

# Why tech billionaires want a corporate dictatorship

Guest host Jon Fortt and The Nerd Reich author Gil Duran discuss the Dark Enlightenment and the rise of tech authoritarianism.

by [Jon Fortt](#)

ello, and welcome to Decoder! This is Jon Fortt, CNBC journalist, cohost of Closing Bell: Overtime, and creator of the Fortt Knox streaming series on LinkedIn. I'm guest-hosting for a couple more episodes of Decoder this summer while Nilay is out on parental leave.

Today, I'm talking with a very special guest: Gil Duran, an old friend, journalist, and author of The Nerd Reich, a newsletter and [forthcoming book](#) about the shifting politics of Silicon Valley and the [rise of tech authoritarianism](#).

I've known Gil for a long time. We met at the end of high school and went to college together, and we were also colleagues at the San Jose Mercury News. Gil has had a fascinating career that spans both media and politics: he's worked as press secretary and comms director for high-profile California politicians like Gov. Jerry Brown and Sen. Dianne Feinstein, and he also advised Kamala Harris when she served as California's attorney general.



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Now, writing *The Nerd Reich*, Gil is focused on a new type of story, one he says has gone woefully under-covered by mainstream media. That story is the influence of tech money

at large, and the disturbing philosophical driving it.

sees it, is a web of powerful, ultrawealthy tech billionaires. People like Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, Marc Andreessen, and others, whose politics and influence now see them pushing the country further and further away from democracy and toward something resembling a kind of cross between unrestrained capitalism and monarchy.

This idea has been kicking around for quite a while now. You'll hear Gil refer to it as the Dark Enlightenment, or as some refer to it, the neo-reactionary movement. Some central characters here include Curtis Yarvin — an influential, anti-democracy blogger whose ideas once stood far outside mainstream acceptability, but who recently has captured the attention of politicians like Vice President JD Vance.

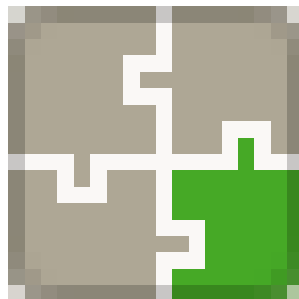
And that's Gil's central thesis: while these ideas are not new, their embrace by some of the wealthiest and most powerful people on the planet is a relatively

recent phenomenon — one that's been supercharged by President Donald Trump's reelection.

Now that these ideas have entered the White House by way of the MAGA movement, Gil argues that it has created a dangerous coalition between the far right and the stewards of the biggest, most popular tech platforms and products. After all, as we've seen with Elon Musk and DOGE, these tech billionaires aren't just sitting in the shadows; they want to tear down and rebuild the government from the ground up.

Gil is one of the sharpest thinkers on this subject, and he never shies away from saying what he really thinks. So I think you'll find this conversation very illuminating; I know I did.

Okay: The Nerd Reich author Gil Duran. Here we go.



Output 1

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

**Gil Duran, great to have you here on Decoder.**

Thanks for having me.

**Well, we're going to talk about The Nerd Reich, of course, because that's what you write, what you podcast, and what you do. But first, a disclosure: You and I first met 31 years ago as high school seniors. We received the same journalism scholarship, went to the same college, and we're friends.**

**We started our journalism careers. You focused more on culture, government, and politics. I focused more on business and tech. You've gone on to a brilliant and wide-ranging career. You've run communications for a who's who of California politics: Jerry Brown, Kamala Harris, Antonio Villaraigosa, Dianne Feinstein.**

**But that's a bit of a past life for you. At this moment, our worlds collide. The government and culture stuff, and the business and tech stuff. So, what is the Nerd Reich?**

The Nerd Reich is a term that some people use to describe a cultish group of tech billionaires who basically seek to replace democracy with something resembling corporate dictatorship. Some people call this movement the Dark Enlightenment, the neo-reactionary movement, or the network state.

It's backed by a handful of CEOs and billionaires: people like venture capitalist Marc Andreessen and Coinbase CEO Brian Armstrong, with involvement from people like OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, and the granddaddy of them all, Peter Thiel, who's been promoting some of these ideas for decades.

**What's wrong with it?**

Well, I say it's inherently anti-American. It sees a post-United States world where, instead of democracy, we will have basically tech feudalism — fiefdoms run by tech corporations. They're pretty explicit about this point. You and I did Poli Sci 101 together at DePaul. I would say that there is a conversation in academia about the long-term health of the nation state in the 21st century, and these guys are tapping into that and proposing a product or a model that will put them at the supreme head of world government in the future.

But I think before we go about trying to change the nation or change the nation state, we should probably discuss that idea with the American people. So, in a nutshell, you have a group of super-rich elites with a very apocalyptic vision of where society and the world are headed, and they are rushing ahead with what they think is the solution, a solution that, by the way, will also put a crown on their heads.

**This reminds me of some themes from a book I read in high school, by author Ayn Rand, called *The Fountainhead*, and I think you and I might've talked about this during freshman year in college as well. It's also in line with another Rand book, *Atlas Shrugged*.**

**It's very convincing when you're reading it as a teenager and maybe also as a billionaire, this idea that, "Hey, there are some people out there who are just more productive as capitalists, and capitalism is good. It's the lifeblood of society, and these are the people we need to be running things, not these altruistic, mealy-mouthed, progressive people who are just watering everything down and making everything mediocre."**

It's definitely an ideology of tech supremacy. This idea that if you have billions of dollars and you've created some tech product that's valuable, that makes

you good at everything. I think there's an old Yiddish saying, "If you're rich, you're also handsome and you can sing." So, it's this idea that because you're rich, you can now do everything. We see this Dunning-Kruger approach with everyone from Elon Musk to Jeff Bezos going into businesses where they have no experience and making a mess of things. So, they're trying to do that basic idea with governance.

You're right, a lot of people trace this back to ideas like Galt's Gulch [in Atlas Shrugged]. It's an idea we find throughout science fiction, with enclaves of tech elites controlling everything. Usually, they're the bad guys. For the life of me, I can't understand why these guys have decided to overtly be the bad guys in science fiction.

But these are ideas that really collapse under the weight of reality because governing and getting the consent of the governed is a long-standing historical problem. The best we've gotten in our thousands of years is figuring out something like the democracy we have right now and the idea that we're just going to replace it with these corporate fiefdoms... there's a lot they haven't thought through, and it becomes very obvious the moment you start probing beneath the surface.

**Now, one of the leading thinkers on the tech billionaire side of this is a guy named Curtis Yarvin. He recently had a debate at Harvard, and he seems to have done pretty well. How would you frame how Yarvin approaches these things?**

Yarvin is a computer programmer and a pseudo-intellectual who, in the early 2000s, started inventing his own theory of politics, largely catering to the idea that instead of a democracy, we need a dictatorship. That we'd be better off with a monarchy and going into great detail about how to create this new

system, which involved breaking up the nation state into smaller territories, he called patchworks, which would then be governed by totalitarian corporations. For example, he envisioned a San Francisco in the future that would be called Frisk Corp, run by a corporation called Frisk Corp, where everybody would be under constant and total surveillance even in the privacy of their own homes.

This is what would ensure your security, and you'd need to swipe in and swipe out to get in or out of the city. The government of the city would have total power over you. They could kill you if you want. You'd have no rights. The only thing you'd be able to do is to leave, to vote with your feet, which is underestimating how authoritarian governments work. Because if everybody could just leave, people would just leave North Korea, China, all these countries. They don't do that for a reason — because they're not allowed to.

**Or maybe it's Singapore.**

Well, that's one idea it's become. So, a few years later, Balaji Srinivasan, who's the former CTO of Coinbase and a former Andreessen Horowitz partner and a friend of both Yarvin and Peter Thiel, and that's an important part... Peter Thiel has a longstanding association with Yarvin, funded his company for years, and has named him in conversations as an inspiration. He's considered Peter Thiel's house philosopher.

Well, Srinivasan sees that the association with Yarvin makes it creepy because he has some weird ideas about what we do with poor people, and a lot of genocidal language occurs through the writings of Yarvin. So, Balaji Srinivasan tries to update it to something called The Network State and puts out this whole book where he basically tries to rebrand it as a corporate safe

idea. We have to start thinking about sovereignty, but he also has some pretty nutty ideas about how that would look.

**So I guess if I were to take the other side, which I have to do to keep it interesting, one could say that Yarvin's ideas aren't so far from, say, Alexander Hamilton's? And the dynamic between Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson was a healthy dynamic in the formation of American ideas.**

**Hamilton was accused of being a monarchist. He was pretty clearly in favor of smart and rich people having a lot more power and say over how things went than everybody else. Thomas Jefferson, despite his many contradictions and hypocrisies, was the man of the people, the pro-democracy guy.**

Well, I think Yarvin would like that comparison. I don't think he deserves it. You've basically got a failed startup founder — his product has never really done what it was supposed to do. If you can't create that world, how can you deal with the rest of it? I've actually been in government at City Hall, in the state capital in Sacramento. There are some hard decisions, some complex issues, that don't lend themselves to this simplistic thinking of a bunch of guys who spend all their lives with their necks craned over their computers in the code. That's what they just don't get. That's the missing element of their ideas.

Yarvin is not a PhD in anything, in history. If you talk to political scientists and historians as I have been doing, because I'm writing a book on this subject, it's almost an insult to bring up his ideas to them because they make no sense, and they immediately go deep into all the philosophers, thinkers, and historians who have debunked the basic ideas here.

So, they're operating at a basic level, almost like high schoolers arguing, or us maybe freshman year arguing over Galt's Gulch. Or remember we had some weird debates over stuff that neither of us really knew about, but we were really going to be right about it. That's what they're doing, except they're grown men. The problem is when you get these billionaires who maybe haven't matured as fast as their finances have, they think these are great ideas, and they push them, and then unfortunately, the rest of us have to deal with them.

**At the root of it, we're at a time where the broader public, at least big segments of the broader public, seem to have lost faith in the ideas of expertise and of institutions. So, you say he doesn't have a PhD. There are a lot of people who are like, "Yay, no PhD. He didn't get a PhD in this from Harvard. Boo, Harvard."**

**What's going on with perhaps the framing of the American promise, where we're now in a time when people are lionizing those who have made a lot of money over those who have gained knowledge or experience in a given area? It seems like the result of some failed promise.**

Well, definitely. We have a media that largely glamorizes the wealthy and makes them seem like they're better than everybody else. I think we've got a longstanding culture in which wealth is seen as proof that you're better, that you're more hardworking, that you're morally superior. So, there's a lot flowing toward that.

I mean, our president of the United States is a guy who played the stereotype of a rich guy on TV in the '80s and the '90s, right? Donald Trump has always been there with this gold-plated, kitschy image that he projects. But I think

it's starting to fall short in some ways. I think when the effects of these tariffs hit, Trump's poll numbers started sinking, and people are learning in their own ways that great wealth doesn't equal wisdom, and it doesn't equal leadership.

Trump has been able to get pretty far on an illusion, but there's only one Donald Trump. Whether you love him or hate him, there's no denying that he's had a longstanding charismatic relationship with the American people. You don't get that with Elon Musk. You don't get that with Peter Thiel, who can barely choke out a sentence that's comprehensible. You certainly don't get that with Curtis Yarvin. If I had a big budget, I would definitely put ads targeting MAGA, showing them the stuff these guys are saying, the stuff these guys are talking about, because these guys have nothing in common with your red hat-wearing Republican. They look down on those people, too.

Unfortunately, the only person making this point is someone I also despise politically, Steve Bannon. He has been telling people about this stuff — about transhumanism and the network state and all these weird ideas that they plan to impose on people. So, I think the bigger problem is that we haven't really had a discussion about any of this stuff because, largely, there's been a media blackout on it. I think editors think it's too weird or esoteric.

Now, it's being shoved in our face more and more with every passing month, and we're way past the point of being able to ignore it. I mean, I'm surprised The New Yorker covered this before The New York Times or The Washington Post. I was writing stuff last year that they're just getting around to now, and believe me, as happy as I am to be a freelance writer who found an important story, I shouldn't have been the guy talking about this last year. Last year was when the American people deserved to know about this stuff.

**I think we might be in a place where certain publications are trying not to seem weird and, in the process, perhaps not covering certain things. But Yarvin would claim — as a matter of fact, not would, he does — that the FDR presidency is the model for what America needs now, right? He talks about the amount of power that FDR concentrated. FDR, coming out of the Gilded Age, had a lot of power and made a lot of decisions that one would easily argue were important. Is that wrong?**

Well, he mischaracterizes FDR as a monarch or a dictator, which is not true because FDR was elected. FDR was beloved, and after FDR left, someone else took his place who was not a member of his family. After that, a few years later, someone from the opposite party was in charge. So, that's how the American government works.

But here's the clue for why Yarvin is obsessed with FDR. FDR was an emergency wartime president. He was president during the Great Depression and WWII, a time of great crisis. Because of that crisis, he was given more power to make things happen quickly in defense of the nation. And now we see what? Donald Trump trying to declare emergencies everywhere in order to get more power, without having to go through Congress, and without having to go through the usual checks and balances. So, I really think the key there is to understand the degree to which they see the use of emergency powers as the easiest way to expand the power of the executives.

I wrote a piece at [The Nerd Reich](#) about a startup here in California that is proposing that Donald Trump declare a national security emergency to allow them to build a little network state tech hub on the island of Alameda, on a former naval base where there happen to be endangered migratory bird habitats. Everywhere we look, even this ridiculous example today, we're seeing this desire for an emergency, which is a way to grab power. So, I think

that's the key to understanding Yarvin's slanderous obsession with FDR: the emergency powers he was granted.

**That idea of an emergency is, I think, a thread throughout law, right?**

**But emergencies are hard to define. The one recent example is the situation in LA around these protests. Were they mostly peaceful**

**protests? Or were they riots and insurrections? It just depends on whose social media feed you're looking at, or what news channel you happen to watch the most, and how that gets framed. So, an emergency, in a way, is in the eye of the beholder and in the context of where the beholder thinks the country's heading.**

Well, I guess to some degree, when you look at different feeds, you're seeing different things. But in California, when there's an emergency, the governor has the power to act. The big thing with LA was that the mayor and the governor both made it clear that they had the situation under control. The LAPD and the LA Sheriff's Department were handling the situation. If someone needs to call on the National Guard, that's the governor's job. The governor called in the National Guard back in 2020 when there were several days of destruction and violence in Sacramento. So, this was Trump seizing on the perception created by Fox News and Elon Musk's X to insert himself as the hero of an emergency that just didn't exist.

Yes, there were protests. Yes, a small portion of them had some property destruction and vandalism, but no one involved in the situation needed Donald Trump to interfere. He politicized the situation and inserted himself, and what he did actually was try to create a crisis because he knew that would create more of a backlash from people in California. More than anything right now, Donald Trump wants confrontation. So, like with Silicon Valley, they're always crying about a crisis that they're actually rushing to

create at the same time. AGI will kill us all, let's rush to create it. This is like a strange mentality, but only we can solve the emergency that we create is what seems to be the logic they apply there.

**Another thing I find interesting about the FDR argument that Yarvin makes is that FDR started social safety nets, big government expansion, massive economic stimulus, and labor rights support. He arguably laid the groundwork for the Great Society. That doesn't sound like what this crowd wants to repeat.**

No, they want to use the powers of a dictatorship to go in the opposite direction. A lot of this is about pulling out of the social contract, and a lot of these ideas can be traced back to a 1997 book called *The Sovereign Individual*, which predicted that in the 21st century, the coming information age would eliminate most jobs and that this would lead to violence and chaos and societal degradation as people no longer had money and could no longer afford anything. But a new technology called cybercurrency would allow a certain cognitive elite, people who can become wealthy off of this new information age, to rise in power and create their own little fortress societies where they would be safe as everything fell apart outside of the walls.

We have a bunch of CEOs telling us that AI is going to get rid of millions and millions of jobs. Well, what's going to happen to those people who can no longer work? What is their future? What is the future of their children? They say, "Well, AI will create other jobs." Well, what I'm hearing is that AI will just continuously improve and take away the jobs it creates. There's this thing that doesn't quite add up, and some of them talk about universal basic income and everyone getting a share of the profits. Well, that sounds a lot like Silicon Valley socialism.

What does freedom look like in Sam Altman's universal basic income universe? What does democracy look like when you don't get to eat unless someone like Elon Musk is approving of your existence? There's a question there that these guys hint at, but never answer. I think that's a place where you have to go in politics. We have to talk about what the future looks like if they're going to kill all jobs.

**So what's the solution then? Because short of regulating AI out of existence... If indeed we are heading toward [artificial general intelligence], and this super smart software that eliminates a bunch of jobs — and very often that isn't what ends up happening — it seems like we were having this same conversation 20 or 25 years ago about the internet.**

**In short, the internet did eliminate encyclopedia salesman jobs, but people are still necessary in the loop. I mean, as the US somehow tries to stop the development of this technology elsewhere, there are technology companies and smart people at these companies who are going to continue working on it.**

Well, I think you need a smart approach to regulation. Unfortunately, what we have now is an effort to ban all regulation because these guys have captured the White House with Trump. I think that it's hard to distinguish between the hype of [artificial general intelligence] and the very real harms of AI, which will come in a simpler form: the bias we already see coming out of these companies in their algorithms and the way it'll be used to exacerbate existing deficiencies in our society. I think the bigger problem is that we're learning that if you give people too much money, they go crazy.

Some of them go crazy and decide they want to end democracy and overthrow the United States of America and live in some dystopian science fiction fantasy world. When you have that much money, you don't just talk about it, you take steps to make it happen. How we deal with that problem is a very serious question that I don't think anybody in politics, Democrat or Republican, wants to answer because they're so dependent on these people for campaign contributions. We need someone like FDR to be a traitor to his class and rise up and find a way to put these billionaires back in their place.

**Well, to go back to the FDR idea here, what if this is part of the natural rhythm of the American climate? That when things go too extreme in one direction, you had the robber barons and all of that, the roaring '20s and their extremes, there needs to be or ends up being some consolidation of power on the other side that swings the pendulum back. Not that those ideas are right, not that everything FDR did was completely sustainable, or the way that he framed it.**

**But what if it was just necessary because of the excesses of the rich that built up on that side, and now what these guys and their crazy ideas represent is merely a pendulum swing in the other direction?**

I think that's plausible. I think studying these guys, one thing that I find frightening is that they have studied those periods of history. They understand what happened in the Gilded Age. Balaji Srinivasan name-checks Ida Tarbell as a major enemy. He's still mad about what she did to Standard Oil, and she's been dead since 1944. So, I think they're looking for a way to end the game. They have enough wealth accruing now where we have robber barons who are richer than maybe at any other point in history, all these guys with infinite money, and now they're creating their own forms of money.

So, I think they're looking for a way to end the game, and that's why they're teamed up with MAGA, because here's a president who's willing to sell to the highest bidder and who's completely testing the law, the constitution, and the limitations on executive power. I have no doubt that if Donald Trump tomorrow declared himself the permanent leader of the United States and said democracy is over, that we would have applause and silence from almost all of Silicon Valley.

**That's a different look than Silicon Valley elite executives displayed 25 years ago when you and I were pretty fresh out of school and heading over there. I mean, is this what we're seeing, the expansion of Atherton?**

**For people who aren't familiar with the Bay Area, Atherton is outside of Palo Alto. A lot of CEOs and venture capitalists live there, and it's the weirdest place in the Bay Area I've ever been because you go there and there are these streets and hedges that are 15 feet tall. You can barely see any houses. In some areas, you can't see any houses at all because that's the idea. You're not supposed to see anybody's house, but super-rich people live there. If they invite you and they open the gate behind the hedges, you can go in. They're sending their kids to private schools. They're in these houses that you can't see. They're living very wealthy lives, and you see mostly pickup trucks from people who are coming to service the properties on the streets.**

**That idea seems to have expanded in recent years, even beyond Atherton, where 25 years ago — and not to lionize this guy — but Steve Jobs was living in Palo Alto, sending his kids to public school, and local families trick-or-treated at his house. It's very different from the Atherton mindset that seems to have expanded lately.**

Definitely. I think we've had a series of crises in our society that have radicalized some of these guys, as has the tremendous expansion of wealth through things like crypto in recent years. Plus, we've had a social media hit. So, you had the financial crisis in 2008, which showed people that everything's much shakier than we thought. We had the rise of social media and a social media president, Donald Trump, who completely disrupted politics. We had the MeToo Movement, which led to a lot more public awareness and sensitivity around certain structures of oppression. That pissed off a lot of people who felt pretty powerful and rich and without problems before that.

Then we had the pandemic, which completely made us all work together for a while and created some divisions over things like vaccines and public health safety measures. So, I think we've lived through a period where our tech CEOs and billionaires no longer feel comfortable just being a part of the system and trying to find a way to work within it. They've decided that everything is ripe for disruption, including the United States of America, including liberal democracy, and that it is their destiny to overthrow it or change it and create a system that answers to them. I think that's what the problem is.

I do remember that 20 years ago, living in San Francisco, some people who had been there a while were really disdainful of the techies and saw them as a threat, as this thing that was going to bring bad ideas and change to the town. I thought they were exaggerating. I didn't think it was that bad. It turns out, actually, it is that bad.

**Well, interesting. Let's visit that for a moment because the national popular image of San Francisco is a place where needles are being passed out and homeless encampments are spreading throughout the city. There's little attention to the actual mechanics of day-to-day life.**

**At the same time, the way I've experienced San Francisco over the past 20-plus years is that there's been this enormous investment in office space and in the downtown to the exclusion of the livability of actual individuals' families. It was to the point where when the pandemic hit and companies shut down, we went to work from home, and San Francisco became a ghost town because there had been so much emphasis placed on office space versus people actually living there. What do you think is the truth of what San Francisco is now, what it has become, and who it's serving?**

Well, San Francisco is the best and most beautiful city in the United States. I mean, it's an amazing place. There are all kinds of things happening, and there are areas of town that are bad. If you didn't grow up in the United States, you may not know that there's always a bad part of town in this country because there are poor people. When you tend to put them all in one neighborhood — and I grew up in a poor neighborhood, so I know — but if you go to my hometown, Tulare, there's a nice part where people have swimming pools and big lawns. And there's the part I'm from, which is not a place you want to go hanging around at night. So, that's normal.

This is a few blocks in San Francisco where the homelessness and open drug addiction have gotten out of hand, and that's a problem that needs to be dealt with, hopefully in a rational, evidence-based way. But what's happened is that there's been this Fox News-driven slander campaign to make it seem like that's all of San Francisco, when you can walk three blocks from the epicenter of this zone and get like a \$20 Japanese-style cocktail, right? It's really the haves and the have-nots. It's a tale of two cities, and most of the city is expensive, beautiful, wonderful, glorious, full of culture and food, et cetera. So, that part of the story is very fictional, but people have been priced out. That's a story all across California and all across many parts of the nation.

Wages aren't keeping up in a way that allows people to continue to live in this country. A recent study showed that 60 percent of Americans have trouble making ends meet and affording the basics. That's the problem we've got to solve. So, these tech billionaires always want to scream about a few blocks in San Francisco where there's fentanyl addiction. Well, guess what's fueling the fentanyl trade more than anything? Crypto. So, let's ban crypto as a first step toward solving the drug crisis, but they don't want to do that.

So, they really are good at directing attention at a scapegoat and away from the core problem, which is that we have an increasing number of billionaires, an increasing number of people living in tents, and a society that is so vastly unequal that it is headed toward a collapse one way or another, but that'll just mean a reckoning. I think it's going to be a reckoning with the role that these billionaires play in our society and with the role that tech and Silicon Valley play in our society. Downtown San Francisco is empty because of Zoom, because you can work from home now. I worked in the financial district for 10 years, and that's not where you see homelessness and drug addiction. There are a few homeless people, but that's about a mile away.

The problem with downtown is that people can work from home now. So, all the restaurants that were there for years serving lunch are gone, and the offices are empty, and it's dead. But if you go to the neighborhoods where people are now working, where they live, everything's booming because that's where things have moved to. So, we've seen this migration out of office space. It turns out we didn't need it because technology disrupted it, and people would rather not go to the office every day. The stories make it seem like the reason downtown is empty is because of the homeless people, and that's a completely fabricated disinformation propaganda narrative.

Those are two separate problems within a few miles of each other, but the way they get conflated by many in Silicon Valley and by Fox, Newsmax, and by the president of the United States gives people a false impression of what's happening.

**So we might just be in this transition period, going back to this idea of climate versus weather, where the cities were designed for an 1980s or 1990s reality in how people go throughout their day, and also work, play, and live. But some of the fundamental mechanics of that have changed because technology and people are going to work, play, and live differently. That means we've got a bunch of infrastructure sitting in various places that just isn't as necessary as it used to be, and then you end up with problems when you've got setups like that.**

Definitely. For thousands and thousands of years, human beings have figured out a way to shelter themselves. It's amazing that we can't figure out a way to provide shelter for the people we have here. Part of the problem in downtown San Francisco is that it's not so easy to convert all of these office buildings into housing. So, it would be expensive to have to tear them down or convert them, or completely reconfigure them. There are some office buildings that are being reconfigured into housing, but of course, that's probably going to be housing not for poor people, but for wealthier people who can afford to live in a redone old office building.

I do think we're at a point where we have to figure out, with all the technologies we have and all of the future that we see right in our face, why can't we solve the basic old problems? Unfortunately, there's a political disconnect there where the people who say they want to solve these problems only want to solve them in a certain way. Then there's the political disagreement. For instance, there's this book, Abundance, that came out and

that everybody's fighting about all the time. Oh, sure, Abundance sounds great. It's a good word. We should have abundance. When you get down into details, though, there's no rational policy you can propose where everybody's just going to agree because it's rational. Politics is not based on rationality.

It's based on all of these other factors: emotion, identity, and morality. So, even if we had housing for everybody, someone would object because you have to work to get into the housing. Actually, here in San Francisco, there's been a movement to keep people from getting housing if they don't stop doing drugs first. Well, the evidence and the data show that you want to get people into housing and not create more barriers, and then try to get them off of the drugs. But some people have a moral block against allowing people to get something while they're doing drugs. It's completely unscientific. The data proves conclusively that it's wrong, but all these tech CEOs here are pro "you have to get the treatment or you don't get the housing."

**Well, if you couldn't get government contracts if you were on drugs, that would be interesting.**

[Laughs] Yeah, well, the rules only apply to some people. Drug tests are for the little people.

**Are we in a situation where technology and democracy are fundamentally at odds? Are we in a cotton gin moment in a way? Because with every new technology, somebody tries to frame it like this is the solution to inequality — the digital divide, we're going to solve that. We didn't solve the digital divide. As we saw during COVID, kids who had means and were home from school actually tended to do better in isolation. Kids who were in even really high-powered charter school-type programs like KIPP did far worse.**

**It debunked the argument that these charter school programs, like KIPP, are cherry-picking the most promising kids out of the inner city. And the reason why they do well is because they would've done well anyway, because a lot of those kids really had a lot of trouble when they were disconnected from that structured environment and from intense attention from teachers, academic preparedness, et cetera. But it's happening again now with AI.**

**So, I really wonder if we are in this march of technological progress, but if technology and democracy, fairness, and economic opportunity are fundamentally at odds. Is there any way to shift that equation that you see?**

Well, social justice and economic justice would be considered woke now by this new generation of CEOs, and they think they just defeated all of those ideas. Now, we can go into a meritocracy future where you only get things if you can compete at a very high level, according to rules created by these Silicon Valley guys. I think that a big part of the problem is who is creating this technology and who are they creating it for? I don't necessarily buy the hype on AGI and AI, but the CEOs are pushing this idea that they're about to massively transform and disrupt the world in a way that sounds like it's going to maybe harm the majority of people to benefit a small number of people.

Why is that the case? Why are they designing it in that way? Why aren't they trying to find ways to create technologies that can solve the problems we have, rather than create new, worse problems? I think a fundamental problem is that these technologies are now being designed by people in the private sector with nothing more than a profit motive. Whereas in the past, some of the biggest, most transformative technologies we have come out of government for the public good, for national security, for some other

incentive, to try to solve the problem in a different way. So, I don't know how you can fix that problem as long as we're going to let a handful of extremely wealthy megalomaniacs guide the progress.

**But you don't think that the mindset of this handful of people who you've highlighted as being part of the Nerd Reich is the dominant mindset in Silicon Valley? There seems to be a range. I talked to a lot of people in Silicon Valley, a lot of CEOs and founders, and very few of them seem to be strongly aligned with this libertarian objectivist group. Some are like, "Oh, this'll pass. I didn't like the Biden policies. So, maybe this is a bit better."**

**Some are actively against the direction that this administration, this government, is going, but hey, they have a business to run. So, they're trying to keep their heads down. Isn't there the idea that some of these people actually could do or try, or support something different?**

Well, it depends on who wins. Silence is complicity, and people sometimes get mad. They say, "Don't say all tech, don't say all Silicon Valley." Well, where are all the techies in Silicon Valley, the CEOs, speaking out against this stuff? Where are the people standing up and saying, "You know what? I'm going to put my money against this. This is morally wrong. This is repugnant. We should do it another way"? Silicon Valley, per capita, I think, has the highest collection of cowardly CEOs in the world. They all want to hide under a rock and be on whatever side wins. That's what I see. I don't see one really speaking out.

**That's a frequent criticism in this administration of the likes of Jeff Bezos, who owns The Washington Post, and that paper's slogan, "Democracy dies in darkness." Now, I wonder, is that a prophecy, or was**

**it a warning? Was it a prediction? He seems to have taken a different slant on trying not to be in direct opposition to the Trump administration, no?**

Well, definitely, he wants to keep all of his government contracts, and he's gutted an editorial board that would've been a big voice in a time like this for speaking as a conscience of the nation. He has some childish idea that he can just be for freedom and economic markets without those being political. I think Bezos is totally going for self-interest. Like I said, I think if Trump declared that democracy was over, you wouldn't hear a peep from The Washington Post or from Jeff Bezos. They just want to be on the side that's winning, to steal a phrase from Bob Dylan. That to me is the scariest part about all of it.

Growing up in this country, I grew up in a very conservative place. I think when I was really young, I had some Republican leanings just because of what I was surrounded by. It was a very patriotic town, and a lot of people in my family enlisted in the military for no particular reason. It was considered just a thing to do. You serve your country.

It's amazing to grow up and to realize, as I head toward 50, that so many people just don't believe in anything, don't believe in this country, and don't really care what happens to it as long as they get theirs. That is just not the way I ever thought it would be. That has been a bit of a surprise to me. If you can't have a little bit of courage when you have billions and billions of dollars, I think the value of that money is suspect. I think it's going to take Americans who are not billionaires to save this country, and then we're going to have a lot of questions for all these rich people who sat around just watching it burn.

**We've talked about the collapse or weakening of many institutions. You've worked for big media companies, for California politicians, and now you're independent. So, in a way, perhaps the disillusionment with institutions and their ability to execute on truth or move the needle, maybe you're living that out now? No?**

Well, I'd say it's more a situation where billionaires in technology have killed journalism jobs. I would've definitely been at a publication if there had been one. It was a hard struggle last year to find a way to make ends meet and still write the stories I wrote for The New Republic. I don't know if people know what freelance pays these days, but I wrote five major stories, and it got me about a month's worth of rent in San Francisco. So, you don't make your money off of writing. You write on the side, and you find other ways to survive. I think that we were talking earlier about technology taking jobs. Do you remember the San Jose Mercury News in 1998, compared to now?

**I do.**

So, there was a bit of a decimation. But I think the bigger problem is the economics of it, where any place you go — and I was at the San Francisco Examiner — it's just layoffs all the time. It gets a bit depressing, and then the rules get tighter and tighter. There's just constant panic and trying to remake whatever the publication is to meet some target that some new person has because the last person failed. I was actually going to leave journalism, but I found this story, and I felt like I had to tell this story. Maybe this is the last story I'll tell as a journalist. So, I did it.

But fortunately, there are positive parts of technology. It doesn't all have to be controlled by a handful of fascists. We deserve technology as well. We deserve technology that doesn't come with the threat of losing our freedom,

of losing our identity, of losing our way of life. Ironically, technology has created this system now where I can have direct subscribers and do my work and reach people on podcasts and on YouTube.

So, we're all in this soup. My argument is not that technology is bad. I am an early adopter of everything. I just got a new e-bike. It's that we don't have to live under the boot of these people because they're at some company that creates something. There should be more public ownership of some of these things as well.

**Unpack some of that because, as you said, you are not a Luddite. In fact, you are embracing lots of technology and how you're distributing this Nerd Reich message, this newsletter and podcast, and you're using some AI in how the message is formulated and distributed, right? Like the imagery. Tell me about that.**

Oh, well, I forbade that on the podcast. We're using Adobe now; I use Shutterstock. I prefer real human images. There was a moment early on when I used a bit of OpenAI's image generation. It was like a new toy, and I used it actually to depict the future that some of these guys want. Actually, Balaji Srinivasan had talked about this Gray Pride Parade, where all the techies would wear gray uniforms and march down Market Street in San Francisco with police and drones flying overhead. So, I literally plugged his phrase into OpenAI, into DALL-E, and it created this terrifying, horrific image that looked actually like Trump's parade over the weekend.

But the more I have had conversations with people and talked about this stuff, the more uncomfortable I've become with using those tools. I think right now we're seeing this phase of an AI art aesthetic that's going to look really bad in a few years, especially when you think about the amount of theft

and robbery taking place to create these little toys and the idea that it boils a swimming pool or something in order to generate it.

So, I have made it clear that I don't want AI in my images. So I use Shutterstock. I think most people who are looking for the words, anyway. Actually, I've got a Nerd Reich art project underway, and I'm going to work with a real artist on it, even though people are like, "Just use AI." I don't think we can get to a point where we just use AI as long as it's going to enrich these guys.

That's the same reason I'm not on Substack. I started on Substack, but a lot of my readers were like, "How can you be on Substack? Andreessen Horowitz is one of the main investors in this." At first, I was hesitant, and Substack made it really easy to start a newsletter and monetize it. But there are alternatives. There's a nonprofit I use now, Ghost, and in fact, it takes a smaller percentage of your pay. I've had bigger growth on it. It really does depend on your content. You're not going to become a big Substack writer with a crappy blog. If you're a good writer, you can take it elsewhere.

So, I think we all have to navigate these relationships, and there's no way to be perfect, just like we use fossil fuels. We eat products that might be harvested under unethical conditions, but we have to strive to be more conscious of our relationships with these technologies and to do better if we can.

**Sounds like farm-to-table technology. So, okay, there are boundaries around what you're willing to do. You axed out the AI stuff. That's like being like, "Okay, I'm not going to import that meat from that far away and burn all those fossil fuels." You're still podcasting. You're still using the internet, right? It's technology.**

**What are you finding about the feedback that you're getting? What's driving the growth and the engagement on the platforms where people are hearing your thesis and the guests with whom you're speaking?**

I think people have been looking for a way to make sense of what's happening. This has been a missing piece of the puzzle: "What's happening with Silicon Valley?" It's a rightward turn. It's mating with MAGA and these weird ideas that we see coming out, like the Freedom City, taking Greenland and giving it to Praxis, which is a company founded by or funded by Sam Altman, Peter Thiel, and Marc Andreessen. People wonder why all this is happening. No one's been telling a cohesive narrative in the mainstream press about why it's happening. That's very much been my focus.

Look, last year, I think to a lot of people this seemed like conspiratorial stuff, or like you said earlier, it seemed weird. Well, we live in weird times, and we've got some conspiratorial people on the scene. I think that the press is finally starting to catch up to what I was trying to say last year. If Kamala Harris had won, it would look like I had gone down a very strange rabbit hole, and it wouldn't have been clear why, because this stuff would've been pushed back a few years. I think it still would've been relevant, but it would've been pushed back.

But even I didn't expect it to accelerate this quickly. I didn't think it'd be Elon Musk in the White House doing Curtis Yarvin's "retire all government employees" plan. I didn't think that Trump would already be pushing to build these freedom cities and take Greenland for the purpose of doing that. This has gone much faster and much further than I expected so far.

Now we've got people like Coinbase CEO Brian Armstrong openly talking about Bitcoin replacing the dollar as a global reserve currency, which is

another thing I've been talking about for a couple of years that would have some dramatic effects on this country and its standing in the world. So, unfortunately, this stuff ended up being a lot more important than it should have been. I hope journalists at the big papers and publications with massive followings will start to tune in and tell people, because what I have found is that people really want to know.

Once you explain it to them, they understand it. They have the tools to understand what's happening, and the democracy of information is necessary for citizens to make the right decisions. I don't see why people are censoring an important part of this story. I spent my life as a journalist at establishment newspapers, working for establishment politicians. I'm a pretty solid evidence-based guy. I think that this generation of political editors at papers like The Washington Post and The New York Times should be known as the generation of failure for completely missing this story. The fact that they're racing to do it now proves the point.

**Well, let's close on a hopeful note then. Paint for me — and get out your greens and yellows perhaps — the picture of how America, how society, and maybe even how tech works its way out of this situation. You alluded earlier to the non-billionaires rising up and pursuing a different end. How might that happen? What does it take?**

Well, I think that this is going to take millions of people in the street on a regular basis. We have to get through the current crisis, and these tech oligarchs have to see that they're playing a very dangerous game by cozying up to Trump and facilitating his fantasies of an authoritarian transformation of this country. Over time, though, I think we have to reckon with the fact that these people have enough money to be an ongoing threat and to try this again. So, I think it's going to take an awareness of the role that billionaires

play in our society and a political movement to demand leaders who are willing to address that problem.

**What kind of leaders? During the pandemic, the Black Lives Matter Movement rose up, and there was this move toward... I'm not going to say exactly leaderless, but decentralized approaches to movements. I haven't tested this out, so poke holes in it, if you will.**

**But the Republican Party and the right have become more centralized in Donald Trump than at any time, I would argue, in our lifetimes. Even Republicans who don't agree with large portions of what he's said, many of them are falling in line, and it's led to this early ability of the Trump administration to make massive progress.**

**So, if you're painting a picture of how things might swing the other way, is decentralization the answer? Or does there need to be the rise of a different charismatic figure, dangerous as those might be, to help people believe?**

I don't think it has to be one charismatic figure. I think it has to be a movement that speaks to the real needs of people. Like I said earlier, 60 percent of Americans can't afford the basics. If the Democratic Party can't find a way to make use of that, well, then I guess it's lights out. You've got AOC and Bernie Sanders going around drawing tens of thousands of people in traditionally conservative areas. People are looking for leaders who speak to their basic core values and issues, and the Democratic Party just wants to play tag along with crypto. They want to be a lighter version of the Republican Party. I think that way lies doom.

I think especially with these younger people coming up today, they are not in the mood, especially after the next four years, for some half-baked, mealy-mouthed political party that tells them that the status quo is also the future. So, one way or another, we're going to get sold a vision of that future, and it's going to be this fascist tech dystopia, or it's going to be something that serves the majority of people and preserves the ideas of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. Again, if the Democratic Party can't find a way to message that, then someone else will come along and do it for them.

**Who?**

Oh, I don't know. I don't think the leader has yet appeared, but people like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders have. And Zohran Mamdani in New York seems to be tapping into something very powerful. If the Democrats aren't going to do it, then someone else will.

**All right. Gil Duran, the podcast and the newsletter are The Nerd Reich. Is the book also called The Nerd Reich?**

The Nerd Reich: Silicon Valley Fascism and the War on Global Democracy.

**Now we're early, but you're writing it probably right before we got on here and right after, in all kinds of moments. How far out should people look for this to perhaps appear? Well, definitely, but how far out should people look for it to appear on shelves?**

Oh, 2026, but if you want to keep up with the progress, it's [thenerdreich.com](https://thenerdreich.com) and it's free.

