



CHAPTER

12 Mencius Moldbug and Neoreaction

Joshua Tait

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the life and work of Mencius Moldbug (Curtis Yarvin), an American programmer and blogger. His blog, *Unqualified Reservations* (2007–13) became the basis of the small but instructive “neoreactionary” movement. With its origins in programmer culture and radical libertarianism, Moldbug’s thought is antiprogressive, antiegalitarian, and antidemocratic. He advocates a monarchic government for an otherwise “open” society. Drawing on Austrian school economics, “elitist” theory, and the reactionary tradition, most prominently Thomas Carlyle, Moldbug argues that progressive elites produce a “universalist” culture to reinforce their power. According to Moldbug, the universalist–democratic regime is inefficient, divorced from reality, and doomed to collapse into chaos. Moldbug and neoreaction were harbingers and archetypes of web-based antiegalitarian movements that mobilized irony and epistemological critiques against the Left. They indicate a growing antidemocratic animus on the American Right, especially among radical libertarians, and the importance of digital activism for right-wing activism in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Mencius Moldbug, libertarianism, neoreaction, Thomas Carlyle, Reactionary Enlightenment, antidemocratic, antiegalitarian, United States

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IN 2007, CURTIS YARVIN began his weblog *Unqualified Reservations* in order to “build a new ideology.”¹ Through dozens of posts as “Mencius Moldbug,” the San Francisco–based software engineer developed a heady critique of democracy and the nature of knowledge. Seeking to break free from a “thought control” system dominated by soft-headed progressive elites, Moldbug rejects the “virus” of democracy. As an alternative philosophy, Moldbug fuses radical libertarian thought with authoritarianism as “neoreaction.” Only a reassertion of authority and hierarchy against democracy and egalitarianism will halt society’s catastrophic decline.

Moldbug is an early example of important new trends in radical Right thought and activism. His blog broached long-taboo themes within the mainstream American Right that have since gained currency among the Alt Right and even the Trump White House. He pioneered anonymous, online, antiprogressive activism through his blend of bleak political analysis and irreverent humor, prefiguring the Alt Right. Beyond the small movement of explicit neoreactionaries, Moldbug has links with the prominent radical Right website Breitbart, the former White House chief strategist Steve Bannon, and the influential billionaire investor Peter Thiel. Moldbug has helped popularize a burgeoning American right-wing turn against democracy and traditional conservative norms, and helped normalize racist views previously absent from American conservatism. Moldbug is a new type of radical Right activist at odds with the conservative

young, coastal, anonymous, secular, male, and adept at manipulating digital technologies to advance an antiprogressive agenda.

The *Unqualified Reservations* blog garnered Moldbug's outsized influence for an anonymous blogger. He became the founding theorist of the "neoreactionary" movement, an online collection of writers determined to theorize a superior alternative to democracy. At least one neoreactionary colleague considers Moldbug "one of only a few political writers today who will be read one hundred years from now."² *Social Matter*, the "flagship Neoreactionary web magazine," and neoreaction.net, which collects Moldbug's work together with his influences and acolytes, are two of several interlinked online communities that regard Moldbug's work as an important rediscovery of the reactionary tradition.³

Sometimes called the "Reactionary Enlightenment," neoreaction is an alchemy of authoritarian and libertarian thought. As a neoreactionary, Moldbug resents the trajectory of modern history but doesn't share the "shipwrecked mind" typical of some reactionaries who project idealized visions onto the past, hoping to restore it by radical means.⁴ Neoreactionaries consider the past instructive, perhaps even superior to the present, but are essentially futurists. Moldbug has a complex relationship to the Enlightenment values that dominate in mainstream American political thought. Unlike irrationalist thinkers like Julius Evola and Alain de Benoist, Moldbug believes in secular, observable reality clearly understandable by reason; his major complaint with progressivism is its alleged falsification of reality. Nor is he a "throne and altar" thinker. His ideal society is cosmopolitan and socially free. However, Moldbug also rejects key political ideals of the Enlightenment. He opposes human equality and the promises of democracy.

Neoreaction's vision is antihumanist and nihilistic. Moldbug thinks overwhelmingly in terms of systems and the grand, almost mechanistic, operation of laws, principles, and trends. His thought generally has little room for human agency. People, he argues, act within rigid structures, driven by basic motivations. The complexities of human behavior and society barely exist in his pursuit of the perfectly engineered political system. Nor does his focus on systems and rational behavior leave much room for the intricacies and durability of historically specific social norms, like business practices or kin relationships, lending Moldbug's thought a certain artificiality.

Moldbug strikingly shows how new web-based media promulgates radical Right ideas to new audiences. The web has fostered anonymous ↪ subcultures of socially disaffected people, fostering predominantly male antiprogressive subcultures.⁵ Moldbug is both an influence on this class and an early instance of it. His antiprogressive critiques justify these groups' rejection of society. And because Moldbug largely uses online sources to develop his arguments, he also reflects new trends in right-wing thought and activism made possible by the internet's drastic lowering of barriers to entry into mass communication. Since 2010 online antiprogressive activism has grown dramatically. Digital activism takes many forms: verbal fights in the comments sections of major websites; Twitter "armies" of users sharing content en masse or targeting individuals for abuse. During the 2016 presidential election, radical Right activists generated thousands of darkly comic and politically loaded images or "memes" to attack Hillary Clinton. Sometimes online targeting becomes criminal with threats of violence and leaks of personal details.

There are important tensions in Moldbug's thought. He advocates hierarchy, yet deeply resents cultural elites. His political vision is futuristic and libertarian, yet expressed in the language of monarchy and reaction. He is irreligious and socially liberal on many issues but angrily antiprogressive. He presents himself as a thinker in search of truth but admits to lying to his readers, saturating his arguments with jokes and irony. These tensions indicate broader fissures among the online Right.

Technolibertarian Foundations

Part of Moldbug's mystique is that he comes from the "Brahmin" social class that, he claims, dominates the US. He was born in 1973 into a highly-educated secular Jewish family connected with the Ivy League and State Department. Moldbug spent parts of his childhood abroad, mainly in Cyprus, before returning to the US around 1985.⁶ Shortly after, he was selected to participate in Johns Hopkins's longitudinal Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth. He entered college in 1988, graduating from Brown in 1992 before dropping out of the Computer Science Division of the University of California at Berkley.⁷

Moldbug was shaped by 1980s and 1990s Silicon Valley programmer and internet subculture. Before neoreaction, he explored libertarianism, a worldview that "in many-blossomed efflorescence" is the

“pervasive *Weltanschauung*” of the overwhelmingly male American high-tech culture.⁸ As Paulina Borsook argues, libertarianism fits with tech culture for several reasons. First, engineers like Yarvin are typically sorted through competitive academic programs, which they consider analogous to the competition imagined in a libertarian society. Secondly, their world is rational, rule-bound, and solvable. Within the subculture, computer software and hardware are the dominant metaphors for society. Such thinking dovetails with the ironclad assumptions about human and market behavior of the Austrian School of Economics led by Ludwig von Mises. Tech culture’s systems focus also accords with libertarianism’s concentration on efficiency and “solving” government. Finally, tech culture venerates science, treating human biology as determinative and confirming their mechanistic assumptions about humanity.

Silicon Valley libertarians are not nostalgic for a mythical past. Working with cutting-edge technology gives programmer culture a futurist bent that combines widespread enthusiasm for science fiction with the promises of the early internet. Science fiction has long been used for political experimentation: seminal writers like Ursula Le Guin and Robert Heinlein consciously used the genre to explore libertarian concepts and imagine possible alternative regimes. For early adopters, the internet was a digital libertarian society. It offered privacy, free-thinking, and ordered but essentially free interaction.⁹ These themes became technolibertarian priorities and saturate Moldbug’s mature writing.

Embracing Reaction: From Misesian to Carlylean

Moldbug’s intellectual trajectory was a rightward march. He shifted from the liberalism of his family, through the cultural libertarianism of Silicon Valley, in and out of mainstream American conservatism and radical libertarianism, and ultimately arrived at neoreaction. Much of Moldbug’s political evolution happened online, where he had access to right-wing texts and avenues to pursue a study in right-wing thought. Moldbug read numerous key thinkers of mainstream American conservatism.

The libertarian University of Tennessee law professor and blogger Glenn Reynolds introduced Moldbug to the radical libertarian tradition, informed by the early twentieth-century Austrian-American economist Ludwig von Mises.¹⁰ One of Mises’s most important American popularizers, Murray Rothbard, excoriated government intervention, advocating an anarcho-capitalist alternative.¹¹ Mises and the Austrian School reject empiricism in favor of deductive reasoning from assumptions about human behavior and economic principles. This “applied logic” economics coheres with Moldbug’s engineering mind-set. For Moldbug, Mises “is a titan” and “Rothbard is a giant.”¹² However, although he continues to embrace important aspects of libertarianism, Moldbug’s reading of the nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle convinced him that without authoritarianism, libertarianism was ineffectual at best and destructive at worst.

Moldbug’s first break with democracy came through Rothbard’s intellectual successor, Hans-Hermann Hoppe. In his 2001 book, *Democracy: The God that Failed*, Hoppe argued that in order to appease voters, democratic leaders have every incentive to exhaust resources and mismanage the economy for short-term gains. Democracy, he argues, causes long-term civilizational decline. By contrast, because monarchies are the private domain of monarchs, they are incentivized to maximize profits over the long-term. Moreover, conflicts between monarchies are shorter and less destructive than democratic conflicts, partly because prolonged warfare risks damaging the monarch’s property.¹³ Moldbug laments that Hoppe is “a sound formalist at every layer up to the top,” but rejects “sovereign property as a royalist plot.”¹⁴ For Moldbug, Hoppe’s failure of nerve illustrates the extent of the progressive hegemony that prohibits people from entertaining nonconsensual politics.

Another of Moldbug’s principal influences was the conservative theorist James Burnham, whose thought informs Moldbug’s “realism” and attention to power structures. Burnham argued that politics cannot be understood by studying rhetoric, where aims are metaphysical and unachievable. “Real” politics occurs through actions and power manipulation. In *The Machiavellians*, a chapter of which Moldbug reproduced in full on his blog, Burnham argued that good political thought reasons inductively from the past and present to reach conclusions about the struggle for power.¹⁵ Burnham placed himself in the tradition of the Italian post-Marxist “Elitists” Gaetano Mosca, Robert Michels, and Vilfredo Pareto. This loose group’s central theme was the “iron law of oligarchy:” beneath democratic or socialist rhetoric, societies are dominated by elites. Accordingly, Burnham came to believe that managing elites to maximize liberty and “civilization” for nonelites was the essential task of political actors.

Drawing Hoppe and Burnham's antidemocratic insights together with radical libertarianism, Moldbug made a final leap into reaction with his discovery of Thomas Carlyle. "Carlyle is the greatest of all," he rhapsodized, "because his vision is the broadest." While "Mises is almost never wrong," Carlyle is wrong "frequently." The Scotsman's "strokes are big. He excavates with a pick, not a dental drill. But there is really nothing ↵ in Mises' philosophy that is not in Carlyle; and the converse is not the case." Moldbug endorses Carlyle's stress on order above all else, embracing Carlyle's belief that the conflict between left and right is ultimately "the struggle between order and chaos." "Evil is chaos; good is order. Evil is left; good is right."¹⁶ Moldbug jokes that *Unqualified Reservations* is a "late, decadent, second-rate imitation of Carlyle."¹⁷

In many ways, Moldbug remains committed to radical libertarianism, but he believes libertarianism has failed because it presupposes order. Without order, agitating for liberty creates chaos and violence, which inhibits freedom far more than the state does. By prioritizing order above all, Moldbug left behind Mises and Rothbard—even Hoppe and Burnham—and embraced reaction.

Unqualified Reservations and the Desert of the Real

Yarvin's only work as Moldbug is the blog *Unqualified Reservations*, which he began in 2007. Moldbug's critique of the mainstream American Right emerged in response to seven years of American conservatism comfortable with the role of the federal government. The failure of American nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan reinforced his antidemocratic inclinations, just as the federal response to the 2008 financial crisis offended his libertarian sensibilities. The jubilation around Obama's candidacy, and then the Obama presidency, fueled Moldbug's resentment and confirmed his belief in history's inevitable leftward trajectory.

The now-defunct blog used the online medium effectively. It featured frequent updates, sometimes strung together as a series. The basic structure of Moldbug's major posts was a critique of progressive hegemony loaded with "jolts" to wrench readers free from its grasp, followed by a justification of antidemocratic politics, a sketch of an alternative system, and a program for neoreactionaries. Moldbug adopted a conversational and referential tone, alluding to science, history, sci-fi, and political and mathematical theory. Through ubiquitous hyperlinks (largely Wikipedia and Google Books, but also right-wing websites and blogs), Moldbug shared these references with his reader, developing a web of common allusion and meaning. Because each post was published separately, Moldbug built his arguments publicly, sometimes in conversation with readers. One result of this process was frequent terminological reinvention. Although his conclusions remained fairly consistent, Moldbug created numerous neologisms for social classes, problems, and solutions in an attempt to ↵ generate language free of "progressive" taint. The overall effect of the language and style of his blog is of joining a conspiracy and entering a world of illicit knowledge.

Moldbug offers a totalizing explanation of elite liberal domination that justifies right-wing rejection of mainstream news sources and academia. Beneath the rhetoric of democracy, the progressive political and social order is an "intellectual political machine" that dictates acceptable and unacceptable thought. Moldbug initially called this regime "Orwellian" (elsewhere he more accurately calls it Gramscian and Moscan, alluding to Marxist and post-Marxist thinkers who argued that elites produce cultures to justify their dominance). Unlike Orwell's Oceania, progressive hegemony is decentered, self-regulating, even elegant, but acutely pernicious. It "has no center, no master planners," but reproduces an intellectual elite class whose control over "mass opinion creates power. Power diverts funds to the manufacturers of opinion, who manufacture more," perpetuating progressive control.¹⁸

Moldbug calls this "feedback loop" "the Cathedral." He argues that progressive elites have established "universalism," a secularized liberal Protestantism, as the implicit state religion. Universalism's pervasiveness and assumed infallibility infuriate him: he objects "most of all to the insidious way in which the Cathedral has managed to mutate its way around the 'separation of church and state' in which it so hypocritically indoctrinates its acolytes."¹⁹ Moldbug's fixation on free thought reflects the concerns of his technolibertarian milieu taken to conspiratorial conclusions.

Moldbug's epistemological critique is typically associated with the Left.²⁰ But unlike left-wing antifoundationalists comfortable with relativistic concepts of knowledge, Moldbug does not reject the concept of objective reality. Reflecting the polarized approach to knowledge in American politics, Moldbug, like the mainstream American Right, is committed to universal truth.²¹ He argues that the Left constructs

fold knowledge that obscures actual reality and attacks the alleged progressive control of the media and institutions of power. In doing so, he extends the long-standing conservative claim that biased, left-wing media and scholarship is damaging the US.²² But Moldbug goes much further. He argues that democracy and political equality, values common to the American Left and Right, are fraudulent productions of the Cathedral.

p. 194 To shock readers free from progressive control, Moldbug uses thought experiments and presents contemporary problems in alien ways. To illustrate the power dynamics inherent in constructing knowledge, for example, he imagines a Nazi Wikipedia reliant on Nazi-approved sources. Many of Moldbug's arguments, especially those critical of the Left, are mainstream conservative positions repackaged in calculatedly provocative terms. To critique affirmative action he describes a society with a protected class of "nobles," gradually revealed to be African Americans. Like many American conservatives, he dismisses climate change science as an unfalsifiable government-funded boondoggle.²³

Moldbug's treatment of race, however, skirts and exceeds mainstream conservative acceptability.²⁴ Moldbug views "human neurological uniformity" and antiracism as central pillars of universalism. During the 2008 presidential election, he decried the "fundamentally predatory nature of the black power movement" created by civil rights programs. Minority crime, in particular, preoccupies Moldbug. He returned to the subject repeatedly on his blog, highlighting the alleged burying of the problem of black violent crime by the universalist media.

His blog uses some racial epithets to defy politically correct language conventions.²⁵ He also put some relatively mainstream conservative positions in inflammatory terms. He argued that if civil rights programs were applied to America's "WASP-Ashkenazi" population, a group of "genuine genetic elites with average IQs of 120" it would "take no more than two generations to produce a culture of worthless, unredeemable scoundrels." Since these programs were "applied to populations with recent hunter-gatherer ancestry and no great reputation for sturdy moral fiber," the result was "absolute human garbage."²⁶ Moldbug's point—that welfare and affirmation action programs have deleterious effects on those they are intended to help—is uncontroversial on the right, but Moldbug phrases his claim to incite.²⁷

Moldbug's racial comments suggest a broader trend: the anonymity of the internet allows him and others who have followed in his wake to revel in taboo language, ideas, and activities. Violating social norms is a kind of liberation for Moldbug: entertaining these ideas is to break from the Cathedral. Moldbug provides a theoretical justification for the extremely transgressive anonymous message boards and political "shitposting" that has manifested online in the past decade.²⁸

p. 195 The complete ideological transformation required to cast off the Cathedral is alienating, Moldbug admits, but intoxicating. Moldbug calls this process "taking the 'Red Pill,'" a reference to the film *The Matrix* (1999) in which the protagonist chooses between swallowing a red pill and escaping a dull digital prison or accepting a blue pill to remain in ignorant normalcy. The Red Pill trope is common among web-based right-wing and antifeminist movements, from the racist Alt Right to politicized "gamers," "pick-up artists," and the "involuntarily celibate," (incels). Angela Nagle suggests it is an especially potent symbol for the growing number of alienated men. The Red Pill idea rationalizes their isolation and justifies their antiegalitarianism.²⁹

The Real Enemy is Democracy

Moldbug believes that under the Cathedral's spurious commitment to equality and justice is a system of power manipulation. Neoreaction's basic assumption is that humans desire power. Interpreting democracy through this framework, Moldbug claims that democracy's appeal is that it disperses power widely, indulging the mass desire for useless fragments of power. Since power-seeking is pervasive, society trends toward greater division of power and a concomitant erosion of order. Democracy is a "dangerous, malignant form of government which tends to degenerate, sometimes slowly and sometimes with shocking, gut-wrenching speed, into tyranny and chaos." Within the Cathedral, it is rational to obey the rules of the system. Ambitious individuals are incentivized to embrace progressive dogma, hence a class of Brahmin progressive elites.

Moldbug rejects the classic republican premise that divided sovereignty constrains governments. Instead, he argues that each branch of government metastasizes, expanding the size and the scope of the state.

Strong governments with clear hierarchies, however, remain small and narrowly focused. With this insight, Moldbug justifies authoritarianism on libertarian grounds. The minimal state is achieved by making government strong, not by weakening it.

Neoreactionaries look to non-Western states as alternatives. Moldbug admires Deng Xiaoping for the Chinese leader's pragmatic, market-oriented authoritarianism, and praises Singapore as a successful authoritarian regime.³⁰ By contrast, he sees the US as soft on crime, economically delusional, and dominated by Brahmins. The subjects of democracy cannot recognize its flaws. They have "been taught to worship democracy." Elections give the illusion of responding to social demands but are false safety valves that mask progressive control. Since power-seeking is basic to human nature, democratic drift is chronic. "Cthulu may swim slowly," Moldbug wrote, alluding to the hideous Lovecraftian deity, "but he always swims left."³¹

p. 196 Neoreaction's decline story bemoans the defeat of reactionary regimes and expansion of progressive dominance in the US and around the world. Although he does not endorse them, Moldbug argues that Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany fought defensive wars against progressive global conquest. He depicts the American Revolution as rabble-rousers violently opposed to responsible Tories and, drawing on libertarian Confederate-apologia, construes the American Civil War as the violent imposition of progressivism on the South.³² On the flip side, the progressive marriage between "Harvard" and government that forms the Cathedral came in two stages. In the 1870s and 1880s, the Liberal Republican civil-service reforms politicized the American academic class. Franklin Roosevelt, a classic libertarian villain, completed the merger of academia and politics through the New Deal and its "brains trust."³³

Moldbug's treatment of historic reactionary regimes also features antidemocratic caveats that distinguish neoreaction from other movements. Fascism and Nazism were right-wing phenomena, to be sure, but Moldbug maintains that they were historically specific, democratic distortions of the Right's core truth. Order and authority are commonsensical but unpopular. Advancing order and authority through democracy typically means joining it with another motivating force like anti-Semitism or nationalism. Nationalism of any kind, including white nationalism, is dangerous precisely because it is democratic. Moldbug's revisionist histories place the blame for the horrors of the twentieth century squarely at the feet of democracy.

What Is to be Done?

The fact that egalitarian rhetoric conceals the rule of progressive elites is Moldbug's starting point. The solution is for political discourse to match real power dynamics. Although he moved away from the term, Moldbug proposed "Formalism"—the formal recognition of realities of power—as an alternative ideology. Denuded of rhetoric, Americans are "serfs" and the "US is just a corporation . . . not a mystic trust consigned to us by the generations."³⁴ After laying the realities of political power bare, Moldbug began "solving" the "engineering problem" of political organization.

p. 197 There are two aspects of Moldbug's ideal regime: the political structure and the civil society it engenders. In effect, Moldbug imagines a radical libertarian utopia with maximum freedom in all things *except politics*. The ideal economic order is a thoroughgoing acceptance of ↳ Misesian microeconomics. Moldbug proposes nationalizing every asset and node of power in exchange for cash and then either privatizing them at auction or destroying them, creating a cash-rich, entirely privatized society.³⁵ Moldbug envisages an "open society" of free thought and behavior constrained by rigorously enforced laws protecting contracts and preventing violence.³⁶ Many of Moldbug's views on social issues are conventionally libertarian—he has written in favor of same-sex marriage, the toleration of private religion, private drug use, and against race- or gender-based discriminatory laws (although he self-consciously proposed private welfare and prison reforms that resembled slavery). Within a correctly engineered authoritarian order, Moldbug assumes that maximum economic freedom produces the best society. There are libertarian precedents for this assumption, especially the libertarian Right's engagement with Augusto Pinochet's Chile in the 1970s and 1980s.

The libertarian aspect of Moldbug's thought is overshadowed by his antiprogressivism and stark Carlylean authority. Because the most ordered system is a unitary command structure with a clear hierarchy, Moldbug's model for a new political order is the corporation. He proposes that the state is privatized to

incentivize profit-maximizing governance by “shareholders” (large owners) who vote for a CEO-monarch. More Steve Jobs than Henry VIII, the monarch has absolute authority but serves at the shareholders’ pleasure. Moldbug calls this corporate-monarchy regime “neocameralism.” By limiting politics to this narrow domain, Moldbug reasons it creates space for a libertarian paradise.³⁷ Moldbug calls himself a “Jacobite” and favors the restoration of the House of Stuart, but the details of his futurist monarchy are less important than the thrust toward the total privatization and authoritarianism.³⁸

Drawing on an implicit machine metaphor, he argues that society needs a “hard reset” not gradual political reform. But Moldbug’s strategy for the destroying the Cathedral further distinguishes him from other right-wing movements. He forbids neoreactionaries from engaging in any form of activism, “violent or harmless, legal or illegal, fashionable or despicable.” Even voting is borderline. Instead, Moldbug advocates “the Steel Rule of Passivism.” He counsels readers that “since you believe others should be willing to accept the rule of the New Structure, over which they wield no power, you must be the first to make the great refusal.”³⁹ Moldbug’s rationale is that progressivism feeds on right-wing opposition. By remaining passive, neoreaction “starves” progressivism of a necessary enemy. Without a “loyal opposition,” “progressivism collapses into ↪ sclerosis.” Eschewing politics also safeguards neoreaction from cooption by those attracted to power, “vaccinat[ing] itself against Hitler.”⁴⁰

Moldbug concedes that destroying progressivism is implausible. But he thinks that with the internet it is possible. He suggests the collapse of the Soviet Union as a model to follow. The sclerosis of the American government and the disjuncture between power structures and political rhetoric will naturally undermine confidence in the state. But indoctrinated Americans also needed a visible alternative. The neoreactionary’s task is to create a clear and obvious alternative or “Schelling Point.” The first steps are challenging the Cathedral intellectually and theorizing an alternative. Moldbug distills his plan into the mantra “Become worthy; Accept power; Rule.” Having begun the creation of the Schelling Point, in 2013 Moldbug drastically reduced his blogging and, after two years of silence, announced in April 2016 that *Unqualified Reservations* had “completed its mission.”⁴¹

Harbinger and Archetype

It can be difficult to gage the seriousness of Moldbug’s project. On the one hand, his droll tone and outlandish statements make it tempting to dismiss him as a prank. There is some evidence to this effect. The Kindle versions of his posts are published by the winkingly named TRO LLC. In one particular post, Moldbug discusses at length Daniel Defoe’s *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, a 1702 pamphlet that parodied Tory propaganda to discredit the Right.⁴² It is possible that Moldbug highlighted the pamphlet to indicate the reality of his blog.

However, Moldbug should be taken seriously. Despite some outlandishness, his core critiques and basic proposals are consistent, and his use of exaggeration is purposeful. Neoreaction treats taboo thought as liberation, and Moldbug’s use of comedy and transgression make sense within this framework. His real identity was revealed online around 2012, and his tech work has occasionally suffered as a result. Two tech-expos disinvited him in 2015 and 2016 causing minor controversy, and Moldbug-Yarvin has since defended *Unqualified Reservations* under his own name.⁴³

Even if Yarvin had not done this, there would be reason to reckon with Moldbug. Regardless of his intent, *Unqualified Reservations* developed a dedicated following who read Moldbug seriously. Moldbug’s approach reflects the online turn toward absurdist memes and “trolling,” the act of inciting outrage by adopting provocative beliefs or actions. Simultaneously ↪ ironic and sincere, trolling makes it impossible to disentangle the serious from the intentionally provocative. If Moldbug is a prototroll, his blog is intended to challenge society and cause teeth-gnashing in mainstream publications like the *Atlantic* and the *Nation*. Most importantly, antiprogressive arguments resembling Moldbug’s have entered the public square. Moldbug was a harbinger of an antiprogressive trend most apparent in the 2016 presidential election.

Donald Trump and his surrogates sounded neoreactionary notes in their condemnation of progressivism and the media. According to *Politico*, the Breitbart executive chairman and Trump advisor Steve Bannon read and admired Moldbug’s work, which confirmed Bannon’s conviction that liberal technocrats were destroying “Western Civilization.” Though criticism of progressivism and liberal media bias have long

histories in mainstream conservatism, Trump and Moldbug are distinct for their tone, use of alternative media types, and disrespect for prevailing norms.

But neoreaction is also at odds with some of conservatism's core tenets. Moldbug's philosophy is hyperindividualistic, thoroughly deracinated from the regional, national, and religious identities conservatives traditionally emphasize. He rejects patriotism, constitutionalism, and populism. Most of the conservative Right venerates a narrow vision of America's political tradition utterly distinct from Moldbug's vision of corporate feudalism.

Moldbug's relationship with white nationalism is also thorny. He is "not exactly allergic to" white nationalist writers and accepts racist claims about "human biodiversity" but disavows it for political reasons. While racist thought may be "a sensible description of a general problem," it suggests erroneous solutions. White nationalism is misguided because it emphasizes race rather than intelligence. More importantly, identitarian politics are flawed because they are democratic and counterproductive because they energize the Left.⁴⁴ Neoreactionaries have distanced themselves from the Alt Right and white-identity politics. Nick Land, another neoreactionary thinker, says he does not "think the Alt-Right (in America) is very serious."⁴⁵ Privately, however, Moldbug has suggested that this distancing is a tactical consideration. In a message to Milo Yiannopoulos, then a Breitbart reporter, on how to relate to neo-Nazis, Moldbug counseled Yiannopoulos to "deal with them the way some perfectly tailored high-communist NYT reporter handles a herd of greasy anarchist hippies. Patronizing contempt." Although disdainful of the neo-Nazi Right, Moldbug sees them as a part of a broad right-wing assault on the Left. Neoreaction's dismissal of neo-Nazism is cultural and tactical, but not entirely ideological. "The liberal doesn't purge the communist because he hates communism," Moldbug told Yiannopoulos. He purges them "because the communist is a public embarrassment to him." Neo-Nazis are losers "and losers rub off."⁴⁶

Where Moldbug has been most influential is among radical libertarians and in burgeoning online subcultures. His overt anti-democracy is a departure for American libertarianism but has a small but growing influence, especially following the 2008 financial crisis. Prominent libertarian investors Balaji Srinivasan and Peter Thiel have echoed Neoreactionary themes about seceding from the US for tech-CEO dictatorships.

Moldbug's relationship with the investor-entrepreneur Thiel is his most important connection. Thiel has considerable influence within mainstream and libertarian circles. He was seriously considered for a cabinet position in the Trump White House, sits on the boards of several major companies, including Facebook, and is a majority shareholder in Palantir, a major intelligence contractor. Thiel invested in Yarvin's tech company and wrote while recommending *Unqualified Reservations*, that he "no longer believe[s] that freedom and democracy are compatible."⁴⁷ In 2016 Moldbug privately boasted that he had been "coaching Thiel" who is "fully enlightened" but "plays it very carefully."⁴⁸ Moldbug exemplifies an important trend in radical libertarianism: a grim view of contemporary society but supreme confidence in technology and the private sector to supersede traditional politics.

Moldbug is perhaps best understood as an online archetype. Especially with the growth of social media and the availability of video technology, many right-wing activists have adeptly harnessed the web to create and propagate their philosophies. The unprecedented platform of the internet provides a space and audience for their world-historical theories. What Moldbug captured in his verbose posts was a growing sense of social frustration among mostly white, middle-class males resentful of diminished economic and social fortunes in a diverse, economically slowing, post-Third Wave feminist society. This frustration manifests itself as misanthropic superiority. *Unqualified Reservations* was the "highbrow" predecessor and later companion to the transgressive anti-"politically correct" metapolitics of nebulous online communities like 4chan and /pol/. Moldbug represents a new type of thinker inseparable from the internet. Moldbug was among the first of this new type of digital ideologue, but he is far from the last.

Notes

1. Mencius Moldbug, "A Formalist Manifesto," *Unqualified Reservations* (blog) (hereafter *UR*), April 23, 2007, <http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/04/formalist-manifesto-originally-posted.html>¹. Moldbug's identity is now public knowledge, but his blog posts are cited as he posted them under his *nom de web*.
2. Justine Alexandra Roberts Tunney, introduction to *A Gentle Introduction to Unqualified Reservations*, by Mencius Moldbug

3. www.socialmatter.net.
4. Mark Lilla, *The Shipwrecked Mind: On Political Reaction* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2016), ix–xxi.
5. Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: The Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the Alt-Right and Trump* (Washington, DC: Zero Books, 2017).
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