PROFILES

CURTIS YARVIN'S PLOT AGAINST AMERICA

The reactionary blogger's call for a monarch to rule the country once seemed like a joke. Now the right is ready to bend the knee.

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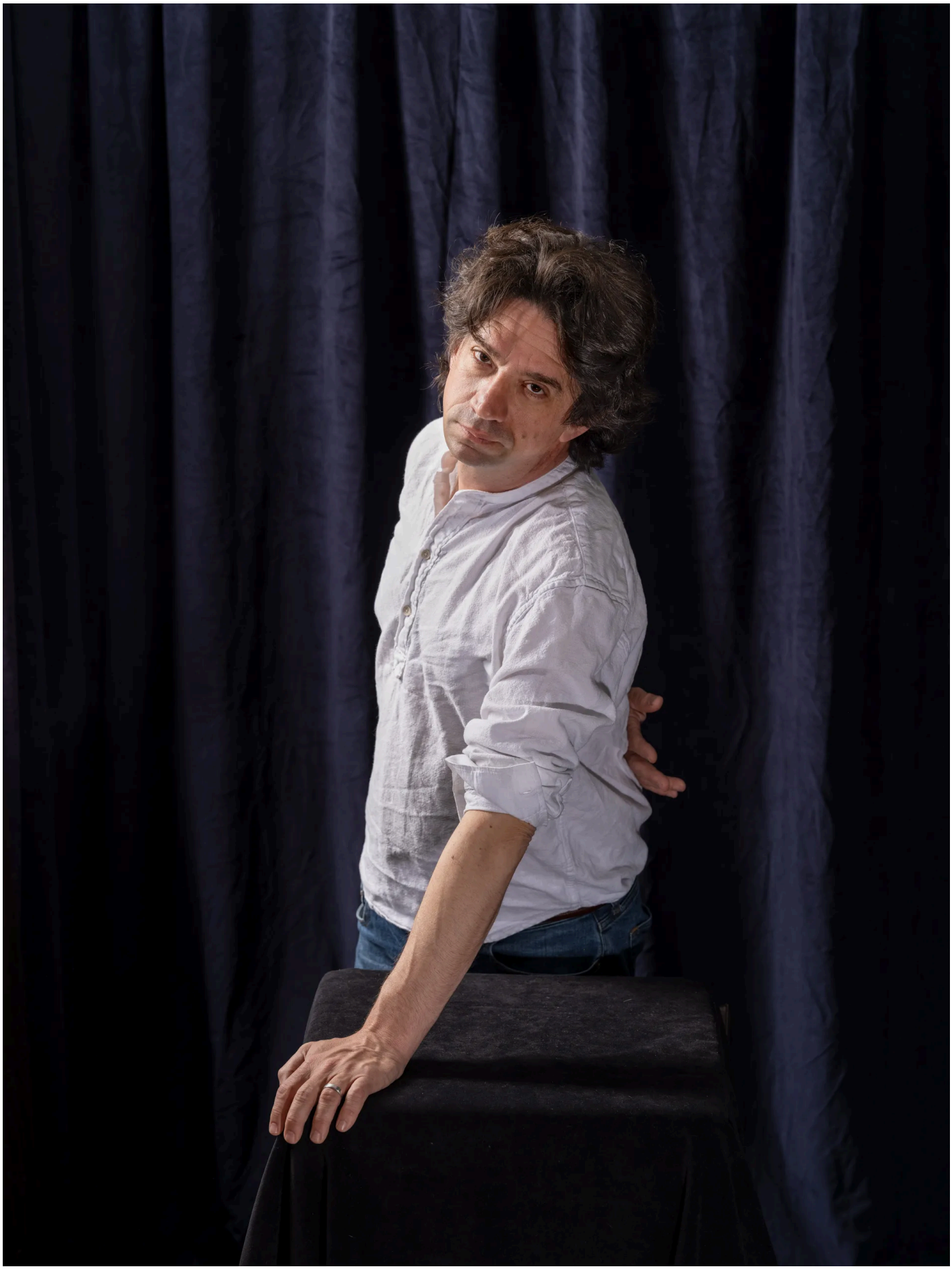

Yarvin wants to destroy democracy. Peter Thiel, Marc Andreessen, and J. D. Vance are among his fans. Photograph by Carolyn Drake for The New Yorker

In the spring and summer of 2008, when Donald Trump was still a registered Democrat, an anonymous blogger known as Mencius Moldbug posted a serial manifesto under the heading "An Open Letter to Open-Minded Progressives." Written with the sneering disaffection of an ex-believer, the hundred-and-twenty-thousand-word letter argued that egalitarianism, far from improving the world, was actually responsible for most of its ills. That his bien-pensant readers thought otherwise, Moldbug contended, was due to the influence of the media and the academy, which worked together, however unwittingly, to perpetuate a left-liberal consensus. To this nefarious alliance he gave the name the Cathedral. Moldbug called for nothing less than its destruction and a total "reboot" of the social order. He proposed "the liquidation of democracy, the Constitution, and the rule of law," and the eventual transfer of power to a C.E.O.-in-chief (someone like Steve Jobs or Marc Andreessen, he suggested), who would transform the government into "a heavily-armed, ultra-profitable corporation." This new regime would sell off public schools, destroy universities, abolish the press, and imprison "decivilized populations." It would also fire civil servants en masse (a policy Moldbug later called RAGE—Retire All Government Employees) and discontinue international relations, including "security guarantees, foreign aid, and mass immigration."

Moldbug acknowledged that his vision depended on the sanity of his chief executive: "Clearly, if he or she turns out to be Hitler or Stalin, we have just recreated Nazism or Stalinism." Yet he dismissed the failures of twentieth-century dictators, whom he saw as too reliant on popular support. For Moldbug, any

system that sought legitimacy in the passions of the mob was doomed to instability. Though critics labelled him a techno-fascist, he preferred to call himself a royalist or a Jacobite—a nod to partisans of James II and his descendants, who, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, opposed Britain's parliamentary system and upheld the divine right of kings. Never mind the French Revolution, the bête noire of reactionary thinkers: Moldbug believed that the English and American Revolutions had gone too far.

If Moldbug's "Open Letter" showed little affection for the masses, it intimated that they might still have a use. "Communism was not overthrown by Andrei Sakharov, Joseph Brodsky, and Václav Havel," he wrote. "What was needed was the combination of philosopher and crowd." The best place to recruit this crowd, he said, was on the internet—a shrewd intuition. Before long, links to Moldbug's blog, "Unqualified Reservations," were being passed around by libertarian techies, disgruntled bureaucrats, and self-styled rationalists—many of whom formed the shock troops of an online intellectual movement that came to be known as neo-reaction, or the Dark Enlightenment. While few turned into outright monarchists, their contempt for Obama-era uplift seemed to find voice in Moldbug's heresies. In his most influential coinage, which quickly gained currency among the nascent alt-right, Moldbug urged his readers to rouse themselves from their ideological slumber by taking the "red pill," like Keanu Reeves's character in "The Matrix," who chooses daunting truth over contented ignorance.

In 2013, an article on the news site *TechCrunch*, titled "Geeks for Monarchy," revealed that Mencius Moldbug was the cyber alias of a forty-year-old programmer in San Francisco named Curtis Yarvin. At the same time that he was trying to redesign the U.S. government, Yarvin was also dreaming up a new computer operating system that he hoped would serve as a "digital republic." He founded a company that he named Tlon, for the Borges story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in which a secret society describes an elaborate parallel world that begins to overtake reality. As he raised money for his startup, Yarvin became a kind of Machiavelli to his big-tech benefactors, who shared his view that the world would be better off if they were in charge. Tlon's investors included the venture-capital firms Andreessen Horowitz and Founders Fund, the latter of which was started by the billionaire Peter Thiel. Both Thiel and Balaji Srinivasan, then a general partner at Andreessen Horowitz, had become friends with Yarvin after reading his blog, though e-mails shared with me revealed that neither was thrilled to be publicly associated with him at the time. "How dangerous is it that we are being linked?" Thiel wrote to Yarvin in 2014. "One reassuring thought: one of our hidden advantages is that these people"—social-justice warriors—"wouldn't believe in a conspiracy if it hit them over the head (this is perhaps the best measure of the decline of the Left). Linkages make them sound really crazy, and they kinda know it."

A decade on, with the Trumpian right embracing strongman rule, Yarvin's links to élites in Silicon Valley and Washington are no longer a secret. In a 2021 appearance on a far-right podcast, Vice-President J. D. Vance, a former employee of one of Thiel's venture-capital firms, cited Yarvin when suggesting that a future Trump Administration "fire every single mid-level bureaucrat, every civil servant in the administrative state, replace them with our people," and ignore the courts if they objected. Marc Andreessen, one of the heads of Andreessen Horowitz and an informal adviser to the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), has started quoting his "good friend" Yarvin about the need for a founder-like figure to take charge of our "out of control" bureaucracy. Andrew Kloster, the new

general counsel at the government's Office of Personnel Management, has said that replacing civil servants with loyalists could help Trump defeat "the Cathedral."

"There are figures who channel a Zeitgeist—Nietzsche calls them timely men—and Curtis is definitely a timely man," a State Department official who has been reading Yarvin since the Moldbug era told me. Back in 2011, Yarvin said that Trump was one of two figures who seemed "biologically suited" to be an American monarch. (The other was Chris Christie.) In 2022, he recommended that Trump, if reëlected, appoint Elon Musk to run the executive branch. On a podcast with his friend Michael Anton, now the director of policy planning at the State Department, Yarvin argued that the institutions of civil society, such as Harvard, would need to be shut down. "The idea that you're going to be a Caesar . . . with someone else's Department of Reality in operation is just manifestly absurd," he said.

In another timeline, Yarvin might have remained an obscure and ineffectual internet crank, a digital de Maistre. Instead, he has become one of America's most influential illiberal thinkers, an engineer of the intellectual source code for the second Trump Administration. "Yarvin has pushed the Overton window," Nikhil Pal Singh, a history professor at N.Y.U., told me. His work has revived ideas that once seemed outside the bounds of polite society, Singh said, and created a road map for the dismantling of "the administrative state and the global postwar order."

As his ideas have been surrealized in DOGE and Trump has taken to self-identifying as a king, one might expect to find Yarvin in an exultant mood. In fact, he has spent the past few months fretting that the moment will go to waste. "If you have a Trump boner right now, enjoy it," he wrote two days after the election. "It's as hard as you'll ever get." What many see as the most dangerous assault on American democracy in the nation's history Yarvin dismisses as woefully insufficient—a "vibes coup." Without a full-blown autocratic takeover, he believes, a backlash is sure to follow. When I spoke to him recently, he quoted the words of

Louis de Saint-Just, the French philosopher who championed the Reign of Terror: "He who makes half a revolution digs his own grave."

Earlier this year, Yarvin and I had lunch in Washington, D.C., where he had come to celebrate the regime change. He was in his usual getup: bluejeans, Chelsea boots, a rumpled dress shirt under a motorcycle jacket. After taking a few bites of a cheeseburger topped with crispy onions, he pushed his plate away. Last year, he explained, he'd decided to start taking an Ozempic-like drug after a debate with the right-wing commentator Richard Hanania about the relative merits of monarchy and democracy. "I destroyed him in almost every way," Yarvin said, nudging a tomato with his fork. "But he had one huge advantage, which was that I was fat and he was not."

The injections seemed to be working. As I ate, Yarvin's phone filled with messages, some of them complimenting his glow-up. That morning, the *Times Magazine* had published an interview with him, accompanied by a moody black-and-white portrait. Until recently, Yarvin, with his frazzled curtain of shoulder-length hair and ill-fitting wardrobe, had seemed indifferent to his appearance. Now, wearing his leather jacket, he glared out at the reader through stylishly tousled hair. His friend Steve Sailer, a writer for white-nationalist websites, said he looked like "the fifth Ramone."

In person, as in print, Yarvin expresses himself with imperious self-assurance. He is nearly impossible to interrupt. "When the rabbi is speaking, you let the rabbi

speak," Razib Khan, a right-wing science blogger and a close friend of Yarvin's, told me. Even his friends and family, however, acknowledge that he has room to grow as a communicator. He talks in a halting monotone, rarely answers questions directly, and is prone to disorienting asides. In the middle of saying one thing, he is always getting distracted by something else he could be saying, like a G.P.S. that keeps suggesting faster routes.

Yarvin, for his part, was relieved at how the interview with the *Times* had gone. "My main goal was, how do I not damage any of my relationships?" he said. For years, Yarvin was best known, to the extent that he was known at all, as the court philosopher of the Thiel-verse, the network of heterodox entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and hangers-on surrounding the tech mogul. He mentioned that a businessman he knew had once complained to a journalist that Thiel had not invested enough money in his company. "That's one strike and you're out, and he was out," Yarvin said, sighing theatrically. His second goal, he said, was to reach the *Times* audience. This seemed surprising: he has called for the government to shut down the paper. "I tend to be more interested in outreach to people who share my own cultural background," Yarvin explained.

He likes to tell the story of his paternal grandparents, Jewish Communists from Brooklyn who met at a leftist gathering in the thirties. (He has less to say about his maternal grandparents, Tarrytown Wasps with a cottage on Nantucket.) "The vibe of American communism was 'We've got thirty I.Q. points on these people, and we're going to win,' " he said. "It's like, what if all the gifted kids formed a political party and tried to take over the world?" Yarvin's parents met at Brown, where his father, Herbert, was pursuing a Ph.D. in philosophy. After finishing school and failing to get tenure ("too arrogant," Yarvin said), Herbert tried his hand at writing the Great American Novel, then joined the Foreign Service as a diplomat. In the following years, the family lived in the Dominican Republic and Cyprus. Herbert was cynical about working for the government, and Yarvin seems to have inherited his disdain: he has repeatedly proposed closing America's

embassies, a prospect the State Department is now considering in parts of Europe and Africa.

Yarvin is reticent on the subject of his childhood, but friends and family suggested to me that his father could be harsh, domineering, and impossible to please. "He controlled their life with an iron fist," someone with close knowledge of the family told me. "It was absolutely his domain." (Yarvin vehemently rejected this view, saying that people who are controlling tend to be insecure, "and that is very much *not* the way of my father." Better words to describe him, he said, would be "stubborn," "intense," and "formidable"—like "a good manager.")

Growing up, Yarvin was sometimes homeschooled by his mother, and skipped three grades. (His older brother, Norman, skipped four.) The family eventually moved to Columbia, Maryland, where Yarvin entered high school as a twelve-year-old sophomore. "When you're much younger than your classmates, you're either an adorable mascot or a weird, threatening, disturbing alien," Yarvin said, adding that he was the latter. Yarvin was selected to participate in a Johns Hopkins study of math prodigies. He attended the university's Center for Talented Youth, a summer camp for gifted children, and was a Baltimore-area champion on "It's Academic," a television trivia show. Andrew Cone, a software engineer who currently lives in a spare room in Yarvin's home, told me that Yarvin's childhood seems to have left him with a lifelong feeling of inadequacy. "I think he has this sense of being not good enough, that he's seen as ridiculous or small, and that the only way out is to perform," Cone said.

Yarvin went to Brown, graduated at eighteen, and then entered a Ph.D. program in computer science at the University of California, Berkeley. Former peers told me that he wore a bicycle helmet in class and seemed eager to show off his knowledge to the professor. "Oh, you mean helmet-head?" one said when I asked about Yarvin. The joke among some of his classmates was that the helmet prevented new ideas from penetrating his mind. He found more of a community on Usenet, a precursor to today's online forums. But even in groups like

talk.bizarre, where intellectual peacocking was the norm, he stood out for his desire to dominate. Along with posting jokes, advice, light verse, and "flames" (blistering takedowns of other users), he maintained a "kill file," a list of members he had blocked because he found their posts uninteresting. "He wanted to be viewed as the smart guy—that was really, really important to him," his first girlfriend, Meredith Tanner, told me. She was drawn to Yarvin after reading one of his virtuosic flames, and the pair dated for a few years. "Don't get involved with someone just because you're impressed by how creatively they insult people," she warned. "They will turn that skill on you."

Friends from Yarvin's twenties described him as a reflexive contrarian who revelled in provocation. "He wasn't a sweet kid, and he could sometimes be nasty, but he wasn't Moldbug," one said. Politically and culturally, Yarvin was a liberal—"a big old hippie," as Tanner put it. He had a ponytail, wore a silver hoop earring, dropped acid at raves, and wrote poetry. Tanner recalled that when she once questioned the value of affirmative action in college admissions, it was Yarvin who convinced her of its necessity.

After a year and a half of doctoral work, Yarvin left academia to seek his fortune in the tech industry. He helped design an early version of a mobile web browser for a company that came to be known as Phone.com. In 2001, he began dating Jennifer Kollmer, a playwright he met on Craigslist, whom he later married and had two children with. Phone.com had gone public, leaving him with a windfall of a million dollars. He used some of the money to buy a condo near the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco and the rest to fund a self-directed study of computer science and political theory. "I was used to getting pats on the head for being smart," he said of his decision to leave the *cursus honorum* of the gifted child. "Diverging from the pat-on-the-head economy was a strange and scary choice."

Out in the wilderness, Yarvin delved into recondite history and economics texts, many of them newly accessible through Google Books. He read Thomas Carlyle,

James Burnham, and Albert Jay Nock, alongside an early-aughts profusion of political blogs. Yarvin traces his own red-pill moment to the Presidential election of 2004. As many of his peers were being driven to the left by lies about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Yarvin was pulled in the opposite direction by fabrications of a different sort: the Swift Boat conspiracy theory pushed by veterans allied with the George W. Bush campaign, who claimed that the Democratic candidate, John Kerry, had lied about his service in Vietnam. It seemed obvious to Yarvin, who believed the accusations, that once the truth emerged Kerry would be forced to drop out of the race. When that didn't happen, he began to question what else he'd naïvely taken on trust. Facts no longer felt stable. How could he be confident in what he'd been told about Joseph McCarthy, the Civil War, or global warming? What about democracy itself? After years of energetic debates in the comments sections of other people's blogs, he decided to start his own. It did not lack for ambition. The first post began, "The other day I was tinkering around in my garage and I decided to build a new ideology."

The German academic Hans-Hermann Hoppe is sometimes described as an intellectual gateway to the far right. A retired economics professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Hoppe argues that universal suffrage has supplanted rule by a "natural élite"; advocates for breaking nations into smaller, homogenous communities; and calls for communists, homosexuals, and others who oppose this rigid social order to be "physically removed." (Some white nationalists have made memes pairing Hoppe's face with a helicopter—an allusion to the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet's practice of executing opponents by throwing them from aircraft.) Though Hoppe favors a minimal state, he believes that freedom is better preserved by monarchy than by democracy.

Yarvin nearly ended up a libertarian. As a Bay Area coder and a devotee of Austrian-school economists in his late twenties, he exhibited all the risk factors. Then he discovered Hoppe's book "Democracy: The God That Failed" (2001) and changed his mind. Yarvin soon adopted Hoppe's imago of a benevolent strongman

—someone who would govern efficiently, avoid senseless wars, and prioritize the well-being of his subjects. "It's not copy-and-pasted, but it is such a direct influence that it's kind of obscene," Julian Waller, a scholar of authoritarianism at George Washington University, said. (Over e-mail, Hoppe recalled that he met Yarvin once at an exclusive gathering at Peter Thiel's home, where Hoppe had been invited to speak. He acknowledged his influence on Yarvin, but added, "For my taste his writing has always been a bit too flowery and rambling.") Hoppe argues that, unlike democratically elected officials, a monarch has a long-term incentive to safeguard his subjects and the state, because both belong to him. Anyone familiar with the history of dictatorships might find this idea disingenuous. Not Yarvin.

"You don't ransack your own house," he told me one afternoon, at an open-air café in Venice Beach. I'd asked him what would stop his C.E.O.-monarch from plundering the country—or enslaving his people—for personal gain. "For Louis XIV, when he says, '*L'état, c'est moi*,' ransacking the state holds no meaning because it's all his anyway." Following Hoppe, Yarvin proposes that nations should eventually be broken up into a "patchwork" of statelets, like Singapore or Dubai, each with its own sovereign ruler. The eternal political problems of legitimacy, accountability, and succession would be solved by a secret board with the power to select and recall the otherwise all-powerful C.E.O. of each sovereign corporation, or SovCorp. (How the board itself would be selected is unclear, but Yarvin has suggested that airline pilots—"a fraternity of intelligent, practical, and careful people who are already trusted on a regular basis with the lives of others. What's not to like?"—could manage the transition between regimes.) To prevent a C.E.O. from staging a military coup, the board members would have access to cryptographic keys that would allow them to disarm all government weapons, from nuclear missiles down to small arms, with the push of a button.
Mass political participation would cease, and the only way that people could vote would be with their feet, by moving from one SovCorp to another if they became dissatisfied with the terms of service, like switching from X to Bluesky. The irony

that dissenters like Yarvin would probably be repressed in such a state appears not to concern him. In his imagined polity, he insists, there would still be freedom of speech. "You can think, say, or write whatever you want," he has promised. "Because the state has no reason to care."

Yarvin's congenital cynicism about governance disappears as soon as he starts talking about dictatorial regimes. He has kind words for El Salvador's strongman, Nayib Bukele, and has encouraged Trump to let Putin end the liberal order "not just in Russian-speaking territories—but all the way to the English Channel." Picking at a plate of fried calamari, Yarvin praised China and Rwanda (neither of which he has visited) for having strong governments that insured both public safety and personal liberty. In China, he told me, "you can think and pretty much say whatever you want." He may have sensed my skepticism, given the country's record of imprisoning critics and detaining ethnic minorities in concentration camps. "If you want to organize against the government, you're gonna have problems," he admitted. Then he returned to his airbrush: "Not Stalin problems. You'll just, like, be cancelled."

For certain people, like meth addicts or four-year-olds, Yarvin said, too much freedom could be deadly. Then, gesturing to the homeless population camped in the neighborhood, he suddenly began to cry. "The idea that this represents success, or this represents the 'worst of all systems, except for all the others' "—he was referencing Churchill's famous comment about democracy, which I'd paraphrased earlier—"is highly delusional," he said, wiping away the tears. (A few weeks later, on a trip to London, I watched him break down while giving a similar speech to a member of the House of Lords. It was less affecting the second time around.)

Presumably, Yarvin's monarch would act decisively to safeguard his wards. At the Venice café, Yarvin lauded the Delancey Street Foundation, a nonprofit rehab organization, whose strict program he has characterized as exerting "fascist-parent-level control." Some of his own proposals go further. On his blog, he once joked about converting San Francisco's underclasses into biodiesel to power the

city's buses. Then he suggested another idea: putting them in solitary confinement, hooked up to a virtual-reality interface. Whatever the exact solution, he has written, it is crucial to find "a humane alternative to genocide," an outcome that "achieves the same result as mass murder (the removal of undesirable elements from society) but without any of the moral stigma."

Yarvin's call for an American strongman is often treated as an eccentric provocation. In fact, he considers it the only answer to a world in which most people are unfit for democracy. An "African country today," he told me, has "enough smart people in the country to run it—you just don't have enough smart people to have a democratic election in which everyone is smart." Because of such remarks, Yarvin is sometimes identified as a white nationalist, a label he delicately resists. In a 2007 blog post titled "Why I Am Not a White Nationalist," he explained that, though he is "not exactly allergic to the stuff," he finds both whiteness and nationalism to be unhelpful political concepts. During lunch, he told me that he feels a rueful sympathy for the bigots of the past, who had some of the right intuitions but lacked the proper science. Neo-reactionaries tend to subscribe to what they call "human biodiversity," a set of fringe beliefs which holds, among other things, that not all racial or population groups are equally intelligent. As Yarvin came to see it from his online research, these genetic differences contributed to (and, conveniently, helped explain away) demographic differences in poverty, crime, and educational attainment. "In this house, we believe in science—*race* science," he wrote last year.

For several hours, Yarvin shuffled through his pitches for strongman rule, like an auctioneer desperate to clinch a sale. I listened patiently, though I was often puzzled by his factual distortions and peculiar asides. "What is the right policy in a completely new-from-scratch regime for African Americans?" he wondered aloud at one point. At first, this seemed like a non sequitur: I'd been pressing him on how he would define success in the second Trump Administration. Answering himself, he said that the "obvious solution" to problems of inner-city drug abuse

and poverty would be to "put the church Blacks in charge of the ghetto Blacks." Yarvin, who is an atheist, is not particularly interested in theocratic rule, but he advocates creating different legal codes to govern different populations. (He has cited the Ottoman *millet* system, which granted religious communities a measure of autonomy.) To keep the "ghetto Blacks" in line, he went on, they should be forced to live in a "traditional way," like Orthodox Jews or the Amish. "The approach that the twentieth century took is, if we could just make the schools good enough, they would all turn into Unitarians," he said. "If you've seen 'The Wire' and lived in Baltimore, both of which I have, that does not seem to work at all." It wasn't until he reached the end of his speech, ten minutes later, that I realized he was, in his own way, addressing my initial question. "Unless we can totally reëngineer DNA to change what a human being is, there are many people who should not live in a modern way but in a traditional way," he concluded. "And *that* is a level of revolution that is so far beyond anything the Trump-Vance regime is doing."

Yarvin is not known for his discretion. He has a habit of sharing private correspondence, as I discovered when he started sending me unsolicited screenshots of text messages and e-mails he'd exchanged with his wife, his friends, a fact checker at the *Times Magazine*, and someone nominated to the new Administration. He seemed troubled by the thought that the wit and wisdom they contained might be lost to posterity. He was more guarded about his friendship with Thiel, but he did mention a conversation they'd privately filmed together last year and boasted about a fortieth-birthday gift he'd received from the billionaire: Francis Neilson's "The Tragedy of Europe," a contemporaneous commentary on the Second World War, though not the first edition that Yarvin had been hoping for.

Thiel has always had a prophetic touch. He co-founded PayPal, became the first outside investor in Facebook, and created Palantir, a data-mining firm that has just received a new contract to help Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers

carry out deportations. Thiel supported Trump back when doing so still made one a pariah in Silicon Valley. In 2022, he donated fifteen million dollars to J. D. Vance's Senate campaign, the largest amount given to a single candidate in congressional history. A longtime libertarian, Thiel appears to have taken a Yarvinian turn around 2009, when, in a widely quoted essay published online by the Cato Institute, he wrote, "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." Yarvin linked to it approvingly in a blog post titled "Democraphobia Goes (Slightly) Viral." They soon met for the first time, at Thiel's house in San Francisco, and, according to private messages I reviewed, struck up a confiding correspondence. Yarvin's e-mails were long and homiletic, full of precepts gleaned from pickup-artist blogs; Thiel's were straightforward and concise. Both men seemed to take for granted that America was a communist country, that journalists acted like the Stasi, and that tech C.E.O.s were their prey.

In the fall of 2014, Thiel published "Zero to One," a best-selling treatise on startups, with Blake Masters, his employee and a longtime Moldbug fan. Before the book tour, Thiel asked Yarvin for advice on fielding questions he might get on how to steer more women into tech. The premise appeared to strike them both as misguided, since women, in their view, were less likely to have men's aptitude for computer science. As Yarvin put it in one e-mail, "There's simply no way short of becoming a farce for Google, YC"—Y Combinator, the startup accelerator—"etc, etc, to 'look like America.' " Yarvin suggested that Thiel deploy a pickup-artist tactic called "agree and amplify"—that is, ask a journalist, who probably had no solution in mind, what she would do to tackle the problem. "The purpose here is not to get the interlocutor to sleep with you, but to get her to fear this issue and run away from it—and ditto for future interviewers," he wrote. Once, at a dinner, Thiel quizzed Yarvin on how one might go about taking down *Gawker*. (As it turned out, Thiel had already decided to secretly bankroll Hulk Hogan's defamation lawsuit against the online publication, which eventually bankrupted it, in 2016.) In e-mails obtained by *BuzzFeed*, Yarvin bragged to Milo Yiannopoulos, the *Breitbart* editor, that he'd watched Trump's first election at Thiel's house and had been "coaching" him. "Peter needs guidance on politics for sure,"

Yiannopoulos replied. Yarvin wrote back, "Less than you might think! . . . He's fully enlightened, just plays it very carefully."

When I recently visited Yarvin's Craftsman home, in Berkeley, I noticed a painting that Thiel had given him: a portrait of Yarvin in the style of a role-playing-game character card, bearing the legend "Philosopher." As I sipped tea from a novelty mug featuring an image of Yarvin with a cartoon crown, he told me that it would be "cringe" for him to broadcast his relationship with Thiel—or with Vance, for that matter, whom he met through Thiel around 2015. "Does a normal Ohio voter read . . . Mencius Moldbug? No," Vance reportedly said one night at a bar during the 2021 National Conservatism Conference. "But do they agree with the broad thrust of where we think American public policy should go? Absolutely." "He's a really cool guy," Yarvin said of the Vice-President, who followed him on X earlier this year. (The White House did not respond to requests for comment.)

Although Yarvin tried to be discreet, he mentioned that Thiel has a bit of a "weirdo edge" and described Andreessen, the venture capitalist, as someone who, "apart from the bizarre and possibly even nonhuman shape of his head, would seem much more normal than Peter." After Andreessen invested in Yarvin's startup, Tlon, the two got to know each other; they texted and went to brunch long before Andreessen came out as a Trump supporter, last year. Andreessen has been known to urge his associates to read Yarvin's blog. "Tech people are not interested in appeals to virtue or beauty or tradition, like most conservatives," the

State Department official said. "They are more like right-wing progressives, and for a long time Moldbug was the only person speaking to them this way." (Andreessen and Thiel declined to comment.) Apropos of his relationships with powerful men, Yarvin paraphrased to me "a wonderful piece of advice for courtiers" that he'd picked up from Lord Chesterfield's "Letters to His Son," an eighteenth-century etiquette manual addressed to the author's illegitimate child: "Never bug them. And never let them forget you exist."

Yarvin has had more success as a courtier to startup founders than as a founder himself. He launched Tlon in 2013, with a twentysomething former Thiel fellow. Yarvin approached computer science the same way he approached the U.S. government—with, as he put it, "utopian megalomania." Yarvin's visionary goal was to build a peer-to-peer computer network, named Urbit, that would allow users to control their own data, free from scolds, spies, and monopolies. Each user on the Urbit network is identified with an N.F.T. that acts like a digital passport. Even though Urbit promotes decentralization, the system is designed around a hierarchical model of virtual real estate, with users owning "planets," "stars," or "galaxies."

In an early sketch of the system, Yarvin named himself its "prince," but he struggled to attract subjects to his imaginary kingdom. Like Yarvin's political theory, his programming language, which he wrote himself, was daring, abstruse, and sometimes mistaken for a hoax. Ever the contrarian, he reversed the meaning of zeros and ones. After decades of work and an estimated thirty million dollars of investment, Urbit seems to function less like a feudal society and more like the Usenet forums of Yarvin's youth. (The trade publication *CoinDesk* has called it "a slower version of AOL Instant Messenger.") "It doesn't work the way it's supposed to," a former Urbit employee told me, describing Yarvin as "the world's first computer-science crank." Yarvin left the company in 2019.

No longer needing to worry about spooking investors, Yarvin threw himself into the life style of a self-described "rogue intellectual." Under his own name, he

launched a Substack newsletter, "Gray Mirror of the Nihilist Prince." (Today, it is the platform's third most popular "history" publication.) He became a fixture on the right-wing podcast circuit and seemed never to turn down an invitation to party. On his travels, he often hosted "office hours"—informal, freewheeling discussions with readers, many of them thoughtful young men, alienated by liberal guilt and groupthink. What wins Yarvin converts is less the soundness of his arguments than the transgressive energy they exude: he makes his listeners feel that he is granting them access to forbidden knowledge—about racial hierarchy, historical conspiracies, and the perfidy of democratic rule—that progressive culture is at pains to suppress. His approach seizes on the reality that most Americans have never learned how to defend democracy; they were simply brought up to believe in it.

Yarvin advises his followers to avoid culture-war battles over issues like D.E.I. and abortion. It is wiser, he argues, to let the democratic system collapse on its own. In the meantime, dissidents should focus on becoming "fashionable" by building a reactionary subculture—a counter-Cathedral. Sam Kriss, a left-wing writer who has debated Yarvin, said of his work, "It flatters people who believe they can change the world simply by having weird ideas on the Internet and decadent parties in Manhattan."

Such people have come to be known as the "dissident right," a loose constellation of artists and strivers clustered around the Bay Area, Miami, and the Lower East Side micro-neighborhood Dimes Square. The milieu was drawn together by a frustration with electoral politics, COVID lockdowns, and the strictures of "wokeness." Vice signalling has been central to the scene's countercultural allure: instead of sharing pronouns and employing the approved nomenclature ("unhoused," "Latinx," "justice-involved person"), its members have revived insults like "gay" and "retarded." Dasha Nekrasova and Anna Khachiyan, the hosts of the "Red Scare" podcast, are among the most prominent avatars of the scene. In 2021, Thiel helped to fund an anti-woke film festival in New York, and Yarvin read his poetry at one of its packed events. Urbit now hosts a literary magazine designed to

look like *The New York Review of Books*. "If you are an intelligent Jewish-American urbanite who wants to play around with certain Nietzschean and eugenic themes, you aren't going to join tiki-torch-bearing marchers chanting that 'the Jews will not replace us,' " the conservative commentator Sohrab Ahmari observed in an essay last year. "No, you turn to the dissident right."

Yarvin has emerged as a veteran edgelord of this crowd, which he compared to San Francisco's gay subculture in the seventies and to the Lost Generation of literary modernists—tight-knit communities whose members bonded over their sense of being outsiders. James Joyce, he said, sold few copies of "Ulysses," but his friends, like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, "knew that what he was doing was good." So it was with the creatives of the dissident right, whose endeavors, he felt, had been overlooked by the intolerant Cathedral. This past April, Yarvin pitched Darren Beattie, the acting Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, on a plan for "dissident-right art hos" to take over the American pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Lately, Yarvin has been trying to flip some of his newly acquired cultural capital into the real thing. Last year, he returned to Urbit as a "wartime C.E.O.," after which several top employees resigned, and in February he raised more money from Andreessen Horowitz. According to a draft of an unpublished Substack post, his newest plan is to promote Urbit as an élite private club whose members, he believes, are destined to become "the stars of the new public sphere—a new Usenet, a new digital Athens built to last forever."

The night before Trump's Inauguration, I drove Yarvin to a black-tie "Coronation Ball" at the Watergate Hotel, in Washington, D.C. The event was organized by a neo-reactionary publishing house, Passage Press, which recently released Yarvin's book "Gray Mirror, Fascicle I: Disturbance," the first of a planned four-part cycle outlining his vision for a new political regime. Its endnotes predominantly consist of QR-code links to Wikipedia pages: "Denazification," "L'État, c'est moi," "Presentism (historical analysis)." As I

negotiated the icy streets, Yarvin explained that during the Elizabethan era the finest minds in the arts and sciences were to be found at court. When I asked if he saw a parallel with Trump's inner circle, he burst out laughing. "Oh, no," he said. "My God."

Like most journalists, I had been denied entry to the ball, so I ordered a drink at a bar in the lobby. Standing next to me was a man wearing a cowboy hat and a burgundy velour suit—a Yarvin enthusiast, it turned out, named Alex Maxa. He ran a party-bus company in San Francisco, and in his free time he made memes featuring Yarvin's likeness. He said that he was drawn to Yarvin's work because "it makes me feel like I've got something that people in Washington who think they're really smart can't actually make a compelling argument against." He'd wanted to go to the ball but tickets, whose price had surged to twenty thousand dollars, were now sold out. Not long afterward, I met two of Yarvin's friends, who encouraged me, and another journalist I was with, to confidently walk into the party with them. Maxa was already inside, having taken a similar approach. "Lol I just waltzed right in by asking where the coat check was," he texted.

Passage Press had billed the event as "MAGA meets the Tech Right." It was not false advertising. In a banquet hall awash in pink and purple light, Anton, from the State Department, Laura Loomer, a Trump whisperer known for her anti-Muslim bigotry, and Jack Posobiec, who popularized the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, mingled with venture capitalists, crypto accelerationists, and Substack all-stars. Earlier that evening, as guests dined on seared scallops and filet mignon, Steve Bannon, the ball's keynote speaker, called for mass deportations, the "Götterdämmerung" of the administrative state, and Mark Zuckerberg's imprisonment.

Eight years ago, Mike Cernovich, a first-gen alt-right influencer, had co-hosted an inaugural party known as the DeploraBall, a winking reference to Hillary Clinton's unfortunate crack about half of Trump's supporters belonging in a "basket of deplorables." It was, by all accounts, a shambolic affair, plagued by

journalists and protesters. One of Cernovich's co-organizers, Tim Gionet, who goes by the online pseudonym Baked Alaska, was removed from his role after posting antisemitic content on Twitter. Now, at the Coronation Ball, Baked Alaska was served for dessert—a nod, it seemed, to Gionet, who was then on probation for participating in the January 6th insurrection. (He was pardoned by Trump the next day.) Cernovich pushed a baby around in a stroller and marvelled, like a proud father, at how far the movement had come. "I was one of the oldest guys in the place!" he tweeted the following afternoon. "Real right wing. High energy and high IQ." In 2008, Yarvin, in his "Open Letter," had called for a reactionary vanguard to form an underground political party. The Coronation Ball made it clear that this was no longer necessary. His web-addled counter-élite was now the establishment.

Yarvin was dressed in the same tuxedo, including a bright-red cummerbund, that he'd worn to a party at Thiel's house in D.C. the night before, where, as *Politico* reported, Vance had amiably greeted him with "You reactionary fascist!" He'd also worn the tux to his wedding last year. Yarvin's first wife died in 2021, from a hereditary heart disease, at the age of fifty. At the ball, he was accompanied by his second wife, Kristine Militello. A former Bernie Sanders supporter and an aspiring novelist, Kristine described herself as having been "red-pilled" during the pandemic, after losing her customer-service job at an online wine retailer. She first encountered Yarvin on YouTube, where she watched a video of him arguing against the legitimacy of the American Revolution, and proceeded to read everything he'd written. She sent him an admiring e-mail in 2022, seeking advice on how to break into New York's dissident-right literary scene, and they met for drinks a few weeks later.

Recently, Yarvin has taken to describing himself as a "dark elf" whose role is to seduce "high elves"—blue-state élites—by planting "acorns of dark doubt in their high golden minds." (In this Tolkien-inspired metaphor, red-state conservatives are "hobbits" who should submit to the "absolute power" of a new ruling class

made up, unsurprisingly, of dark elves.) He didn't always express himself so quaintly. In 2011, the day after the far-right terrorist Anders Behring Breivik killed sixty-nine people, many of them teen-agers, at a summer camp in Norway, Yarvin wrote, "If you're going to change Norway into something new, you need the present ruling class of Norway to *join* and *follow* you. Or at least, you'll need their children." He praised Breivik for targeting the right group ("communists, not Muslims"), but condemned his methods: "Rape is beta. Seduction is alpha. Don't slaughter the youth camp—*recruit* the youth camp."

Yarvin's own recruitment efforts seemed to be working. Near the open bar, I spoke to Stevie Miller, a sprightly sophomore at Carnegie Mellon who has been reading Yarvin since the seventh grade. (Yarvin told me that he'd encountered several gifted Zoomers who'd read him as preteens because his "high-I.Q. style" served as a "high-I.Q. magnet.") Two years ago, Miller hung out with Yarvin at Vibecamp, a gathering for nerds and techies in rural Maryland. Yarvin, who left early, asked Miller to help him throw his own party in D.C., which came to be known as Vibekampf. Afterward, Miller became Yarvin's first personal intern. "My parents, New York Jewish liberals who I love, were totally mystified," he said.

After half an hour, I was escorted out of the party, as were other reporters throughout the evening. Security mistook Maxa, my friend from the lobby, for one of our kind, and he was ejected, too, though not before pressing through the crowd to get his photo taken with the dark elf.

Even Trump's most pessimistic critics have been startled by the speed with which the President, in his second term, has moved to impose autocracy on America, concentrating power in the executive branch—and often enough in the hands of the richest men on earth. Elon Musk, an unelected citizen, has led a squadron of twentysomethings on a spree through the federal government, laying off tens of thousands of civil servants, shuttering the U.S. Agency for International Development, and seizing control of the Treasury Department's payment system. Meanwhile, the Administration has launched an assault on civil society, revoking

funding at Harvard and other universities that it claims are bastions of ideological indoctrination and punishing law firms that have represented Trump's opponents. It has expanded the machinery of immigration enforcement, deporting three U.S.-born children to Honduras, a group of Asian and Latin American immigrants to Africa, and more than two hundred Venezuelan migrants to a maximum-security prison in El Salvador, where they may remain until the end of their lives. U.S. citizens now find themselves with a government that claims the right to disappear them without due process: as Trump told Bukele, the President of El Salvador, during an Oval Office meeting, "Homegrowns are next." Without a vigorous system of checks and balances, one man's crank ideas—like starting an incoherent trade war that upends the global economy—don't get filtered out. They become policies that enrich his family and his allies.

Since January, a cottage industry has arisen online to trace links between the government's chaotic blitz of actions and Yarvin's writings. Yarvin is hardly the Rasputin-like figure with Oval Office access that certain Bluesky users imagine him to be, but it isn't difficult to see why some people may have come to this view. Last month, an anonymous DOGE adviser told the Washington *Post* that it was "an open secret that everyone in policymaking roles has read Yarvin." Stephen Miller, the President's deputy chief of staff, recently quote-tweeted him. Vance has called for the U.S. to retrench from Europe, a longtime Yarvin desideratum. Last spring, Yarvin proposed expelling all Palestinians from the Gaza Strip and turning it into a luxury resort. "Did I hear someone say 'beachfront?' " he wrote on Substack. "The new Gaza—developed, of course, by Jared Kushner—is the LA of the Mediterranean, an entirely new charter city on humanity's oldest ocean, sublime real estate with an absolutely perfect, Apple-quality government." This February, during a joint press conference with Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, Trump surprised his advisers when he made a nearly identical proposal, describing his redeveloped Gaza as "the Riviera of the Middle East."

Whenever I asked Yarvin about resonances between his writing and real-world events, his response was nonchalant. He seemed to see himself as a conduit for pure reason—the only mystery, to him, was why it had taken others so long to catch up. "You can invent a lie, but you can only discover the truth," he told me. We were in London, where he was attending the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship, a conservative conference co-founded by the psychologist Jordan Peterson. (Yarvin described Peterson to me as "a dandy" with "a weird narcissistic energy coming off of him.") Accompanying Yarvin on his travels were Eduardo Giralt Brun and Alonso Esquinca Díaz, two millennial filmmakers who were shooting a documentary about his life. Their goal was to make a naturalistic character study in the style of "Grey Gardens," in which, as Brun put it, "the camera just happens to be around." It wasn't going to plan. Yarvin kept repeating the same monologues, which meant that much of the footage was the same. The filmmakers worried that his racist remarks would turn viewers off. One afternoon in London, Díaz had filmed Yarvin getting his portrait painted with Lord Maurice Glasman, a post-liberal political theorist who has been called "Labour's MAGA Lord," for his support of Brexit and his ongoing dialogue with figures like Steve Bannon. At one point in their discussion, Yarvin had pulled out his iPhone to show Glasman that he'd hacked the chatbot Claude to get it to call him by the N-word.

Some thinkers would envy the attention Yarvin is receiving. But he dismissed his influence as a "fraudulent currency" since it has yet to cash out in the revolution he desires. He poured scorn on DOGE ("so much libertarian DNA") and Trump's tariff plan (not mercantilist enough). In a recent essay on Substack, he criticized the decision to dispatch plainclothes ICE officers to jail college students and professors for political speech—not on moral grounds, but because the thuggish optics were likely to provoke resistance. Yarvin's oracular pronouncements and bottomless disdain for actually existing politics have inspired a viral post: his face under the words "Your anti-regime actions work well in practice. But do they work in theory?" The conservative activist Christopher Rufo has compared Yarvin to "a

sullen teenager who insists that everything is pointless." I came to think of him as a reactionary Goldilocks who would be satisfied with nothing less than the inch-perfect autocracy that he'd constructed in his mind.

This apparent desire for control also shows up in some of his relationships. Not long ago, I visited Lydia Laurenson, Yarvin's ex-fiancée, in Berkeley. The two began dating in September, 2021, after Yarvin posted a personal ad on Substack, explaining that he'd recently lost his "widower virginity" and was looking to meet someone of "childbearing age." Laurenson, a freelance writer and editor, replied the same day: "I have historically been a liberal but my IQ is really high, I want kids, and I'm incredibly curious to talk to you." Yarvin went on Zoom dates with other women who answered the post—among them, Caroline Ellison, the ex-girlfriend of the now imprisoned crypto entrepreneur Sam Bankman-Fried—but he and Laurenson soon found themselves in an all-consuming romance. She told me that the ethos of her relationship with Yarvin was " 'We're going to be geniuses together and have genius babies.' I'm making fun of it a little bit, but that really was it."

Like Yarvin, Laurenson had been a precocious child who went to college early. She'd also maintained a blog with a cult following, where, under the pseudonym Clarisse Thorn, she wrote about sex-positive feminism, B.D.S.M., and pickup artistry. She and Yarvin fought often, sometimes about politics. Laurenson had moved away from the left, but she hadn't fully embraced neo-reaction. When I asked her if she'd ever changed Yarvin's mind about anything, she said she'd gotten

him to stop using the N-word, at least around her. (He later told this magazine that he was not using the word in the spirit of "a Southern plantation owner.")

The bigger source of tension, according to Laurenson, was Yarvin's autocratic attachment style. When they fought, Laurenson said, he insisted that she provide a rational justification for ending hostilities. She felt that Yarvin's slippery personal attacks resembled his manner in public debates. "He makes up explanations that seem reasonable, but are actually false; he attacks the character of the person who is trying to point out what he's doing; it's like a DDOS attack of the soul," she told me in an e-mail, referencing the cyberattack strategy of overwhelming a server with traffic from multiple sources. James Dama, a friend of Laurenson's who had his own falling out with Yarvin, recalled, "He would make a coarse joke about Lydia's weight or looks, not get a laugh, and then get angry at Lydia for being too stuck up." (Tanner, Yarvin's first girlfriend, described a similar pattern of insults and demands.)

Laurenson and Yarvin broke up in the summer of 2022, while Laurenson was pregnant. He told me that his desire for closeness might have struck Laurenson as "overbearing and stifling," and that he had a bad habit of making "a joke that's sort of a barb," but he denied that he was ever purposefully cruel during the relationship. (He added that, after the relationship ended, "my natural instinct was, I'm going to cut her down to size every time I can"—something, he noted, he was "very good at.") A few weeks after their son was born, that December, Yarvin sued for partial custody, which he received. An ongoing family-court case remains acrimonious. "The parents are in disagreement about nearly every issue," their mediator observed last year.

Now that they share a toddler, Laurenson spends a lot of time thinking about Yarvin's own childhood. "He has this class-clown thing going on, where he very much craves attention," she said. To her, it seemed that his embrace of a provocative ideology was a kind of "repetition compulsion," a psychological defense that allowed him to reframe the ostracization he experienced growing up.

As America's most famous living monarchist, he could tell himself that people were rejecting him for his outré ideas, not for his personality. She wondered if he'd first adopted "the monarchist thing" as a kind of intellectual sport, a bit from Usenet, and then, like the parallel world in the Borges story, it had slowly taken on a reality of its own. "Is it just like you found this place where people admire you and allow you to troll as much as you want, and then you just live in that world?" she asked.

In the past decade, liberalism has taken a beating from both sides of the political spectrum. Its critics to the left view its measured gradualism as incommensurate to the present's multiple emergencies: climate change, inequality, the rise of an ethno-nationalist right. Conservatives, by contrast, paint liberalism as a cultural leviathan that has trampled traditional values underfoot. In "Why Liberalism Failed" (2018), the Notre Dame political scientist Patrick Deneen argues that the contemporary American emphasis on individual freedom has come at the expense of family, faith, and community, turning us into "increasingly separate, autonomous, non-relational selves replete with rights and defined by our liberty, but insecure, powerless, afraid, and alone." Other post-liberal theorists, including Adrian Vermeule, have proposed that the state curtail certain rights in the service of an explicitly Catholic "common good."

Yarvin is calling for something simpler and more libidinally satisfying: to burn it all down and start again from scratch. Since the advent of neoliberalism in the late seventies, political leaders have increasingly treated governance like corporate management, turning citizens into customers and privatizing services. The result has been greater inequality, a weakened social safety net, and the widespread perception that democracy itself is to blame for these ills, creating an appetite for exactly the kind of autocratic efficiency Yarvin now extolls. "A Yarvin program might seem seductive during a period of neoliberal rule, where efforts to change things, whether it is global warming or the war machine, feel futile," the historian Suzanne Schneider told me. "You can sit back, not give a fuck, and let someone

else run the show." Yarvin has little to say on the question of human flourishing, or about humans in general, who appear in his work as sheep to be herded, idiots to be corrected, or marionettes controlled by leftist puppeteers.

Whatever gift Yarvin has for attracting attention, his work does not survive scrutiny. It is full of spurious syllogisms and arguments retconned to match his jaundiced intuitions. He has read widely, but he uses his knowledge merely as grist for the same reactionary fairy tale: once upon a time, people knew their place and lived in harmony; then along came the Enlightenment, with its "noble lie" of egalitarianism, plunging the world into disorder. Yarvin often criticizes academics for treating history like a Marvel movie, with oversimplified heroes and villains, but it's unclear what he adds to the picture by calling Napoleon a "startup guy." (He has favored the revisionist theories that Shakespeare's plays were really written by the seventeenth Earl of Oxford and that the American Civil War, which he calls the War of Secession, worsened living conditions for Black Americans.) "The neat thing about primary sources is that often, it takes only one to prove your point," he has proclaimed, which would come as news to historians.

Some of his most thoroughgoing critics are on the right. Rufo, the conservative activist, has written that Yarvin is a "sophist" whose debating style consists of "childish insults, bouts of paranoia, heavy italics, pointless digressions, competitive bibliography, and allusions to cartoons." He added, "When one tries to locate what it is that you actually think, he cannot help but discover that there really isn't much substance there." The most generous engagement with Yarvin's ideas has come from bloggers associated with the rationalist movement, which prides itself on weighing evidence for even seemingly far-fetched claims. Their formidable patience, however, has also worn thin. "He never addressed me as an equal, only as a brainwashed person," Scott Aaronson, an eminent computer scientist, said of their conversations. "He seemed to think that if he just gave me one more reading assignment about happy slaves singing or one more monologue about F.D.R., I'd finally see the light."

Intellectual seriousness may not be the point. Yarvin's polemics have proved useful for those on the right in search of a rationale for nerd ressentiment and plutocratic will to power. "The guy does not have a coherent theory of the case," the Democratic senator Chris Murphy, from Connecticut, told me. "He just happens to be saying something out loud that a lot of Republicans are eager to hear."

It is not difficult to anticipate the totalitarian endgame of a world view that marries power worship with a contempt for human dignity—fascism, as some might call it. Like his ideological nemeses the Bolsheviks, Yarvin seems to believe that the only thing standing in the way of Utopia is an unwillingness to use every means possible to achieve it. He claims that the transition to his regime will be peaceful, even joyous, but fantasies of violence flicker throughout his work. "Unless the monarch is ready to actually *genocide* the nobility or the masses, he has to capture their loyalty," he wrote in a Substack post in March. "You're not going to *foam* these people, like turkeys with bird flu. Right?"

Yarvin's strong opinions on how the world ought to work extended to this profile. Some of his suggestions were intriguing: he floated the idea of staging a debate with one of his ex-girlfriends, and invited me to follow him to Doha for a meeting with Omar bin Laden, one of Osama's sons. Others were officious. At one point, he sent me nine texts objecting to my use of the word "extreme"—"a hostile pejorative," he explained, which my article would be better off without. (He'd previously boasted several times in our taped conversations that he was more "extreme" than anyone in the current Administration.) A few days after the Coronation Ball at the Watergate Hotel, he wrote to *The New Yorker* to complain that I'd walked in without his publisher's permission; he said that he hoped the incident would not turn into "Watergate 2," and referred to himself as "certainly the most media-friendly person in the scene!" (Jonathan Keeperman, his publisher at Passage Press and the host of the ball, once suggested that the Republican Party should "lamppost"—that is, lynch—"the journos," so this was not a particularly high bar to clear.)

One morning this winter, I woke up to twenty-eight texts from Yarvin expressing concerns about my reporting technique. "The problem is that your process is slack and I can feel it generating low-quality content—because it's not adversarial enough," he wrote. "When the process is not adversarial, I don't know what I am contending against." He briefly considered whether I was "too dumb to understand the ideas," or whether I'd succumbed to the mental self-censorship that Orwell called "crimestop." He urged me to watch "The Lives of Others," an Oscar-winning film that depicts the relationship between an East German playwright and a Stasi agent who is tasked with surveilling him. The Stasi agent, he wrote, "can actually write up the ideas of the playwright, *without even thinking them* It is not even that he is 'opposed' to the dissident ideas. It is that he does not even let them touch his brain." In the film, the Stasi agent eventually "cracks," after he comes to sympathize with the playwright's views. Yarvin, presumably, was the playwright.

He said that he was coming to see me, on the other hand, as an "NPC," or non-player character. He proposed giving me a Voight-Kampff test, the fictional exam in "Blade Runner" used to distinguish androids from humans. His version would involve the two of us debating "the 'blank slate theory' versus 'racism' " and recording the conversation. ("By 'racism' I mean of course human biodiversity," he elaborated.) When I explained that my reporting process did not include submitting to on-demand tests, Yarvin sent me a screenshot of "August 1968," W. H. Auden's poem about the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia to suppress the Prague Spring:

The Ogre does what ogres can
Deeds quite impossible for Man,
But one prize is beyond his reach,
The Ogre cannot master Speech

He went on to say that although he'd agreed to participate in this story because "no publicity is bad publicity," he would now try to kill it if he could.

I was struck by the contrast between his messages and the coolheaded tone he'd recommended that Thiel and other friends deploy when handling the media. After the 2013 *TechCrunch* article identifying Yarvin came out, Balaji Srinivasan, the entrepreneur, proposed in an e-mail "to sic the Dark Enlightenment audience on a single vulnerable hostile reporter to dox them." Yarvin dissuaded him. "What would Heartiste say?" Yarvin asked, referring to the white-nationalist pickup-artist blog "Chateau Heartiste." "Almost always, the right alpha answer is 'nothing.' Say nothing. Do nothing."

On a balmy afternoon in late February, Yarvin and his wife, Kristine, were driving down a country road in the South of France. They were accompanied by the documentarians, Brun and Díaz. "Where are we going, Kristine?" Brun asked from the passenger seat, turning the camera around to film her in the back beside me.

She said that she had only the vaguest notion. "Honestly, he just tells me everything last minute," she explained. "It's kind of like being a dog. You just know that you're going in the car, and you don't know if you're gonna go to the dog park, or you're gonna go to the vet, and you'll find out when you get there."

"Spontaneity," Yarvin chimed in.

"That's a word for it," Kristine teased.

We were on our way to meet Renaud Camus, a seventy-eight-year-old novelist and pamphleteer, who, in 2011, published "The Great Replacement," an

incendiary manifesto that argued that liberal élites were behind a conspiracy to replace white Europeans with migrants from Africa and the Middle East. The title phrase has since become a rallying cry for white nationalists around the world, from Charlottesville, Virginia, where, in 2017, marchers chanted, "You will not replace us," to Christchurch, New Zealand, where, two years later, a man who'd published a manifesto with the same title as Camus's killed fifty-one Muslims.

As we crested a hill, the walls of Camus's castle, Château de Plieux, loomed into view. "Does anyone know if he's related to Albert Camus?" Yarvin asked. "I think he's not related to Albert, but he's a lovely, old, gay, literary Frenchman."

Brun, who is Venezuelan, wondered what he would do if Camus "has a sign that says 'No Foreigners Allowed.' "

"Well, are you here to replace us?" Kristine joked. Nobody replied.

Yarvin rang an impressive metal bell beside the door, and we were soon ushered inside by Pierre Jolibert, Camus's partner. Upstairs, Camus was waiting for us with a bottle of champagne. With his manicured white beard and brown corduroy jacket, complete with a bow tie and gold pocket-watch chain, he looked like a nineteenth-century man of letters. Speaking perfect English, with an English accent, he made it sound as though he'd had no choice but to buy the castle, which dated from the early thirteen-hundreds, after his library grew too large for his small Parisian flat. That was thirty-five years ago. Now, acknowledging the stacks of books that were overtaking his cavernous study, he said that he was running into the same problem here.

Over several glasses of champagne, Yarvin fired a series of questions at Camus, though he rarely waited long enough for his host to give a full answer. What did Camus think of Philippe Pétain? Charles de Gaulle? Napoleon III? Napoleon I? Ernst Jünger? Ernst von Salomon? Ezra Pound? Basil Bunting? More than an

interaction, Yarvin, the former trivia champion, seemed to want a pat on the head for his display of learning.

After we headed downstairs for lunch—strips of sizzling duck, a quiche Lorraine, red wine—Yarvin resumed his cross-examination. Did Camus rate Thomas Carlyle? Michel Houellebecq? Louis XIV? What would he say to Charles Maurras if he were alive today? What would Dostoyevsky have thought about the COVID lab-leak theory?

Camus let out a high-pitched giggle whenever Yarvin asked a particularly odd question, but he was baffled by his guest's repeated inquiries about Brigitte Macron, the French First Lady, who Yarvin suspected was actually a man. "We are dealing with the most important thing in the history of the Continent," Camus exclaimed, referring to the rise of nonwhite immigration to Europe. "What does it matter if Mrs. Macron is a man or woman?"

Brun asked the men to move to a window so that he could shoot them from outside. As Yarvin gazed at the patchwork of neatly tended fields below, he spoke about the Great Replacement as "one of the greatest crimes" in history. "Is it greater than the Holocaust? I don't know. . . . We haven't seen it play out yet." He'd been drinking since his arrival and seemed to be in an emotional state. "I have three children," he told Camus. "Will they be basically lined up and marched into mass graves?" They had been discussing Jean Raspail's apocalyptic novel, "The Camp of the Saints" (1973), which depicts an invasion of Indian migrants destroying European nations. Sobbing now, he continued, "I want my children to die in the twenty-second century. I don't want them to experience some kind of insane post-colonial Holocaust."

After dessert, coffee, and a rum from Guadeloupe, it was time for an evening stroll. Carrying a wooden cane, Camus led Yarvin through the small town of Plieux. Spring had arrived early: a cherry tree was blossoming with little flowers. As they passed the local church, Yarvin took out his phone to show Camus a

photo of the toddler he shares with Laurenson. "The mother of that child was not my wife," he said confidingly. A moment later, he was reading a poem by C. P. Cavafy, in tears once again.

When Yarvin and Camus went on ahead, the filmmakers paused to assess the day's shoot. Brun said that Yarvin reminded him of the long-winded character in "Airplane!" who talks so incessantly that it drives his seatmates to kill themselves. We wondered what Camus was making of the afternoon. It wasn't long before we found out. "If intellectual exchanges were commercial exchanges—which they are, to a certain extent—the amount of my exports would not reach one per cent of that of my imports," Camus wrote in his diary, which he posted online the following day. "The visitor spoke without interruption from his arrival to his departure, for five hours, very quickly and very loudly, interrupting himself only for curious fits of tears, when he spoke of his deceased wife, but also, more strangely, certain political situations."

It was dark by the time we all returned to the château. "Thank you so much for your hospitality and your duck and your castle," Yarvin said, looking around. "How much money did you spend on it?"

Lovingly squeezing Yarvin's arm, Kristine said, "You can't just ask people that!"

Camus gave Yarvin some of his books as souvenirs, but Yarvin's mind already seemed elsewhere. Tomorrow, he would fly to Paris to meet with a group of red-pilled Zoomers and Éric Zemmour, a far-right polemicist who once ran to be the President of France.

As we headed to the car, Yarvin was buzzing with boyish excitement about his performance. He turned to me and the filmmakers. "Was that good?" he asked. "Was that good?" ♦

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