

EASY CHAIR

Exit

By Hari Kunzru

In the mid-Nineties, I spent about eighteen months working as an editor for the British edition of a new magazine called *Wired*, which had been founded in San Francisco as a sort of house journal of the exploding Bay Area tech world. London at the time was fairly sure of itself culturally; this was a moment when you could affix “Brit” to things—BritArt and BritPop—and they would sound cool. But we didn’t have much in the way of BritCyberculture, which was what *Wired* was selling: a freewheeling future in which old problems like state repression and economic scarcity would be swept away by the internet.

Early in my tenure, I was sent to San Francisco for what was called, only half-jokingly, “an injection of *Wired* DNA.” I lounged in hot tubs, played frame drums on the beach, ingested strong psychedelics, went to parties, and met the kind of people *Wired* editors liked to refer to as “digerati”—people such as Stewart Brand, who had started the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Working at *Wired* felt like being part of a cult. There were the people who got it, who understood that we were about to be rap-

ported by the internet, and there were Luddites, who would be left behind in the ruins of the old world. In the San Francisco office, staffers went barefoot, the accounting department had a butoh troupe, and—what impressed me most—in the kitchen was a fridge full of Odwalla juices.

I bought into some of this. I had indisputably stumbled into the middle of a momentous technological and social shift, and it was fun to feel part of this late flowering of West Coast counterculture. As a writer in my mid-twenties, I was interviewing philosophers and government officials, touring Scandinavian chip fabrication plants, and trying out VR gear—yet I was also aware that my idea of a “digital revolution” wasn’t the one espoused by the magazine’s senior staff. While at *Wired*, I was also part of an editorial team producing an underground publication called *Mute*. Our slogan was “proud to be flesh,” and our contributors included artists, designers, programmers, theorists, and activists. It was grubbier, more European, and much more skeptical about the social impact of the inter-

net. Information may have wanted to be free, we thought, but so did people. Our feral ethos was best demonstrated by the production process. A deal had been struck with the printer that produced the *Financial Times*. They would use our publication to do test runs on rolls of the *FT*’s distinctive pink paper, for which we got a cheap rate. The resulting resemblance made for good times on the Tube, as the banker reading over your shoulder, expecting something about interest rates, found himself confronted with headlines like ANGEL, VIRUS: CYBERSPACE BREAKDOWN(S) or (my personal favorite) ALT.ZOMBIE.GOLF.THE.EARTH.

Occasionally my dissenting perspective showed through at *Wired*. I had been struck by the claim, made in another magazine, that only half of the people in the world had ever made a phone call. When *Wired*’s co-founder, Louis Rossetto, came to London for an editorial meeting, I spoke up to ask why, given the massive disparities in access to communication technology, we weren’t more focused on the digital haves-nots. At the time I didn’t know

much about my ultimate boss, except that he had a reputation as a visionary who didn't suffer fools gladly. I later found out that he had been a campus radical in the Sixties, though not the usual type. As a senior at Columbia, Rossetto had co-authored a 1971 *New York Times* piece titled THE NEW RIGHT CREDO—LIBERTARIANISM, a passionate polemic in favor of laissez-faire economics, the expansion of private property, and a minimal (or even non-existent) state, accompanied by pictures of a pantheon of heroes, including Ayn Rand and the science fiction writer Robert Heinlein. By the time he started *Wired*, two decades later, his libertarianism had curdled into an opposition to politics as such.

Rossetto patiently corrected me. There were no have-nots, he said. Only have-laters. In the world of *Wired*, distribution was a technical issue, a speed bump on a road being built by smart engineers. While superficially true (twenty-five years on, internet-enabled cell phones are ubiquitous in the developing world), his answer blithely reduced billions of people to passive consumers of a future he and his friends were bringing into being.

It was a testament to Rossetto's commitment to free expression that I didn't get fired for what I did next. At *Mute* we'd published a withering critique of the *Wired* worldview by two leftists, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron. "The Californian Ideology simultaneously reflects the disciplines of market economics and the freedoms of hippie artisanship," they wrote. "This bizarre hybrid is only made possible through a nearly universal belief in technological determinism." I emailed a copy of the essay to Rossetto and asked whether he'd care to respond. He did, in an email, which we happily printed in *Mute*. He described "The Californian Ideology" as

a seeming understanding of the Digital Revolution's crucial left-right fusion of free minds and free markets, followed by a totally out-to-lunch excursion into discussions of the role of the government, racism, and the ecology in California ... all of it betraying an atavistic attachment to statism, and an utterly dismal failure to comprehend the pos-

sibilities of a future radically different than the one we currently inhabit.

This future, Rossetto insisted, would be "democratic, meritocratic, decentralized, libertarian."

The political economist Albert O. Hirschman famously characterized the choice that is faced by people within declining institutions as being between "voice" and "exit." Either you speak up to change things, or you leave and look for something better. In its West Coast iteration, libertarianism had become bound up with the idea of exit. *Wired* staffers liked to joke that, as Californians, they were the descendants of people who, when they didn't like something, preferred to pack up and leave. The idea of Westward expansion had been translated, during the Cold War, into a desire for the "high frontier" of space. The Californian ideologists of the Nineties saw themselves as part of a third wave, in which the frontier had become as much temporal as physical. Rossetto once explained to me (possibly in the same meeting) that, as a resident of technologically lagging London, I was "literally" living two years in his Bay Area past.

Since World War II, there have been numerous libertarian efforts to found territories outside the global order—several of them initiated by a Lithuanian Holocaust survivor who became a millionaire by developing land in Nevada and selling gold and silver coins by mail order. Moses Olitzky—later Michael Oliver—so feared the rise of American totalitarianism that he devoted himself, from the Sixties onward, to the creation of a libertarian micronation beyond state control. After failing to establish his New Jerusalem on reefs which turned out to belong to Tonga, he tried the Bahamas and later Vanuatu. None of his projects came to fruition.

Oliver's schemes are detailed in *Adventure Capitalism*, Raymond B. Craib's fascinating history of what he terms libertarian exit. Oliver, in Craib's account, exploited opportunities created by decolonization, offering incentives to governments looking to

bootstrap their post-independence economies. He aspired to be a postwar version of Kiplingesque nineteenth-century adventurers—men who would be kings—like the Englishman James Brooke, who became the rajah of Sarawak in the 1840s. Oliver's failures demonstrated that, by the late twentieth century, there was little chance of finding an alternative to the global system. Galt's Gulch did not exist.

The final flourishing of what one might think of as spatial libertarianism was the Seasteading Institute, founded in 2008 by Patri Friedman, the grandson of Milton Friedman, the Chicago School economist who did more than anyone else to popularize the notion that the "freedom to choose" was foundational. The younger Friedman's plan, which garnered a lot of press, was to build private floating platforms where libertarians could exercise their sovereignty on the high seas. Despite the support of Peter Thiel, the project has encountered considerable technical difficulties, and these days the idea of living on a remote floating platform at the end of a long, fragile supply chain is a harder sell than it once was. There are no seasteads currently in operation.

In 2009, Thiel wrote an essay for the Cato Institute, the think tank founded by Charles Koch and the anarcho-capitalist theorist Murray N. Rothbard. "In our time," Thiel wrote, "the great task for libertarians is to find an escape from politics in all its forms—from the totalitarian and fundamentalist catastrophes to the unthinking demos that guides so-called 'social democracy.'"

Ironically, the digital frontier of the Nineties, which for a while was the great hope for exit, was enclosed by men like Thiel, who have created a landscape of corporate walled gardens that hasn't fulfilled the utopian potential of the early internet. The dreams of collaborative software building, universal privacy guaranteed by strong encryption, autonomy, chosen community, and an escape from scarcity—in short, the professed ideals of West Coast libertarianism—have taken a back seat to the imperative to track, extract, and monetize.

Instead of a global consciousness, we have a giant machine for selling ads. Since the internet is no longer the delirious, much-desired outside, the space of libertarian freedom must apparently be redefined yet again. Thiel's aristocratic characterization of exit as an escape—not from a place or from the state, but from *politics* and the “unthinking demos”—explains much of the chaos of today's public scene, not just in the United States, but around the world.

If freedom is to be found through an exit from politics, then it follows that the degradation of the political process in all its forms—the integrity of the voting system, standards in public life, trust in institutions, the peaceful transfer of power—is a worthy project. If Thiel, the elite Stanford technocrat, is funding disruptive populists in American elections, it's not necessarily because he believes in the wisdom of their policy prescriptions. They are the tribunes of the “unthinking demos.” If the masses want their Jesus and a few intellectuals to string up, it's no skin off Charles Koch's nose. Populism is useful to elite libertarians because applying centrifugal force to the political system creates exit opportunities. But for whom?

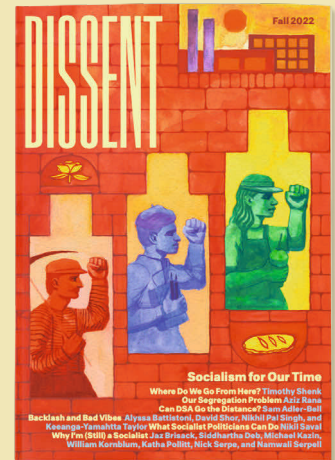
One of the most quietly influential books about libertarian political exit is *The Sovereign Individual*, which was written in 1997 by the antitax activist (and future Newsmax board member) James Dale Davidson with the editor William Rees-Mogg, the father of the Conservative minister and arch Brexiteer Jacob Rees-Mogg. Together the authors imagine a “cognitive elite” who will operate outside political control:

At the highest plateau of productivity, these Sovereign Individuals will compete and interact on terms that echo the relations among the gods in Greek myth. . . . The new Sovereign Individual will operate . . . in the same physical environment as the ordinary, subject citizen, but in a separate realm politically. Commanding vastly greater resources and beyond the reach of many forms of compulsion, the Sovereign Individual will redesign governments and reconfigure economies in the new millennium.

Fueled by the pandemic and the crypto boom, such exit schemes have multiplied. Bitcoiners look for an escape from financial oversight and transhumanists look to escape their bodies, while rich preppers design personal lifeboats to escape from social collapse. Some exit evangelists, such as the investor Balaji S. Srinivasan, are still touting the project of a new nation of “cloud first, land last.” Others are just making sure that in the great supermarket sweep of life, they get to fill their shopping carts before their neighbors do.

But the most successful form of elite exit has not been some utopian transcendence of the global order. It has been the pragmatic, negotiated creation of holes in its body. Quinn Slobodian's forthcoming book *Crack-Up Capitalism* describes the proliferation of areas in which regulation is suspended, from the experimental zones set up by the Chinese government to segregated South African Bantustans sold by anticommunist boosters in the apartheid era as sites of free-market experiment. There are start-up states like Singapore and tax havens like Liechtenstein. There are export processing zones, enterprise zones, and free ports. In 1986 there were 176 special economic zones around the world. By 2018 there were an estimated 5,400. If territorial exit is unachievable (unless you have your own Mars program), and political exit is always contested, then the next best thing is freedom from the financial rules that apply to ordinary citizens.

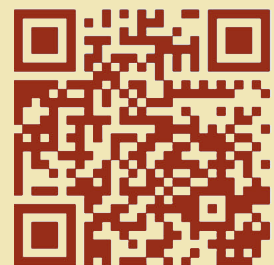
Exit is not a benign withdrawal. It imposes costs on those left behind, and the freedom of Exiteers substantially depends on the unfree labor of others. In 1623, wracked with sickness, the poet John Donne wrote that “No man is an island entire of itself . . . any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.” This interdependency is precisely what elite libertarianism finds intolerable. Its ultimate aim is to ensure that the sovereign individual never has to ask for whom the bell tolls, because, pace Donne, it will never toll for him. ■



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