

Silicon Valley billionaires building a new fascist world order

Gil Duran's new book traces a through-line from SF school board recalls to Peter Thiel, Curtis Yarvin, and JD Vance.

By [Kevin Truong](#)

Picture this: A loosely organized cabal of obscenely wealthy tech moguls aim to overthrow democracy and replace it with a corporatist dictatorship.

It would make for a good political thriller. It's a far grimmer read in nonfiction.

Gil Duran, a journalist and former aide to Jerry Brown, Dianne Feinstein, and Kamala Harris, has spent the last two years tracking extremist strains of authoritarianism in Silicon Valley through his newsletter, [The Nerd Reich](#)(opens in new tab).

That premise is now the central thesis of a new book. "[The Nerd Reich: Silicon Valley Fascism and the War on Democracy](#)(opens in new tab)," out Aug. 18, catalogs the rise of what Duran characterizes as an ideological movement designed to degrade liberal democracy and supplant it with a tech-led oligarchy.

Among the stops along the way are the rise of crypto corruption, the transhumanist philosophies of the AI-pilled, and Balaji Srinivasan's "Network State" project to replace today's nation-states with "startup societies" free to develop their own laws. Early experiments can be seen in Honduras' Prospera or closer to home with the California Forever project in Solano County.

Hitler makes a few appearances. So do JD Vance, Curtis Yarvin, and the big bad of tech plutocrats, Peter Thiel. The book can veer polemic, but Duran girds his argument with plenty of direct quotes from his subjects' conference speeches, publications, and podcast appearances.

The Standard spoke with Duran about the early warning signs he saw in San Francisco, books on the Silicon Valley mogul reading list, and how tech-flavored libertarianism has curdled into something far darker.

This conversation has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

I think we have to start with the name "Nerd Reich." What was the origin?

People often give me credit for coming up with it, but I didn't. After I wrote a story [about Balaji Srinivasan\(opens in new tab\)](#), which went super viral, he started attacking me for several days. Then a pretty well-known figure from the crypto world reached out to me over DM and said, "You know, we've been calling these guys the Nerd Reich for years." And I was like, "What?" The URL was available, so I rebranded my newsletter as the Nerd Reich and announced it in dramatic fashion.

To me, the most important thing is that this is not a name I came up with. This is a name their own peers use. They are telling people what they are doing. They want people to know because they're evangelizing to bring in more believers.

| Source: Steve Jennings/Getty Images for TechCrunch

You write that you came to the main idea of your book via the lens of SF politics and the DA and school board recalls of 2022. Can you explain the connection?

It was Garry Tan describing his sudden aggressive engagement in San Francisco politics as something related to the Network State that led me to look more deeply into it. When I finally read the book and listened to all of Balaji's interviews, I understood that it's basically this cult of venture capitalists and other tech moguls and billionaires who believe it is the destiny of Silicon Valley to replace democratic governments and become the governments of the world.

How do they propose to do that?

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Ideas

San Francisco once declared war on tech. Tech won

There's two ways. One is called voice. One is called exit. It's a framework Balaji took from the economist Albert O. Hirschman. Exit, which Balaji favors, means leaving a country or a territory and starting your own new territory or country. That's what he prefers because democracy is too powerful, too messy, and the backlash will be too big. In some ways, what the Network State is trying to do is recreate the failed cult compound commune idea, right? Balaji Srinivasan's Network School, for example. He's created a little cult of young people willing to go live in Kazakhstan in order to be a part of it.

And San Francisco is where we saw voice come in?

Voice is where you use your power, your wealth, and your influence to seize power within existing systems and turn those into systems that serve your interests. In San Francisco, I think we saw a little beta test for voice. Voters had some legitimate dissatisfactions coming out of the lockdowns, but those recalls would have fizzled and had no chance of success without a Republican billionaire (William Oberndorf) and tech venture capitalists pouring [millions of dollars](#) in to make it happen. But they generated this panic, this fever for recalls. And remember, this comes after the Newsom recall fails. They tried that one first. So they were looking for some way to express power, to take down a politician, to prove they could do it.

From an outsider perspective, it might be a bit of a stretch to tie the quality-of-life issues that helped drive the recalls to what you term tech fascism.

Garry Tan went and said it at the Network State conference: we're replacing parts of that machine. And before that, the explosive part of my Srinivasan story was that he gave an interview where he talked about purging Democrats from San Francisco. The blue tribe must be driven out. The gray tribe, the new tech tribe, he described as allies of the red tribe, the Republican tribe, and if we work together we can get rid of the blues and rip down their power structures. He was describing the idea behind the recalls, with this weird aesthetic layer on it. Then Tan pretty much says the same thing, minus the red and blue tribe stuff.

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In September of 2024, there was [a conference at Fort Mason\(opens in new tab\)](#) called Reboot 2024 themed "The New Reality," and it was about how Silicon Valley has now woken up to politics. The

new reality turns out to be a collaboration between right-wing Trump supporters and San Francisco venture capitalists. There was Michael Kratsios, a Thiel deputy who's now high up in the Trump administration, and Kevin Roberts of the Heritage Foundation, along with a keynote by Garry Tan. To me, you would have to look really hard not to see that the idea was that Silicon Valley money, partnered with right-wing money and infrastructure, is a weapon for undermining democratic rule.

I didn't think this would be an immediate problem for the rest of the country. I thought maybe in five or 10 years this is really going to be a problem. It wasn't until JD Vance got on the ticket that I thought, wait, this is accelerating far more quickly than I thought. The basic idea is that Silicon Valley billionaires have become so powerful and wealthy that they can now control what happens in society, and that they will. And why let something as weak and vulnerable as democracy stand in their way?

Someone you identify as a foundation for the movement is Curtis Yarvin, who argues for the replacement of democracy with a kind of corporate-style monarchy where we're ruled by a CEO.

Yarvin is this guy who was really good at math and skipped a bunch of grades, and then he did a tremendous amount of psychedelic drugs and wrote a new ideology while living off his wife and his mother. The importance of Yarvin is that if you want to know who Peter Thiel is, if you want to know who Marc Andreessen is, read Curtis Yarvin, or watch one of his interviews where he [compares Africans to cattle\(opens in new tab\)](#) and talks about making sure they don't breed too much. This is someone these people regard as worth listening to, and who they've promoted to the point that [even the vice president of the United States has quoted him\(opens in new tab\)](#).

| Source:Amanda Andrade-Rhoades/The Standard

You devote a chapter to JD Vance, who you describe as essentially a creation of Peter Thiel, what role do you see him playing in the implementation of the ideology?

It's not just Vance. Bloomberg [did a story at the beginning\(opens in new tab\)](#) of the administration counting 15 of Thiel's closest deputies spreading out through the administration. Elon gets all the credit and sucks up all the energy, but Thiel is the quiet power behind it.

And with Vance you have a man whose entire career was bankrolled and promoted by Peter Thiel sitting a heartbeat away from the presidency. This was the guy quoting Curtis Yarvin's specific ideas: purging the federal government, and a president who defies the law. Those come from Yarvin, which in turn come largely from Carl Schmitt, the Nazi legal philosopher Vance has [also talked about\(opens in new tab\)](#).

One urtext you identify is “The Sovereign Individual.” How does that book explain what’s happening today?

I read the book because it’s Peter Thiel’s favorite book, even more so than his fixation with “The Lord of the Rings.” In 2020, “The Sovereign Individual” was [reissued with a preface by Thiel\(opens in new tab\)](#). The thing you have to understand is that this is a crazy, kooky conspiracy theory book that largely rehashed other ideas from the cypherpunks and libertarians and those sorts of people. This was the third big book written by James Dale Davidson and William Rees-Mogg, and it was focused on the 21st century, so they vacuumed up a bunch of the futurism and ideas that had been in print since the ’60s and ’70s and ’80s.

Thiel sees “The Sovereign Individual” as a work of prophecy, because the book did say that in the 21st century two technologies — crypto and AI — would lead to the complete collapse of nations like the United States and create widespread chaos and violence. But savvy individuals who knew how to invest correctly and make the right moves, collecting multiple passports and making sure they could triage between jurisdictions favorable to their interests, would be able to benefit greatly from the situation. So it’s an apocalyptic book, right? The apocalypse is coming, driven by technology. But if you accept this prophecy and follow it, you will become a cognitive elite that roams the world freely, free from laws and rules. The book was so influential for Thiel that he’s credited it as one of the reasons he started PayPal — as an effort to create the digital currency the book described.

What differentiates tech fascism from the original recipe developed in the early 20th century?

They have a lot more money. This is a story about the toxic effects of too much money in the hands of small-minded men who have way too much power in society because of it. Hitler and Mussolini had the radio. That was powerful enough to communicate with people everywhere at the same time. Now we have the internet, which goes beyond that, because it can also follow you around and constantly manipulate you.

I think one of the main innovations the tech fascists make is that instead of promising a return to a mythical past, they promise a mythical future: superabundance, interplanetary travel, eternal life, total efficiency. If you look at history, before the fascists you had the futurists, who believed in speed and violence as the ultimate beauty and technological acceleration as the thing that would win in the end. Filippo Marinetti wrote the Futurist Manifesto, then a decade later wrote the Fascist Manifesto. In his [Techno-Optimist Manifesto\(opens in new tab\)](#), Marc Andreessen names Marinetti as a patron saint.

You draw a connection in your book between Christian apocalyptic end-times theology and what's happening philosophically in the tech industry.

It's a kind of apocalypse capitalism. That's where venture capital has gone now: they're running out of unicorns, so now they have to hunt for Antichrists. Usually Silicon Valley is disrupting some industry: hotels, taxis, grocery shopping, you name it. How do you go into something, add a layer of tech that siphons profits into software, and create a new convenience people will pay for? They're running out of those things, so now they've created AI and decided this is the so-called last invention. In order to justify these billion-dollar valuations, they have to promise that everything's going to be disrupted, and this has led to some very apocalyptic thinking.

The AI narrative has largely been focused on the idea of complete destruction — the destruction of humanity, or at the very least the destruction of the economy. To be clear, I don't necessarily believe any of those things are foregone conclusions, and I don't think AI and LLMs are totally useless technologies. But I don't understand why suddenly they have to eat everything up and we all have to just give everything to them. They're going to write your op-ed, they're going to make your website, and they're going to decide what's in your refrigerator. I just don't think that acceleration is based on reality. It's based on people wanting to become trillionaires.

Network state experiments like California Forever, Praxis, Esmeralda, Prospera have faced lawsuits, regulatory hurdles, and local pushback. Does that suggest the whole thing is failing?

They're going to force this on people wherever they can, and everywhere they go they're hated. Balaji just got [kicked out of Malaysia](#)(opens in new tab). California Forever was initially going to get a vote of the people, after sneaking around buying up land and suing farmers, but the polls showed 70% opposed, including high levels of Republicans. They found a way to unite Democrats and Republicans. So what do they do instead? They creep around trying to pick off different cities with annexation deals, and now they're angling for some kind of special zone where they're exempt from the rules and can do what they want.

Why do billionaires suddenly need to build new cities everywhere? Trump has freedom cities in his plan. Greenland, same thing. It's this idea of new fortress societies to prepare for a dark future, when the wealthy and powerful need zones that are protected from everybody else.

There's been a fast, bipartisan backlash against the AI industry. How do you read the opposition?

I think the majority of people are quickly realizing that Silicon Valley poses an existential threat to their interests, and politicians are moving too slowly to get on the side of the people. Someone online

called them data center Democrats, people who see the public rising up against this stuff and for some reason want to be on the side of the companies and the billionaires. That's because money is the mother's milk of politics. Gavin Newsom is going to run for president and he wants billionaire checks. He thinks he can bridge the gap between Marc Andreessen and liberal democracy. He can't.

It's not clear to me why people like Adam Schiff and Alex Padilla aren't speaking directly to Silicon Valley's role in destroying our country. They largely don't train their fire on the oligarchs. But one of the few things that works with these people is shame — calling them out, making them feel accountable. You see Chris Murphy, Ron Wyden, Bernie Sanders, AOC, Jasmine Crockett, James Talarico, and a handful of others doing it directly. Either we get a shift, or we get a new class of candidates willing to challenge the incumbents, because silence is complicity.