

The Wall Street Journal, 10 mai

The Ideological Gurus Battling for the Soul of Trump World

Techno-libertarian Curtis Yarvin and Catholic conservative Patrick Deneen have just one thing in common: a desire to destroy the American establishment.



Full text:

When President Trump announced last month that he would upend decades of American trade policy by imposing massive tariffs even on longtime allies, he aroused the competing spirits of his closest advisers. [Elon Musk](#), the world's richest man, was all too aware of the disruption tariffs would pose to his electric vehicle company, [Tesla](#), with factories and suppliers around the world. He blasted Trump's trade adviser, Peter Navarro, as "a moron" and "dumber than a sack of bricks."

Vice President [JD Vance](#), on the other hand, is an ardent defender of a trade policy that Trump insists will restore industrial jobs to the Rust Belt, including Vance's home state of Ohio. "What has the globalist economy gotten the United States of America?" he asked on Fox News last month. "We borrow money from Chinese peasants to buy the things those Chinese peasants manufacture. That is not a recipe for economic prosperity."

Within that clash were strains of two radical and conflicting philosophies that have animated Trump's first 100 days. On one side are tech bros racing to create a new future; on the other, a resurgent band of conservative Catholics who yearn for an imagined past. Both groups agree that the status quo has failed America and must be torn down to make way for a new "postliberal" world. This conviction explains much of the revolutionary fervor of Trump's second term, especially the aggressive bludgeoning of elite universities and the federal workforce.

But the two camps disagree sharply on why liberalism should be junked and what should replace it. The techies envision a libertarian world in which great men like Musk can build a utopian future unfettered by government bureaucrats and regulation. Their dark prince is Curtis Yarvin, a blogger-philosopher who has called for American democracy to be replaced by a king who would run the nation like a tech CEO.

The conservative Catholics, in contrast, want to return America to a bygone era. They venerate local communities, small producers and those who work with their hands. This "common good" conservatism, as they call it, is bound together by tradition and religious morality. Unlike Musk, with his many baby mamas and his zeal to colonize Mars, they believe in limits and personal restraint.

The Catholics' worldview may be best expressed by Patrick Deneen, a political philosopher at the University of Notre Dame whose 2018 book "Why Liberalism Failed" garnered a recommendation from Barack Obama. David Deane, a Catholic theologian, says that Deneen's 2023 book "[Regime Change](#)" offered a preview of the Trump administration's intention to breathe fire on America's cultural institutions. The book "flagged for many of us the fact that Vance would be waging war on the universities. They will, in turn, wage war to a certain extent on the media. They've already waged war on American NGO activity," said Deane, author of the book

“The Tyranny of the Banal” and a close observer of the “common good” movement. “For them politics is wholly insufficient to bringing about the kind of transformation of our social order that they yearn for.”

Like others, Deane marvels at Trump’s ability to corral tech futurists and religious traditionalists into the same political movement—those thrilled by the prospect of transhumanism and those committed to protecting the dignity of the human person. “There’s few figures less Catholic than Musk!” he quipped, calling him a “neo-pagan.” But he also wonders how long it will last. “At some stage a civil war is coming to the Trump movement,” he predicted. “And I think Musk and Vance will be on two very different sides of that civil war.”

‘Democracy Is Bunk’

On a recent evening at the Harvard Faculty Club in Cambridge, Mass., the shaggy-haired Yarvin, dressed in a leather jacket and jeans, was laying out some of his ideas for a standing-room-only crowd that had come to watch him debate Danielle Allen, a Harvard professor of political philosophy. The event was not sanctioned by the university and, for security reasons, the venue was kept private.

It wasn’t always easy to follow a man who speaks in pages, not paragraphs. Yarvin was often obscure, digressing from the Boer War to Machiavelli, universal basic income and 1980s Japanese mercantilism. He was also provocative: “I’m like, do you want democracy? This abstraction, this ideal that people are talking about? Or do you want to be in a competently governed country that is not in a state of cold civil war?”

More than a decade ago, when Yarvin blogged under the name Mencius Moldbug, he was widely dismissed as an internet troll for arguing that “democracy is bunk” and that Americans should “get over their dictator-phobia.” But his profile has grown so quickly that Allen, a celebrated Ivy League political theorist, engaged seriously with his argument for an American monarchy. Writing on The Wall Street Journal’s oped page [this week](#), Allen explained that Harvard students invited her to debate Yarvin and “when students ask for help thinking about intellectual material, my job is to provide that help.”

At the event, Allen argued that Yarvin “thinks we need an absolute monarch unaccountable, no separation of powers, no checks and balances, no limits and so forth. Could be Trump. He kind of elected him. Maybe that’s already happening...Could be Musk...Hard to say.”

Allen also questioned Yarvin’s grasp of history. “It is not the case that autocracies over the course of history have delivered good for human beings,” she said. “They have consistently violated freedom.”

Afterward, Yarvin held court for students and other attendees. He praised JD Vance for his clarity about the decline of rural America and his ability to speak both “populist language” and “the language of Yale,” where the vice president went to law school. But he attacked Christopher Rufo, another leading figure in the conservative movement. Rufo was instrumental in instigating Claudine Gay’s resignation as president of Harvard and has earned praise from Vance as “a leading voice in the movement to restore merit and excellence” to universities, but Yarvin dismissed him as “a grifter selling fake civil war.”

In an email, Rufo responded that Yarvin had backed off his previous goal of “liquidating” Harvard to embrace his own of “re-orienting” it. “I’ve advanced that project in real terms,” Rufo wrote. “He’s mumbled about it whilst wearing a leather jacket. The real debate is within Curtis’ fevered mind.”

Aidan Fitzsimons, a Harvard senior who attended the event, hailed Yarvin as a vital force in the new administration. “I think the biggest difference between Trump 2016 and Trump 2024 is that a sufficiently sizable chunk of the center-slash-tech right swung for Trump. And I think for a lot of intellectuals, Yarvin was like a really big part of that,” he said, describing him as a leading figure in an ascendant West Coast “counter-elite.”

It was Yarvin’s willingness to break political taboos that earned him a following in Silicon Valley, where powerful men chafed against the structures of the state. “A verbose and dyspeptic geek with an abiding distaste for the mainstream Left,” Yarvin became the “house political philosopher” for [PayPal](#) co-founder Peter Thiel, wrote journalist Max Chafkin in his biography of Thiel, “The Contrarian.”

Long before Trump took aim at Harvard, Yarvin argued that government recognition should be withdrawn from elite universities, which held too much sway over American politics and culture. (He himself graduated from Brown.) Long before DOGE, Yarvin advocated for what he called RAGE: Retire All Government Employees.

Yarvin's writing caught the attention of the new right, including Vance, who praised his idea for eliminating the "administrative state" on a podcast in 2021. "I'm sympathetic to that project," the vice president said at the time. The same year, Yarvin bantered on a podcast with Michael Anton, now the director of policy planning in Trump's State Department, about how a president might seize more power.

Yarvin's school of thought has been called the "Dark Enlightenment" or the neo-reactionary movement. The "Nerd Reich" is how Gil Duran, a veteran Democratic staffer who is now an independent journalist, describes it.

"These are crazy ideas that should have been lost in an internet chat forum," Duran said. "But when billionaires decide that they're good ideas, we all have to deal with them."

The Virtues of 'The Many'

Yarvin, an atheist with a devil-may-care attitude, would appear to have little in common with the coat-and-tie wearing Deneen, who despaired in a recent speech about the casual dropping of the "F-bomb" in modern society.

But both are outsiders of a sort. Deneen spent years on the faculties of Princeton and Georgetown as a Catholic conservative with few allies before arriving at Notre Dame in 2012. "Why Liberalism Failed" drew the attention of readers seeking to understand Trump's rise—as did Vance's book about his own Appalachian roots, "Hillbilly Elegy." Vance converted to Catholicism in 2019 and gravitated toward Deneen's intellectual circle. After his selection as Trump's running mate, Deneen praised Vance as "a man of deep personal faith and integrity, a devoted family man, a generous friend and a genuine patriot."

In 2023, when "Regime Change" was published, then-Senator Vance attended a talk by Deneen at Washington, D.C.'s Catholic University extolling the virtues of "the many"—ordinary people who are pious and rooted and know how to fix their own cars. "I'm looking at you, JD," Deneen said.

Vance later joined his mentor on stage for a panel discussion, along with Kevin Roberts, president of the Heritage Foundation and architect of Project 2025, a right-wing blueprint for Trump's second term. "You need to make it much more profitable to invest in the United States, and much less profitable to invest overseas," Vance said during their discussion, presaging the Trump tariffs. He also lamented that the common man was at the mercy of "an American regime" of merged corporate and government elites that betrayed the common good.

It is fair to say that Deneen doesn't believe technology will save the world. He bemoans an America ravaged by economic and social liberalism—a fallen country in which divorce, out-of-wedlock births and abortion are celebrated as examples of liberation. In the populist uprisings of Brexit and Trump, he said in the 2023 talk, he saw an inchoate plea from below: "I want to overturn the party of progress and restore the party of order."

Like Vance, Deneen sometimes drips with contempt for elites who "like nice restaurants." He can also be brooding. In 2021, speaking at the National Conservatism conference in Orlando, Fla., he described America's oligarchs as fomenting "an ideology of rapine and plunder—the stripping of wealth from a ship that they are sinking while busily stocking the lifeboats until the last moment when they will be able to cut loose."

Yet when Trump and Vance took the oath of office in January, some of the world's richest men—including Musk, [Amazon's Jeff Bezos](#) and Meta's [Mark Zuckerberg](#)—were there to pay homage, in an extraordinary spectacle of wealth and power.

For Musk and Bezos, the "lifeboats" Deneen talked about are rocket ships, which will allow humanity to start a new civilization on the Moon or Mars. At Harvard this week, Yarvin proposed giving Musk control of NASA:

“If you basically said, all right, NASA spends \$25 billion on cool space stuff, let’s give Elon Musk \$25 billion a year to spend on cool space stuff. I bet we would get a lot more cool space stuff than what NASA delivers.”

An Unwieldy Coalition

It remains to be seen which side will gain the upper hand in the White House—Musk or Vance, Yarvin or Deneen. Will the administration prioritize policies to encourage women to bear more children, or the establishment of “freedom cities” in which technology companies rule and are free to test their newfangled ideas?

There are some policies on which Catholic conservatives and tech libertarians can agree, even if their motivations differ. Both back the eradication of DEI, for example. For the tech bros, it undermines meritocracy, penalizing great men like Musk in their pursuit of wealth and dominance. Vance, meanwhile, has dismissed DEI as a way for elite liberals to flatter themselves while ignoring the plight of the working class.

Ultimately, it is the vice president himself who may determine the future of this unwieldy coalition. Both sides have reason to believe Vance is one of theirs: He is a common-good Catholic who went to work for Thiel’s venture-capital firm in 2017 and credits him as a friend and mentor. The billionaire, in turn, donated millions to Vance’s 2022 Senate campaign.

“If Vance ever ascends to the presidency or runs for President...there’s going to be a lot of Catholics, a lot of Silicon Valley types and a lot of reformed Protestants who are going to see in JD themselves,” predicts Brad Onishi, a religious scholar who hosts a podcast on Christian nationalism. “Not somebody that could be in their interest, but themselves.” That will require finesse to manage.

Meanwhile, Yarvin, ever coy, downplays his own political influence. “I’m actually, um, much more distant from Washington than most people think,” he said after the Harvard event. “People imagine me as some kind of Svengali whispering in these people’s ears. I just post blog posts on the internet. Right?”