dozens of essays over the last few years, by thoughtful scholars from across the country and around the world. There was a lot to choose from; these were some of our favorites.

To contend with the rising tides of illiberalism, citizens in liberal democracies around the world will perhaps, as Harvey Mansfield contends, need to recover their sense of civic virtue. They will certainly need to rekindle their capacities for bold new visions, be they economic or cultural, local or technological. We hope these essays can help develop the terrain for such new visions and explorations.

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Frontiers of American Reaction Volume I: Myths, MAGA, the Tech Right, and Liberalism Today

Edited by Laura K. Field