JD Vance, Peter Thiel, and the Silicon Valley Digital Radical Right

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Among the most important developments in a season of political surprises has been the selection of JD Vance as Donald Trump's Vice-Presidential pick and the associated growing influence of the Silicon Valley radical "new Right." I hope you will agree that we will greatly benefit from turning our psychohistorical attention to just who Vance is, how he became what he is today, and what he represents and stands for.

Many of you, I am sure, first encountered Vance in reading his quasi-autobiography *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016). Indeed, it seemed to shed welcome light on the surprise victory in 2016 of an outsider political demagogue who claimed to champion the forgotten white working class. Subtitled "A Memoir of a Family and a Culture in Crisis," Vance sought to tell the story of his own personal rise from poverty to success, from very adverse family origins, and the stories of the people and culture from which he came. For "it is Greater Appalachia," he wrote, "where the fortunes of working class whites seems dimmest. From low mobility to poverty to divorce and drug addiction, my home is a hub of misery." (Vance, 2016, p. 4.)

Vance portrays in the most drastic terms an upbringing marked by significant trauma and family instability, domestic violence, drug addiction, privation, and disorientation. His "Hillbilly" grandparents sought refuge from Kentucky and economic opportunity in Middleton, Ohio, which at that time was still a flourishing industrial city where his grandfather became a well-paid steel worker, with Vance as a boy spending summers at his family's small Kentucky hometown. There were two pivotal figures in Vance's young life: his grandmother, Bonnie, called "Mamaw," and his mother, Bev. The first, whom he came to revere, was a tough, stern disciplinarian "pistol-parkin" Hillbilly woman with a penchant for violence, who took over raising JD when Bev (whom he brought to the recent Republican National Committee [RNC]) was unable to raise him. His mother was 18 years old when he was born, dropped out of high school, married her teenage boyfriend but divorced quickly thereafter, and went forward into adult life as an emotionally unstable alcoholic and drug addict (though now 14 years sober) who exposed Vance to a series of boyfriends brought into the home, none of whom stuck around very long.

With his grandfather being, according to Vance, a "violent drunk," Vance lacked a stable or identifiable father figure in his childhood. He recalled that he developed a tendency to adopt the characteristics (and style) of several of the men his mother temporarily attached to, with a "father-hunger" that even his grandmother commented on. Throughout the book, Vance emphasizes how powerful an influence his grandmother Mamaw was, providing the structure and discipline he needed to become a good student. Vance joined the Marine Corps after high school, becoming a public relations officer. After four years, that experience, along with his native intelligence, helped him graduate with honors from Ohio State University before he was accepted into Yale Law School on what could be called an "affirmative action" scholarship for impoverished White working-class students.

Vance's experience at Yale was one of feeling that he was an outsider, surrounded by peers with an elite background. He credits his Indian-American girlfriend

and now spouse, Usha, a fellow law student from a stable middle-class professional background, with being his "spirit guide," who also coached him on appropriate etiquette for formal dining. Interestingly, his grandmother Mamaw was politically a New Deal Democrat (the one trait he did not carry on). Crotchety and opinionated, what is most striking in his depiction of her was how violent she was, which he attributed to the Hatfield vs. McCoy hillbilly subculture that she embodied. In one incident, when his grandfather came home drunk one night despite her admonishment and collapsed on the sofa, she poured a flammable liquid on him and lit him afire. (He was saved from serious injury only by the quick action of a child family member.)

A dominant theme in *Hillbilly Elegy* is Vance's exposure in his early life to severe domestic trauma and his agonizing search for a personal identity. The two are obviously linked. In an insightful *New York Times* article this year, entitled "The Unnerving Changeability of JD Vance," Michelle Goldberg (2024) points out how Vance "described how consistently remaking his childhood self to fit the rotating case of figures his unsound mother brought into their lives….", including, for a time, becoming a "devoted convert" to the Pentecostal evangelical faith of this biological father. "'Devoted convert' is the role he inhabits most naturally. In 2016, Vance stated that Donald Trump might become 'America's Hitler.' Now, he's his running mate. A lot has been written trying to understand Vance's ideological journey, but at least part of the story seems to be hiding in plain sight in his book. In attaching himself to the most bellicose patriarch he can find, he is reenacting a childhood pattern." Goldberg, 2024). With his background of unprocessed trauma, Vance has not only sought a personal identity in available male figures in his life but, for emotional survival's sake, tended to substitute his powerful and controlling grandmother's style and sensibility for an authentic voice of his own.

Despite his traumatic background, Vance went on to earn a law degree from the prestigious Yale Law School, where he writes that he quickly realized that the legal profession was not for him. He relates that in his first year at Yale, he attended a lecture by the Silicon Valley venture billionaire Peter Thiel, which completely enthralled him. Vance struck up a friendly relationship with Thiel, which led him to move to San Francisco to join Thiel's investment circle and adopt his venture capitalist occupation as well as a significant part of his political philosophy. In 2017, he also adopted Thiel's brand of ultraconservative Catholicism.

Vance's conversion to the radical Right was gradual. In *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance provides a critique of conspiracy theory about how vulnerable his people are to quick fixes and demagoguery and shortly thereafter describes Trump as a kind of "heroin" for the declining White working class and a "would-be Hitler." By 2020, Vance had moved from being a humanistic, socially conservative centrist to an admirer and follower of Trump with radical right ideas—a quite remarkable flip or transition. While he explained this later as simply changing his mind, having seen what Trump did in office, this "conversion" invites psychohistorical illumination.

To further understand his shift, we need to focus on what the "new Vance" now believes. Some of his ideas, such as his notion expressed on *The Tucker Carlson Show* in 2021 that the U.S. is threatened by "cat ladies" who have no children and are therefore "sociopathic," have earned him notoriety and ridicule. However, it is important to understand the social philosophy that underlies this belief. In Vance's mental universe,

the family (Vance's preoccupation in *Hillbilly Elegy*) is the rock upon which all civilization is built, and connected to that rock is patriotism (rootedness and loyalty to country, place, and one's people). This undeniably resembles the "blood and soil" Volkisch nationalism of German national socialism, with a valorization of connection to land, family ties, and one's ethnicity and locality. (Vance rhapsodizes about how he wants both himself and his children to eventually be buried in the Jackson, Kentucky, family cemetery and plot.) While valuing the family is a traditional staple of conservatives, and to borrow a term from Jonathan Haidt, one of its central "taste buds" or core values, what is different in Vance's radical conservatism is its ethnocentrism and intense discomfort with immigration and the cultural diversity it brings. Vance's forceful repetition of Trump's libel against all Haitian immigrants is rooted in his fierce identification with and empathy for the Springfield, Ohio, White working class. Vance's dearth of empathy is expressed in disdain and contempt for the desperate immigrants seeking amnesty and fleeing crime and chaos in their homelands.

Vance's current worldview (which he effectively hid during the VP debate, where he posed as a reasonable or moderate conservative) is essentially apocalyptic. The U.S., in his eyes, is experiencing an existential crisis in which its very essence is threatened. Facing this, the harshest of tactics is justified, and for Vance, this includes proclaiming that "Kamala Harris can go to hell!!" in response to her criticism of Trump's photo-op at Arlington Cemetery. Vance's "attack dog" role in the campaign is very much in the spirit of what he describes (ambivalently but also positively) in his book as the Hatfield-McCoy Hillbilly subculture and ethos. This ethos was embodied in his revered grandmother "Mamaw," who once physically trashed a small drugstore with her husband for "insulting" JD as a boy, and who, he proudly notes, had over 30 guns stashed strategically around her house just before she died.

In Gabriel Winnant's words, "*Hillbilly Elegy* is fundamentally a book about unresolved trauma. In one of the books final moments, Vance gains some insight into his own behavior by reading up on 'Childhood adverse experiences,' or ACEs. Kids who endure violent and chaotic childhoods like his, he wrote, 'become hired-wired for conflict. And that wiring remains, even when there's no more conflict to be had.'" Winant, 2024, quoting Vance, p. 228.) We know, however, that if there is psychotherapy and an effective healing process, this need not be. But in *Hillbilly Elegy*, he expressed an intense disdain for therapy as something that was not for him.

Vance's career "identity crisis," in which, although graduating with a prestigious Yale Law School degree, he realized that he did not want to be an attorney. (He expressed disgust for the hollow materialism of most of his law school peers and the elite professional world in general. This was resolved when he heard a lecture by Peter Thiel and went on to follow his message.)

Born in 1967, Peter Anders Thiel is a successful Silicon Valley Billionaire venture capitalist known for his extreme libertarian and radical conservative views. Born in Germany, he was one year old when his very religious German parents emigrated to the U.S. He spent some years in South Africa before landing in California, where he attended Stanford University as a philosophy major. Extremely bright and a chess master, Theil went to Stanford Law School, after which he quickly, like Vance,

decided that the legal profession was not meant for him. He briefly worked as a hedge fund financier on Wall Street before settling in Silicon Valley near Stanford to embark on a very successful career as a digital entrepreneur and venture capitalist. Thiel co-founded PayPal with Elon Musk in 1998 before launching his own hedge fund and became Facebook's first major outside investor in 2004 and founder of Palantir, which specializes in software platforms for "big data" and intelligence services worldwide, with clients that have included the FBI, NSA, the CIA, and the government of Israel.

Known as the "contrarian" and the "Don of the Silicon Valley mafia," Thiel has a wide-ranging intellect and an ambition to use digital technology to shape the world in his image and according to his libertarian and ultra-conservative values. In addition to an adamant opposition to all governmental regulation (one of the purposes of PayPal was to establish a banking entity outside of normal banking regulations), Thiel has heavily invested in pursuing anti-aging technology ("I believe if we could enable people to live forever we should - this interest also involved advocating older people getting blood transfusions from younger people." (Chafkin, 2021, p. 325-326), the creation of "sea islands" (which be offshore independent libertarian utopian enclaves), space colonization (including Space X), and animus against universities and higher education that manifested in his setting up a "Thiel foundation" to recruit bright 18-year-olds and persuade them to skip starting college in order to join him to devote themselves to creating capitalist start-ups.

Thiel's conservatism and activism on its behalf began when he was an undergraduate at Stanford when, as "the contrarian," he helped found a student newspaper that protested the university's emphasis on diversity and equality. He co-wrote a book entitled *The Diversity Trap* (Peter Sacks and David Sacks, 1998), rejecting Stanford's efforts to introduce diversity into the curriculum and defending absolute free speech on campus. Although Thiel is gay, as a college activist, he defended egregious homophobic speech on campus that the university sought to curtail. In recent years, he has donated large sums to varied conservative causes and candidates, which included Trump in 2016 and JD Vance in 2022.

In the ten years prior to his speech supporting Trump at the 2016 RNC, Thiel supplemented his venture capitalist investing with an avid pursuit of his intellectual interests, especially the goal of expanding his youthful libertarianism (which, of course, had originally been inspired by a reading of Ayn Rand) and delving into new ideas on the radical Right, especially those percolating on the "dark web" of the internet and the so-called "Alt-Right." During the Obama years, Thiel funded anti-immigration groups, supported the idea of setting up libertarian enclaves outside of the jurisdiction of the nation-state, and supported the candidacy of the libertarian reactionary Ron Paul. In 2011, he wrote, "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible," arguing that "The 1920s was the last decade in American history in which one could be genuinely optimistic about policies. Since the 1920's, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women - two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians - have rendered the notion of a capitalist democracy an oxymoron." (quoted In Chafkin, 2021, p. 140).

Thiel's anti-democratic leanings and suspicions of the female electorate were encouraged by his admiration for the ideas of the heterodox political theorist Curtis Yarvin. Yarvin is a college dropout with an intense animus against universities and

the left. He left the academic world to pursue start-up venture entrepreneurship, the structure of which, top-down and, he said, necessarily tyrannical, was the model in his writings for re-engineering America into becoming an envisioned non-democratic monarchical technocracy. Following Yarvin, Thiel came to believe that climate science was a hoax, that genetic differences result in some groups being "more suited to mastery." (Chafkin, 2021, p. 175). He bewailed the idea of any democratic or stockholder accountability for corporate executives. "Start-ups and founders," Thiel wrote, "lean toward the dictatorial side," which he pointed out is good. (Chafkin, 2021, p. 176.)

Thiel's mixture of Ayn Rand objectivism, combined with a cultural pessimism that accuses Western liberal elites of stalling technological progress, and a get-rich secular prosperity gospel contained in articles and his best-selling book *Zero to One* (Thiel, 2014), captured the imagination of many ambitious but alienated young men. "Across the United States and beyond, teenagers schemed to get close to Thiel," his biographer Max Chafkin (2021) observes. "They responded to and amplified the blog posts that his surrogates published. They stalked his inner circle on Twitter and adopted his own language as their own. A young army of Thiel acolytes - most of whom want to start companies and get rich, ideally with Thiel's money - started talking like techno-utopians or contrarians" (Chafkin, 2021, p. 174).

One of these acolytes, fleeing from law school and Wall Street establishment high finance, was, of course, JD Vance. Based on his email friendship with Thiel, Vance accepted his invitation to move to San Francisco and join the Thiel venture capitalist coterie. He was then provided the financial support and connections by Thiel to launch his career, first as a venture capitalist and, eight years later, as a politician, to the tune of a $15 million contribution to Vance's campaign to become a Trump-approved Ohio Senator. It was Peter Thiel, with his connections to Steve Bannon and Trump, who arranged a meeting between Vance and Trump in 2021 to bring about a kind of rapprochement and led Vance to move from atheism to a conservative Catholicism (such as that of Patrick Daneen and the current Supreme Court majority), which has played such a strong role in the contemporary radical Right and ultra-conservative movement.

What are the psychohistorical themes implicit in the biography of Peter Thiel? He is reported by someone who knew him in high school as having been bullied for being "different." Chafkin (2021), after interviewing a number of Thiel's Stanford class and dorm mates, describes Theil as both a loner and a contrarian (someone who delights in being oppositional and a heretic) and socially awkward with an anti-social streak. In one uncharitable assessment, he is described by someone who knew him as impressively intelligent but stand-offish and by one of his dorm mates as "a strange, strange boy. (Chafkin, 2021, pp. 26-27) concludes his biography with a nod to Thiel's impressive success and far-reaching influence but writes: "And yet it is a legacy that feels a little bit shallow. Thiel has disseminated his reactionary ideas and made great sums of money, but he may be forever marooned in his own contrarianism - an ideology that is inherently isolating, after all….Thiel tends to treat interpersonal relationships in

explicitly transactional terms…treating people well is not an end in itself but something one does in the expectation of 'returns'….As far as I could gather in my reporting for this book, Chafkin concludes, "Thiel's life has been full of important relationships, but few that seem to transcend money or power. Contrary to his own advice, he has built a life in which success, as he defines it, depends on a willingness - or really a need -to shed ties and go it alone" (Chafkin, 2021, p.336)

To summarize and preview what I intend to be a more far-reaching upcoming analysis that will also encompass Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg, Vance, with his personality of unresolved trauma, now propelled by the populist MAGA movement, and Thiel, with his, let's call it not weird, but odd quest for libertarian utopia and an untrammeled technocracy, represent a "new right" in America that aspires to radically transform our nation. The technology and social media culture that had its birth in Silicon Valley has now provided the framework to facilitate this intended overthrow of democracy and establishment of a new authoritarian order, spearheaded by a wealthy elite and leaders who project their personal unprocessed trauma and personality quirks onto our public sphere. Let us hope that November 5th proves that our republic is not too fragile to withstand this grab for power.

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