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Software, Sovereignty and the Post-Neoliberal Politics of Exit

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of neoreactionary (NRx) thinking – that of Curtis Yarvin, Nick Land, Peter Thiel and Patri Friedman in particular – on contemporary political debates manifest in ‘architectures of exit’. We specifically focus on Urbit, as an NRx digital architecture that captures how post-neoliberal politics imagines notions of freedom and sovereignty through a micro-fracturing of nation-states into ‘gov-corps’. We trace the development of NRx philosophy – and situate this within contemporary political and technological change to theorize the significance of exit manifest within the notion of ‘dynamic geographies’. While technological programmes such as Urbit may never ultimately succeed, we argue that these, and other speculative investments such as ‘seasteading’, reflect broader post-neoliberal NRx imaginaries that were, perhaps, prefigured a quarter of a century ago in *The Sovereign Individual*.

Keywords

Dark Enlightenment, neoreaction (NRx), post-neoliberalism, seasteading, sovereign individual, Urbit

Introduction

It would now be impossible to countenance any discussion of the concept of post-neoliberalism without considering the mediating influence of the depressing *mélange* of discourses that – especially post-2008 – have come to be summarized under the moniker of the alt-right. As Gilroy (2019: 3) explains, this term is clearly not just a descriptive one; rather, it has been chosen strategically in order to ‘accomplish new political goals’. It refers to an ‘informal coalition that is well-funded and enjoys access to the

highest levels of power'. It is also 'technologically sophisticated and has assembled an elusive command of political and psychological communication via the libidinal and affective aspects of new technology in general, and social media in particular'. As Ambedkar (2017) has shown, it is also a coalition that, although it shares some commonalities – a predilection for authoritarianism over democracy, commitments to various forms of libertarianism, antipathy towards the supposed cultural hegemony of 'progressive' discourses, and an inclination towards racism and misogyny – is otherwise riven by highly divergent perspectives concerning economics, nationalism, cultural values and more besides. In this paper we want to offer a critical exploration of the activities of one particular fragment within this coalition – bloggers, computer programmers, entrepreneurs and others who coalesce around neoreactionary (or NRx) philosophies – which, in recent years, has been getting ever closer to a (rightward shifting) political mainstream (Gilroy, 2019; Duesterberg, 2017; Hermansson et al., 2020; Mulhall, 2020; O'Brien, 2020; Topinka, 2019).

We are interested in connecting particular theoretical positions with material investments and flows of capital that are fundamental to NRx future imaginaries, specifically those that purport to offer a 'return to first principles'. In order to do this, we focus, in particular, on the development of a new digital platform – Urbit – funded and largely written by NRx 'luminaries'. Briefly, Urbit proposes to reinvent the internet through a clean-slate data architecture complete with its own operating system, kernel, network protocols, programming language, and digital identity. Within the context of broader discussions about post-neoliberalism, we see a critical discussion of Urbit as contributing to several overlapping debates concerning the future cultural politics of software and cloud-computing for: epistemological transformations invoked by artificial intelligence (Parisi, 2019; Amoore, 2019); the use of decentralized technologies, such as blockchain, for governance and self-determination (Atzori, 2017; Campbell-Verduyn, 2018); and, crucially, sovereignty (Bratton, 2016; Amoore, 2020). Hitherto, these literatures have had little engagement with the radical politics of what we will term redcentralization, or the underlying post-neoliberal – and primarily libertarian – theories of exit that have become inscribed into a wider ideology of data power thought capable of enacting new forms of jurisdictional sovereignty. This paper offers a critical examination of this lacuna.

A Strange Brew: Based Deleuzians, Techno-Fogies and Billionaire Libertarians

Approaching NRx thinking just a few years ago might have been a mildly diverting exercise; a chance to 'connect some philosophical ideas . . . using some very silly right-wing nutjobs who were nevertheless . . . interesting' (Sandifer, 2017: 1). As MacDougald (2015) describes, NRx writing often

appears as ‘little more than a fever swamp of feudal misogynists, racist programmers and “fascist teenage dungeon masters,” gathering on sub-reddits to await the collapse of Western civilization’. As such, it reads like ‘all the awful things you always suspected about libertarianism with odds and ends from PUA culture, Victorian Social Darwinism, and an only semi-ironic attachment to absolutism’. However, post-2016, as Sandifer (2017: 1) expresses it in her own inimitable style, ‘everything went to shit’ and suddenly these otherwise ‘batshit crazy’ ideas, associated software projects and social prototyping experiments began to manifest across a whole range of global cultural, political and technological imaginaries. As hard as it is to fathom, NRx thinking now forms a significant part of the theoretical universe that contemporary political figures and ‘proto-theorists’ such as Dominic Cummings (in the UK) (Cummings, 2020; Lewis et al., 2002; Mulhall, 2020; Volpicelli, 2020; Wolf, 2020) and Steve Bannon (in the US) (Goldhill, 2017; Gray, 2017) draw upon and are attempting to promulgate into mainstream political discourse. As Nagle (2017: 53) explains it, supporters of NRx ideas seem to have been more adept at ‘heeding the ideas...of...Gramsci’s theory of hegemony’, especially via social media (Daniels, 2018), than have those on the left more usually associated with them (Mouffe, 2019).

It is difficult to know how best to approach this material analytically. As Gilroy (2019: 3) suggests, when discussing fascist ideas ‘there is always a danger that critics end up taking them more seriously than their adherents do’. It is also the case that much of the material with which we need to engage is located online and often in a form outwith the usual protocols and stylistics of the academy. The NRx political project is essentially ‘anti-egalitarian’, ‘anti-progressive’, and argues that ‘democracy is bust; rule by the people doesn’t work, and doesn’t lead to good governance’ (Gray, 2017). The aim of NRx seems to be to dissolve existing nation-states into ‘competing authoritarian seasteads on the model of Singapore’ (MacDougald, 2015). It is a philosophy that argues that ‘society should break into tiny states, each effectively governed by a CEO’ (Goldhill, 2017). At its heart is the proposal that we should reorganize ourselves into a patchwork of privately-owned states (‘Gov-Corps’) and use various mechanisms of ‘exit’ to develop a dynamic market for governance; people are called upon ‘to “vote with their feet” by opting-in to the jurisdiction that best fits their needs and beliefs’ (Lynch, 2017: 82).¹ As we will discuss, for the advocates of NRx, such an imagined future does not just require the development of a radical new ideology; it also requires the early construction of new socio-technical architectures within which this ideology can be instantiated.

There are numerous individuals associated with NRx ideas, but four are perhaps key: two – Curtis Yarvin and Nick Land – might be considered the original ‘builders’ (as we will see, this is not an innocent term) of the position; and two – Peter Thiel and Patri Friedman – are major

Silicon Valley ideological and financial supporters who have, on occasion, contributed additional theoretical and practical ballast to the project (Gilroy, 2019; Goldhill, 2017; Haider, 2017; MacDougald, 2015, 2016).

Curtis Yarvin is a Silicon Valley computer scientist who until recently ran a business start-up indirectly funded by Thiel, responsible for Urbit, who produced a series of long blog posts between 2007 and 2014 (with a brief coda in 2016) entitled *Unqualified Reservations (UR)*,² writing in the persona of Mencius Moldbug.³ Central to these writings is a thoroughgoing critique of ‘progressivism’ in all its forms which:

has become a veritable religion of quack government. Its policies are always counterintuitive: it preaches leniency as the cure for crime, timidity as military genius, profligacy as the acme of economics, ‘special education’ as the heart of pedagogy, indulgence as oversight, appeasement as diplomacy. As it goes from one disaster to the next, progressivism never considers the possibility that the obvious, rather than its opposite, could be the case. (Moldbug, 2009)

Nick Land will be more familiar to readers of this journal.⁴ He was once the enfant terrible of what came to be called ‘Deleuzian Thatcherism’ (Galloway and Noys, 2014)⁵ at the University of Warwick in the UK in the 1990s (Blincoe, 2017; Reynolds, 2009), but since the early 2000s he has been based in Shanghai, rearticulating the outpourings of Moldbug and others, in the Deleuzian-inflected language of right-accelerationism (Beckett, 2017; Burrows, 2019; Land, 2017; MacDougald, 2015, 2016) in a long series of blog posts and tweets and one longer-form piece (almost 30,000 words), entitled *The Dark Enlightenment* (Land, 2012). He has also become a central figure in alt-right meme culture (Topinka, 2019). His position might now more easily be characterized as a bizarre form of ‘Based Deleuzianism’ (Murphy, 2019). Gilroy (2019: 4) brilliantly characterizes the relationship between this odd couple (Yarvin and Land):

This . . . [alt-right] substrate draws upon the dubious legacies of thinkers like Georges Bataille and Carl Schmitt as well as a techno-orientalist sublime discovered in the exciting possibility that states will be shrunk down to minimal proportions and run as corporations. . . . This . . . dream is larded with a gleeful anti-humanism and a fervent racism now routinely and blandly re-described as ‘human biodiversity’ and ‘ethno-nationalism.’ The would-be Magi of the movement are led online by the failed academic philosopher Nick Land and others who have, in turn, been influenced by ‘Mencius Moldbug,’ a prominent techno-fogey who draws

inspiration from some of the more obscure works penned by Victorian . . . theorists of imperial domination.

Peter Thiel, likely the most infamous of the quartet, is a libertarian billionaire Silicon Valley investor – founder of both PayPal and Palantir and a major investor in Facebook – and occasional author, who indirectly bankrolls the ideological and techno-business activities of Yarvin, Friedman and many others. It is not difficult to understand why the work of Yarvin, in particular, appeals to Thiel. As we will go on to discuss, in many ways NRx reads as a radical updating of the ideas and sentiments contained in a book that Thiel claims has most influenced him – *The Sovereign Individual* by Davidson and Rees-Mogg (1997).⁶ Thiel's investment philosophy emphasizes the pursuit of innovation by 'thinking about business from first principles instead of formulas' (Thiel, 2014: 3) and forms a core pillar to understanding his interest in projects such as Urbit. Patri Friedman is part of the neoliberal Friedman dynasty – David was his father, and Milton and Rose his grandparents (Ruger, 2011) – and he has been a software engineer at Google, an author and the co-founder of The Seasteading Institute,⁷ a start-up, again originally funded by Thiel, where many NRx ideas are supposedly prototyped (Quirk with Friedman, 2017).

Between them, these four characters – along with others – have produced what amounts to a form of 'alt-social theory' or, in their terms, social theory in the service of 'red pilling' (Sandifer, 2017: 36–41; Wendling, 2018: 29–30); a notion widely used within alt-right discourses, deriving, of course, from the 1999 film *The Matrix*,⁸ in which the central character Neo is offered the choice between a 'blue pill' – easy to swallow and providing continuity and blissful ignorance – or a 'red pill' which, although hard to get down, leads to liberation and some new clear-eyed 'truth'. It will come as no surprise that, from a NRx perspective, the primary function of the traditional academy – those working in the arts, the humanities and the social sciences in particular – is to produce 'blue pills'. In NRx argot, most academics are 'cultural Marxists', a loose term which refers to virtually anything on the left of the political spectrum that constitutes 'an all-encompassing conspiracy being driven by an uncertain . . . number or combination of groups or sub-groups that come under the vast umbrella of the Cathedral' (Wendling, 2018: 81). This means that the domain assumptions that mainstream academics make about the social world, as well as their routine practices, are conceptualized in NRx discourses as key fetters to 'red pill' thinking. The Cathedral – with a genealogy, ironically, leading back to the Puritan church – encompasses not just the universities, but also the civil service, the media and any other organizations that foreground what Yarvin calls Universalism – egalitarianism, democracy, constructivism and so on – that forms, for Yarvin, the 'faith of our ruling caste, the Brahmins'

(Moldbug, 2007a). It is a conceptualization that reads like a crazily inverted version of the old Althusserian notion of the ‘ideological state apparatus’ (ISAs) (Althusser, 1971); but rather than dampening down proletarian revolutionary dissent, in the NRx version the ideological function seems to do quite the opposite – to inculcate a false belief in the efficacy of democratic systems of government and the associated stymying of new forms of uncompensated capitalism. Not surprisingly, NRx discourse frequently works through such ironic inversions to naturalize social hierarchies and inequalities. Public figures such as Elon Musk and Ivanka Trump have both claimed to be ‘red-pilled’ (Rao, 2020).

Yarvin takes ‘red-pilling’ one step further, hoping his works will serve to ‘cure your brain’ of the Orwellian mind-control state induced by Anglo-American progressive democracy.⁹ Yarvin is probably the most important figure in NRx, as it would be fair to regard his UR blog as the foundational text of the movement. Writing as Mencius Moldbug, Yarvin offered up idiosyncratic, ironic and voluminous prose that meanders through the work of Thomas Carlyle, Ludwig von Mises and various strains of individualist libertarianism and which, in the end, concludes that Prussian cameralism, in which a state is a business that owns a country, offers the most viable model for a future 21st-century politics. Originally called ‘neocameralism’, his position soon became known as ‘neoreactionary’ philosophy (NRx) and then, once passed through Land’s nihilist Deleuzian filter, as *The Dark Enlightenment*. According to Tait (2019: 189), Yarvin’s vision is deeply grounded in his mathematical precociousness and his long-term immersion in Silicon Valley techno-libertarian culture. Indeed, Sandifer (2017: 129) considers that because he is ‘an accomplished software engineer’, he has ‘visibly concluded that because software engineering is hard and history/philosophy are easy if he can do the former well he can obviously do the latter well, and indeed better’. He seems to accept this reading of himself as someone committed to what is essentially a computationalist ontology – describing himself in a recent interview as a ‘computer programmer’ who enjoys applying the logics of first principles to historical systems, always asking ‘what would this look like if you could build it from scratch?’¹⁰

In this spirit, he began UR with his *Formalist Manifesto*, which starts: ‘The other day I was tinkering around in my garage and I decided to build a new ideology’ (Moldbug, 2007b). Formalism is a ‘do-it-yourself’ ideological project – an engineering challenge, even – to remove one’s existing ideology and ‘install’ a new one that rejects progressive doctrines transmitted by the Cathedral. Moldbug’s techno-fogeyism is generative of a computational worldview that is ‘rational, rule-bound, and solvable... [and where]... software and hardware are the dominant metaphors for society’ (Tait, 2019: 189). In their writings both Yarvin and

Land point towards a key essay by Thiel (2009) published in *Cato Unbound* – the house journal of the Cato Institute in Washington, DC, founded by libertarian billionaire Charles Koch – in which he infamously declares that: ‘I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible’. Land (2012) of course goes further, suggesting that ‘democracy is not merely doomed, it is doom itself’. For him, democratic political forms involve:

cropping out all high-frequency feedback mechanisms (such as market signals), and replacing them with sluggish, infra-red loops that pass through a centralized forum of ‘general will’, a radically democratized society insulates parasitism from what it does, transforming local, painfully dysfunctional, intolerable, and thus urgently corrected behavior patterns into global, numbed, and chronic socio-political pathologies. (Land, 2012)

The NRx alternative is to, first, ‘Retire All Government Employees’ (RAGE) in order to ‘reboot’ the economy,¹¹ and, second, replace democratic institutions with a CEO (or even a Monarch). The resulting ‘govcorp’ – a society run as a business – can then be regulated not via the ‘voice’ of its citizenry – there will be no democracy – but via their ability to ‘exit’ as consumers in a free market for governance. Land has become obsessed with the ideas contained in the classic treatise of Albert Hirschman (1970) on the distinction between Exit, Voice, and Loyalty.¹² For Land, democratic voice and the ‘warm’ solidarities of loyalty must be opposed, as they will, as we saw above, cut ‘out all high-frequency feedback mechanisms’. For Yarvin (2019a), any attempt to engage politically through voice would be ineffective – even futile – because of ‘the pervasive error’ that monopolizes civic and political discourse. Designing new architectures of exit becomes of paramount importance; indeed, for Land (2012), quoting Patri Friedman, ‘free exit is so important that...it [is] the only Universal Human Right’. Exit informs Yarvin’s theory of Patchwork (Moldbug, 2008) – again drawing on computer engineering as a proxy for social ontology – which would constitute a ‘new operating system for the world’:

The basic idea...is that, as the crappy governments we inherited from history are smashed, they should be replaced by a global spiderweb of tens, even hundreds, of thousands of sovereign and independent mini-countries, each governed by its own joint-stock corporation without regard to the residents’ opinions. If residents don’t like their government, they can and should move. The design is all ‘exit,’ no ‘voice.’

While Yarvin thinks this operating system would borrow political designs ‘across time and space...it is only natural that a reactionary design for future government will have a somewhat feudal feel’ while also being something ‘new’ that would ‘not feel like the past. It will feel like the future’ (Moldbug, 2008). Patchwork’s feudal futurism will be held together by a complex of cryptographic hierarchies of sovereign corporate power and reinforced with durable surveillance infrastructures in order to maintain order, security and profit. How it is imagined this might be built is discussed in what follows.

Urbit, Hyperstition and Redecentralization

As we have already noted, Friedman is another NRx entrepreneur-cum-philosopher backed by Thiel’s dollars, and the co-founder of The Seasteading Institute, an organization supposedly busy designing permanent (almost Lovecraftian) cities at sea – seasteads – prefigurative gov-corps outside the territory claimed by democratic governments. They are just one example of an NRx envisioning of the emergence of a complex patchwork of small, and competing, gov-corps – autonomous gated communities, city-states, even ‘off-world’ communities (think Elon Musk). Friedman offers up the imagined possibility of a ‘dynamic geography’ – a material architecture of exit – informed by the neoliberal ideas of his father and his grandfather.

David Friedman described a machinery of freedom. Milton Friedman advocated the freedom to choose. Patri identified a machinery of freedom to choose...he proposed an idea that became contagious: imagine ten thousand homesteads on the sea – ‘seasteads’ – where ocean pioneers will be free to experiment with new societies. Aquatic citizens could live in modular pods that can detach at any time and sail to join another floating city, compelling ocean governments to compete for mobile citizens. A market of competing governments...would allow the best ideas for governance to emerge peacefully, unleashing unimaginable progress... By such means, an economic and moral argument could become a technological experiment. (Quirk with Friedman, 2017: 8–9)

Not surprisingly, this imagined future has turned out to be almost entirely impracticable. A recent documentary – *The Seasteaders* (2018)¹³ – about the ‘progress’ made so far, demonstrates that things remain much as they were when Steinberg et al. (2012) explored the phenomenon over a decade ago. He and his colleagues reported that at a conference hosted by Thiel in 2009:

The tenor ... ranged from that of a science fiction convention (potential seasteaders in attendance, who were overwhelmingly men, wondered what they could do to attract women to live on seasteads), to a seminar in libertarian economics (references to Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, Mancur Olson, and Ayn Rand abounded), to a scientific meeting on ocean engineering (architectural renderings were displayed and critiqued), to a psychedelic conclave of free-thinking anarchists. ... Indeed, the entire seasteading venture might easily be written off as an impractical fantasy of social misfits and political dreamers who would like to make their own states. (Steinberg et al., 2012: 1533)

What has changed, however, is that those dreaming of creating their own states are now greater in number and have more political and institutional support for the aspiration. Enclave libertarian ideas – including the work of the Startup Cities Institute (2014) – are now supported by the likes of the Cato Institute, the Mises Institute, the Foundation for Economic Education and the Mont Pelerin Society (Lynch, 2017), as well as Silicon Valley (and other) billionaires and political strategists who have been ‘red-pilled’ (Majer, 2016). However, and this is our central point, NRx is all about dreaming of a certain kind. This process is central to the NRx hegemonic strategy. Steinberg et al. (2012: 1533–4) intuited that seasteads would not be established anytime in the near future. Their purpose was to reflect on ostensible limits of freedom imposed by the state, so that others ‘will dream up and implement more practical alternatives’. This is a cultural and political strategy of what has come to be known as *hyperstition* – a notion that has long been central to Land’s thinking. For Land, time, like much else, is non-linear and thus relations between cause and effect are always complex. Futurity is in the here and now in the sense that it is not something that just unfolds; it is something we create. On occasion portended social imaginaries – designs, diagrams, fictions, maps, movies, plans, philosophies, prototypes, theories, dreams and more – become generative of the future; it is as if the tentacles of future entities reach back through time in order to bring into being the very elements necessary for their own materialization. As Haider (2017) explains, there does not exist a simple ‘word for this cause-and-effect relationship in ordinary English, but Land coined one: *hyperstition*, that which is “equipoised between fiction and technology.”’ For Land (Carstens, 2009):

Hyperstition is a positive feedback circuit including culture as a component. It can be defined as the experimental (techno-) science of self-fulfilling prophecies. Superstitions are merely false beliefs, but hyperstitions – by their very existence as ideas – function

causally to bring about their own reality. Capitalist economics is extremely sensitive to hyperstition, where confidence acts as an effective tonic, and inversely. The (fictional) idea of Cyberspace contributed to the influx of investment that rapidly converted it into a technosocial reality.¹⁴

The fictional social imaginaries offered up by movies such as *Metropolis* or *Blade Runner* and by novels such as Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (where the notion of cyberspace originates of course; Featherstone and Burrows, 1995) or, especially in the case of NRx, Neil Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (Stephenson, 1992), are all examples of hyperstition; but so too are broader discursive assemblages that come to function as ideologies. As we have discussed above, Friedman's seasteading adventures could also be thought of in this way, and The Dark Enlightenment is perhaps Land's own hyper-reflexive attempt¹⁵ at constructing a hyperstitional object – fictional entities that will themselves into existence. However, we need to return to Yarvin if we really want to come to terms with what might be at stake here. Although, as we have noted, his UR blog is clearly foundational to NRx thinking, it is his work on Urbit that perhaps possesses greater hyperstitious qualities. At the same time as he was writing his blog, he was also writing code. Yarvin has been working on Urbit since 2002, and in 2013, as he was running down his blog, he launched the San Francisco-based company Tlön Corp, which oversees Urbit with funding from Thiel's venture capital arm, the Founders Fund (Lecher, 2017). Yarvin parted company with Tlön in January 2019, marking the occasion with a highly discursive post (Yarvin, 2019b). However, he retains some involvement – intellectual and financial – in the development of Urbit (Tseng, 2019).

It could be that the development of NRx ideas and Yarvin's ability to write code are totally separate practices, but this seems unlikely (Lecher, 2017; Tseng, 2019). As Haider (2017) argues, there is already good evidence to suggest that NRx ideas are being instantiated within other pieces of software, and in this regard, it is not clear why Urbit should be any different. Anyway, Yarvin has 'occasionally hinted at ties between his ideology and professional pursuit' (Lecher, 2017), even producing a very brief 2010 Moldbug post called 'Urbit: functional programming from scratch', pointing towards another post written by his 'good friend, C. Guy Yarvin'. But there are also other, stronger, hints concerning the hyperstitious aspiration of the software, as Tseng (2019) observes:

'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,' the Borges story where Yarvin's company gets its name, describes a secret society, Orbis Tertius, that architects an entirely new world, Tlön, by publishing an encyclopaedia describing it. Over time, bits of this fictional world begin to

emerge in the real world, consuming it, such that '[t]he world will be Tlön.'

Urbit is a 'secure peer-to-peer network of personal servers, built on a clean-slate system software stack' that 'replaces multiple developer-hosted web services on multiple foreign servers, with multiple self-hosted applications on one personal server' (Yarvin et al., 2016: 3). The goal, it seems, is to 'redentralize' the web for the 21st century because 'the internet has lost its way', and it needs to be built 'right this time' (Fosdem, 2018). Already we see allusions between Urbit and Formalism's DIY ideological 're-installation' via first principles, re-imagining new architectural relations between service providers, users, and data by positioning Urbit as a clean-slate operating system and network. Urbit's CEO, Galen Wolfe-Pauly, whose background is in architecture, describes it as a 'global computing platform' complete with protocols, programming languages, databases, operating system, and a digital identity. Urbit reconfigures the user/cloud experience by inverting the network; instead of running applications on developer machines, users will run them on their own virtual computer, allowing Urbit users to 'own and control' their 'own data, code and identity' (Urbit, 2016). This means that '[i]n an Urbit world, your data is no longer trapped in a jumble of proprietary servers. Your Urbit is a permanent, versioned, typed archive the size of your digital life' (Wolfe-Pauley, 2016). This is, in effect, the 'Western answer to WeChat' – a seamless extensible social network 'but without the surveillance' (Urbit, n.d.).

Reactions to Urbit have been, at best, mixed. Tseng (2019) considers the software to be hopelessly contaminated by NRx ideology. Others, from the coding community, who are perhaps more sympathetic to NRx (Bianco, 2013), although initially critical and bewildered, have, over time, claimed to be able to see some worth in the project. Sandifer (2017: 130), although willing to accept that Urbit might be 'an ambitious reinvention of the internet according to first principles', concludes that in the end:

it's nearly useless. The problems it solves are so bound up in its principles of what security and freedom mean in the context of software design that only a handful of people in the world care about... And perhaps more importantly, it's arguably even more batshit crazy than [UR]... Yarvin is not the sort of software engineer who spends a lot of time thinking about the user, which is to say, not the sort of software engineer with much empathy.

At the time she was writing a few years ago, Sandifer may well have been correct in her assertion that only a handful of people cared about the issues that Urbit claimed to be foregrounding. Today, however, the social implications of incumbent ad-tech driven platforms and

monolithic service providers like Google and Facebook ('MEGACORP', to borrow from Urbit) are now mainstream concerns. For that matter, we surmise that indeed Yarvin does think about users, but via the NRx filter of reclaiming specific notions, derived from computationalist ontologies, of data sovereignty as individual liberty. The importance of owning and managing one's own personal server and the need to re-invent networked protocols to correspond with emerging socio-technical needs are now also apparent elsewhere. Platforms such as Blockstack, Sandstorm, and Solid, a de-centralized platform under development by Sir Tim Berners-Lee's company Inrupt, all represent different approaches to the reinvention of various systems of redcentralization to correspond with emergent data control prerogatives for, what some speculate, will be the next generation of web applications and services (Corbyn, 2018). While Urbit could be dismissed as just one amongst a number of recent re-imaginings of decentralized internet architectures, Yarvin arguably infuses NRx thinking into the very protocols and data architectures of Urbit by completely rebuilding its computational kernel while advocating for a new constitution for internet governance rooted in NRx philosophies. Urbit's developers argue that existing protocols such as TCP/IP and HTTP are based on 'ancient' UNIX language that was never designed for the kinds of decentralized networking emerging through blockchain and related technologies (Dodd, 2018). The mutual belief that the internet has 'lost its way' via hyper-commercialization, and that it is not sustainable for future web applications and economies, is precisely the nexus that binds together its ideological and computational kernels into a hyperstitious analytic.

As we have already noted, the Urbit project began in 2002, its first live tests were conducted in 2013, and the first public sale of Urbit address space was held in 2016. The technical development of Urbit's kernel is measured on 'Kelvin versioning': descending in releases towards absolute zero when the technical protocols have congealed across the network and never need to be updated. As of 2019, Urbit was composed of three layers: Arvo, the operating system and kernel; Azimuth, the identity layer; and Aegean, an abstract 'pattern of independent, decentralized societies on top of the Arvo network' (Urbit, n.d.). Urbit runs on just 50,000 lines of code. There are no patents or intellectual property because Urbit sees itself as the next open-source superstructure for the internet.

The Urbit project imagines itself as leading a movement towards 'calm' and 'clean' computing that provides a frictionless, clean-slate, user experience, in part because of how Urbit consolidates digital identity, property, and authority into Azimuth. The address system resembles a cosmological ordering of Urbit identities, known as ships, an Azimuth 'point' on Ethereum. Ships use phonetic IP addresses – a 'pronounceable' phone number – such as '~firbyr-napbes', that denotes both the bit length (in this case 32-bits) and their relationship to the Urbit network.

A 32-bit planet is a member of a 16-bit star, which belongs to an 8-bit galaxy, the most valuable of Urbit assets.¹⁶ There are roughly 4 billion planets, 65,280 stars, and only 256 galaxies possible on Urbit. Because ships are finite assets, Urbit argues they will gradually accrue reputation and value as cryptographic property. Ships therefore operate as the necessary cryptographic identity by which sovereignty is coded into Urbit space – a multipass serving as both an identity and as a wallet, ‘both a driver’s license and a credit card. Identity and money. Think about it as a “civilizational key” for the new society’ (Wolfe-Pauley, 2019).

The finite hierarchical design of Urbit ships aligns with Yarvin’s notion of Patchwork sovereignty, whereby the nature of authority is proportional to the kinds of digital property owned: ‘If Bitcoin is money, and Ethereum is law, Urbit is land’ (Klein, 2019). Urbit’s CEO, Galen Wolfe-Pauley, frequently compares Urbit to a city because they are both seen as decentralized ‘platforms’ by which a complex of social processes (or ‘systems’) take place within a physical infrastructure subject to specific rules and logics of a system.¹⁷ This comparison assumes a deeper set of political beliefs concerning the nature of space as fundamentally instrumental in nature: a house is ‘a tool for living’, and in this way, your Urbit is a tool for being.¹⁸ The Aegean network is the necessary spatial capital ‘for building cities’ by grouping individuals running similar programs on their Arvo servers. These cities exist as particular combinations of applications and tools that operate together in a self-governing manner and offer users both the right to self-determination in their own city but also the right to exit, or move freely from one Urbit city to another. The end result will be a virtual concomitant to the imagined dynamic geographies of seasteading: ‘a vast archipelago of hypercultures. A centreless network of networks on top of the neutral Arvo and Azimuth infrastructure’ (Urbit, n.d.).

As a ‘virtual city’ or cryptographic ‘land’, Urbit sees digital code as law that offers sufficient governance structures. Under these conditions, Urbit can follow a teleological path from a ‘corporate gated community’ towards a ‘true city-state: a self-governing digital republic that offers the chance for digital freedom’.¹⁹

Urbit, as virtual city, is a platform that brings together all our datastreams – from emails to heartbeats – in a way that we ourselves control. Can we work together to match faces in photos, without submitting to some panopticon in Mountain View? While the first step in freedom is the right to be left alone, the second is the power to form new intentional communities, to create and evolve a voluntary definition of public space. We have no idea at all what people will do with this power. (Wolfe-Pauley, 2016)

This really feels like retrofuturism. As we have noted, as far back as 1992 Neal Stephenson's science-fiction novel *Snow Crash* featured a 'metaverse' or shared collective virtual space that appeared to users, or more specifically their virtual avatars, as self-contained urban environments complete with virtual real estate governed by the Global Multimedia Protocol Group. These philosophies echo an earlier ideology of internet culture defined by a belief in transcendence from existing social, political, and economic hierarchies through decentralized communication systems (Ludlow, 2001). However, for Urbit, even the internet itself must shed its socio-technical history, its archaic programming language, monopolized media ecosystems dominated by a winner-takes-all logic, and the 'high-velocity trash economy' built by 'Statist Keynesians'.²⁰

Urbit is a clean-slate reimagining of networks as Patchwork governance. Indeed, governance is at the heart of the Urbit philosophy. Urbit's 'constitution', borrowed 'from valid historical structures, mainly Roman and Anglo-American', declares itself a digital republic complete with its own parliamentary structures including a consulate, senate, congress, and assembly. This hierarchy of structures reflects its cosmological ordering. The assembly is the set of all active planets, the congress is the set of all active stars, and the senate is the set of galaxies. Urbit's CEO, and developer Raymond Pasco, currently both serve as Urbit's two consuls and function as the executive authority. Specific branches of government are likewise tasked with particular responsibilities of administering either technical or nontechnical issues (Tlön, 2016). Not surprisingly, this puts Urbit's founders and its venture capital partners in excellent positions to govern through network ownership. Indeed, the ownership of Urbit galaxies has already been decided. Of Urbit's 256 galaxies, Tlön owns about 37 per cent; Urbit.org: 19 per cent; Tlön employees: 15 per cent (Yarvin owns 24 galaxies, everyone else 16); outside Tlön investors: 13 per cent; and Urbit donors and contributors: 14 per cent. Tseng's (2019) analysis of the distribution of galaxies and stars shows a clear concentration towards Tlön and its employees. Put differently, despite Urbit's insistence on 'redcentralization' it is nonetheless prefigurative of concentrated property ownership and a rigid hierarchy of the address space. Yet, Urbit's creators do not concern themselves with this critique, even claiming in the Urbit constitution that: 'Urbit should never fall under any kind of central control. All transitions in galaxy ownership should divide positions, not unite them,' and that, 'property rights are contingent and accidental, not moral or meritorious. A property register does not record why an owner deserves some property. Ownership is neither a reward nor a right; it is a fact.' Exit is the only constitutional right. There is no democratic voice as Urbit is necessarily governed by a technocratic elite of stars and galaxies. Planets dissatisfied with their parent star are free to detach and move elsewhere but they must belong somewhere.

Galaxies exercise infrastructural governance only on stars that freely participate. In Urbit, computationalist ontologies trump any notion of social governance, and the only liberty is exit.

Conclusions

As we have already noted, writing almost a quarter of a century ago, James Dale Davidson and Lord William Rees-Mogg (father of arch-Brexiteer UK MP Jacob Rees-Mogg) published *The Sovereign Individual*, a book that Thiel claims to have heavily influenced his worldview (O'Connell, 2018). In it, they predict the eventual collapse of the nation-state and the eclipse of politics by corporatist initiatives (seasteading and Urbit easily fit this bill). Their prediction hinges on the acceleration of information processing by decentralized telecommunication networks. Through them, nation-states will be unable to 'catch up' with the speed of encrypted transactions, rendering existing institutions of tax-collection impossible. Commerce will migrate online, and 'cyberspace' will become 'the ultimate offshore jurisdiction' (Davidson and Rees-Mogg, 1997: 24). This 'triumph of efficiency over power', as they describe it, is interesting not only because they theorize the nation-state as paralyzed by 'micro-processing', but also because these proto-neoreactionaries draw specifically on hyperstitional notions such as the metaverse of *Snow Crash* (Davidson and Rees-Mogg, 1997: 179) as a post-neoliberal imaginary. This triumph is predicted to result in the eventual rise in violent and organized crime following the decline of nation-states, but also the emergence of new information assets. The virtual corporations and sovereign individuals envisioned by Yarvin, Land, Thiel, Friedman, Davidson, and the late Rees-Mogg are geographically dynamic entities capable of rapid mobilization from jurisdictional authority. As we see it, these views are not simply speculative predictions of a post-neoliberal future but have played a materially key role in guiding capital investment patterns in places such as Silicon Valley. Davidson and the late Rees-Mogg both edited *Strategic Investment*, and Davidson himself is a venture capitalist with a panache for the apocalyptic. In any event, these economies of prediction all hinge on assumptions that capital will be drawn to chaos because it can easily exit should circumstances change.

It is important for us to keep attending to the manner in which the political projects that underpin NRx are working into the socio-technical infrastructures of everyday life. Projects like Urbit, and other NRx exit strategies such as seasteading, offer vivid imaginary resources for those already possessing a predilection towards social withdrawal from the manifest crises and failures of contemporary global capitalism. The functioning of the democratic urban form – American cities in particular – has been a particular target for denigration (Land, 2012).²¹ Instead, exit

to prosperous, technologically-advanced, supposedly well-functioning but antidemocratic city-states – Singapore, Hong Kong (before the current unrest at least), Dubai and the like – is set up as a model for the future. Such interpretations have a symbolic and a political force. We see similar processes occurring within Urbit's critique of existing network architectures and power structures. True or not, these critiques work to advance a hyperstitious imaginary of a uniquely different network architecture based on particular beliefs of how data-subjects and communities should interact through decentralized secessionist logics, and the political rights or obligations (if any) that follow from them.

NRx architectures of exit, as Steorts (2017) observes, are powerful precisely because they oversimplify. Incentives are aligned with their efficient pursuit: 'A computer scientist would think this way: You just set up the rules and your mechanism follows them.' Any notion of political sovereignty is, in other words, in the hands of the technologists working through a 'cryptographic chain of command'. We suggest that platforms such as Urbit represent attempts to concretize such mechanistic computational 'social' theories of a hyper-efficient neoreactionary state. The power to govern the conditions of exit, while likely futile in realizing any fantasy of fracturing the political status quo to restore a myth of sovereignty, nonetheless has a certain traction for neoreactionaries claiming to have access to some privileged, almost mythical, understanding of the contemporary social order ascertained only through red-pilling. Here, the question of how seriously we should take the writings of people like Yarvin and Land on exit becomes significant. As we have already noted, the ease with which otherwise 'batshit crazy' ideas have become mainstreamed in recent years is perhaps a mark of the 'new dark age' in which we live (Bridle, 2018). On any definition, we are dealing here with fascism (Gilroy, 2019; Goldhill, 2017; Hermansson et al., 2020) but at the same time we would be foolish to dismiss the memetic, almost infectious quality that NRx and The Dark Enlightenment possess (O'Sullivan, 2017: 30). The so-called 'Overton Window' is being moved rightwards, and as Gilroy (2019: 5) argues, political conduct has been redefined; fractions of the alt-right now consider themselves Gramscians and Leninists, and they intend 'to play a long game'.

We speculate that these fractures reinforce an emergent political order illustrated by projects such as Urbit and seasteading in order to provide material instances of exit architectures. These represent a particular kind of state that gestures towards imagined post-neoliberal orders characterized by the fracturing of the bureaucratic administrative state and its replacement by 'gov-corps'. It is worth considering what powers, if any, those who do not own Urbit land might have, what choices one would really have to exit the network, and what moral or ethical constructs would govern this imagined space. Indeed, discussions of exit touch upon key ethical debates facing Silicon Valley concerning the

extent to which tech companies should participate in such matters. Alex Karp, the CEO and co-founder (with Peter Thiel) of the artificial intelligence firm Palantir, argued in the *Washington Post* (Karp, 2019) that tech companies have absolutely no moral obligation to influence policy in a broadside critique of the progressive agenda: ‘when a small group of executives at the largest Internet companies in Silicon Valley try to impose their moral framework on America, something has gone seriously and dangerously awry.’ Putting aside for a moment the extent to which such moral frameworks are indeed a minority position (likely, they are not), or whether Karp subscribes to the principles of NRx, his view highlights an underlying truth behind the ‘techno-utopian right-libertarianism’ that pervades both the ethics and aesthetics of Silicon Valley (Armistead, 2016). Namely, that post-neoliberalism, as dominated by the political and cultural frameworks of tech start-ups, should be decisively anti-political and indifferent to existing moral dilemmas precisely because exit will offer the transcendental mechanism for decentralized political change. Exit apologist Balaji Srinivasan (2013) sees the future as a techno-utopia because subjects can choose the ‘level of exit’ they desire: ‘there is this entire digital world up here which we can jack our brains into and we can opt out.’ The objective is to reduce the barriers of exit by fracturing the civil service and marketplace of progressive social theory through start-ups hyper-stimulated on billionaire finance. Departing from Thatcher’s infamous neoliberal rhetoric, the Dark Enlightenment will have such things as societies, but opt-in ones only.

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Notes

1. One is immediately reminded of *Micronations: The Lonely Planet Guide to Home-Made Nations* (Ryan et al., 2006).
2. They are available at <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/> in their original form, but parts have also been revised and (self-)published in book format with titles such as: *An Open Letter to Open-Minded Progressives*; *A Gentle Introduction to Unqualified Reservations*; *How Dawkins Got Pwned*; *Moldbug on Carlyle*; and, of particular interest here, *Patchwork: A Political System for the 21st Century*.
3. See Ratcliffe (2020) for a periodization of the output of Yarvin/Moldbug.
4. Indeed, at one point he published articles in both this journal and *Body & Society* (Land, 1995a, 1995b).
5. Described by MacDougald (2015) as ‘a heady cocktail of nihilism, cybernetic Marxism, complexity theory, numerology, jungle music, and the dystopian sci-fi of William Gibson and *Blade Runner*’. Although not foregrounded at the time, the cocktail also included foundational neoliberal thinkers.

6. See, in particular, the brilliant account offered by O'Connell (2018) on the relationship between this particular text, Thiel, Yarvin and post-apocalyptic NRx imaginaries.
7. See <https://www.seasteading.org/>.
8. As Sandifer has pointed out, given the sexual politics and inherent misogyny of so much alt-right thinking, it is deeply ironic that this movie – the source of so many celebratory alt-right metaphors – should have been directed by two transgender women.
9. More recently, Yarvin has been writing a series of posts for *The American Mind* entitled 'The Clear Pill', where he develops his theory of 'The Pervasive Error': an epistemic crisis of 'truth markets' that has culminated in a paradox of 'distributed despotism'. This 'theory of wokeness' specifically highlights the acceleration of progressivism with a 'microhistory of media evolution' (i.e. social media and 'new-media sites that connected analytics directly to their editorial process'). This microhistory has vastly increased the 'evolutionary efficiency of the market' for the hegemony of progressive discourse and the emergence of an accelerated epistemic elite: 'The evolution of ideas, once a lazy ripple of views and reviews, had become an instant viral loop. Darwin started grinding up his Adderall' (Yarvin, 2019a).
10. See the first 10 minutes of 'Curtis Yarvin Live at the Based Deleuze Release Party in LA (Mencius Moldbug)' available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRQO3VbJsMw>.
11. See Moldbug/Yarvin here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZluMysK2B1E>.
12. See 'Nick Land's Response to Tech Secessionism' talk here, organized in relation to Hirschman's distinctions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJMlauptGHTM>.
13. See the film by Jacob Hurwitz-Goodman and Daniel Keller made for DIS.ART here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmESxdvegao>.
14. See also the movie *Hyperstition* by Christopher Roth, in which Nick Land and others associated with (left-) accelerationism (Gardiner, 2017) appear. It can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/hyperstition>.
15. Others have invoked Thomas Pynchon-esque conspiracy theories to make sense of the contemporary re-emergence of Land's weird oeuvre, describing him as 'the sort of strange, half-forgotten figure that might turn up in an Adam Curtis documentary ten years from now' (MacDougald, 2015).
16. It is interesting to note that in earlier iterations of Urbit, Yarvin based the platform's address hierarchy on a monarchical system – 'Lords', 'Dukes' and 'Earls' – derived from, as he put it, 'standard Lockean libertarian home-steading theory' (Lecher, 2017).
17. See IDEO CoLab 'Blueprint 2017 Talks: Galen Wolfe-Pauly on the Distributed Web': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9cXTGW9J9a0>.
18. Yarvin and Wolfe-Pauly in conversation on Blockchannel in 2018: 'Virtual Land in the Clouds, with Urbit': <https://medium.com/blockchannel/episode-19-virtual-land-in-the-clouds-with-urbit-1428ba98243a>.
19. Yarvin and Wolfe-Pauly in discussion on *The Ether Review* #46 in 2016: <https://urbit.org/media/the-ether-review-46-curtis-yarvin-and-galen-wolfe-pauly-on-urbit/>.

20. The ‘high-velocity trash economy’ circulates in bitcoin communities and has been popularized by bitcoin evangelist Pierre Rochard, exemplifying a decentralized accelerationist critique. See: https://twitter.com/pierre_rochard/status/1196828128607387648.
21. See, by way of example, the disturbing NRx-inspired ‘Crush the Urbanite’ blog: <https://crushtheurbanite.wordpress.com/>.

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