

Carlsbad 1819

Like another Chouannerie

Mencius Moldbug, 10 years later: a critical retrospective

April 22, 2017 by Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur

[Also on Thermidor. (<http://thermidormag.com/mencius-moldbug-10-years-on-a-critical-retrospective/>)]

Who would have thought that some kid, a civil service brat and the grandson of dues-paying members of the CPUSA, who came of age on Usenet discussing SunOS Unix login semantics and apparently submitting text files for cDc's ezine (<http://www.textfiles.com/groups/CDC/cDc-0234.txt>) [who are somehow still kicking around], would become an infamous blogger widely credited as the one who kickstarted a tendency in political thought called "neoreaction"?

April 22nd, 2007 was Moldbug's debut on 2Blowhards.com, publishing his formalist manifesto, to be republished as the first article on Unqualified Reservations a day later. Having ostensibly secured himself a reasonable amount of discretionary income in the dot-com boom, he took a sabbatical to read some books, old and new.

The product of UR was a series of lengthy blog posts with long-winded digressions, liberal use of quotations and extended commentaries on books written before 1922 offering perspectives that are unsettling to children of (very) late modernity. Between this were frequent spats with other bloggers (something Moldbug would come back to do again after Scott Aaronson urged action against Trump's Executive Order 13769). See, e.g., his exchanges with Liberal Biorealist: [1]

(<https://liberalbiorealism.wordpress.com/2009/12/01/the-human-disposition-to-help/>), [2]

(<https://liberalbiorealism.wordpress.com/2009/12/13/biology-and-justice-first-cut/>).

Summary of his thought

Frequently misinterpreted as a monarchist, he actually regarded it as a subpar form of governance (https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2009/01/gentle-introduction-to-unqualified_29.html):

The common incidence of irresponsible kings, for purely biological reasons, is one of the main reasons cited for the demise of the European monarchical system, which of course created the great Continental nation-states now plainly going to the dogs. I think this problem may be slightly overstated (the main reason I would cite starts with “E” and ends with “land”), but it is nonetheless a problem.

An easy way to see this is to see the royal family as a family business, that business being the State. A sovereign state has no law above it to govern its affairs, and exists solely as a function of its own ability to defend itself. In all other respects it is exactly the same as any other corporate enterprise. For example, states and private corporations can, should, and usually do use the same accounting conventions, HR procedures, management structures, etc, etc. If sovereignty were not boolean, the difference between a real-estate developer and a state would be a difference of degree.

Unfortunately, the monarchies of Europe were already in decline when the most important organizational invention of the last millennium, the joint-stock corporation, was born. (And, of course, it was born in England, which had already done in its own rightful king and was soon to do away with everyone else’s.) Therefore, no royalist intellectuals that I am aware of ever proposed converting the old family businesses into what might be called **joint-stock republics**.

These “joint-stock republics” are the subject of neocameralism, his proposed solution to the problem of governing hominids. Neocameralism is just as much of a thought experiment as a serious proposal. The idea is to think of a state actor in completely propertarian terms, with no distinction between a public or private legislator, and as maintaining perfect internal security. As Nick Szabo notes in “[Corporate Origins of the United States](https://unenumerated.blogspot.com/2006/03/corporate-origins-of-united-states.html) (<https://unenumerated.blogspot.com/2006/03/corporate-origins-of-united-states.html>)”: “Abbeys, monasteries and dioceses were ecclesiastical corporations; boroughs and cities were municipal corporations, and a wide variety of other corporations existed including merchant and trade guilds, universities, and hospitals. Royal law did not make a strong distinction between these different kinds of corporations as our law makes today between, for example, commercial corporations and municipal corporations. They were all “corporations and bodies politick” whose charters used the same basic form and language and which often were granted various degrees of judicial and police powers as property rights appurtenant to or held by the corporation.”

Moldbug thus drew a distinction between “primary property,” the inalienable allod that a state claims as its territory and that has no higher enforceable law, as opposed to “secondary property,” the various private estates operating under the laws and customs of the primary property-holder.

Using a twist on the Anglo-American joint-stock corporate governance model, a neocameral patch is to be governed by a Delegate (surrogate for a CEO) in an absolute fashion, but who is elected and ultimately constrained by proprietary shareholders. The state is essentially a real estate venture writ large and earns profits by maximizing the capital value of its lands, in terms of cash flows discounted by the prevailing rate of interest. A fixed exchange rate for currency (particularly a commodity standard) is assumed as given in order to avoid accounting issues with fiat currency where everything essentially becomes equity. Ethical responsibility is to be replaced by financial responsibility.

Related to this is the idea of formalism, an approach to conflict resolution and political thinking that eschews speculative, metaphysical and historical judgments in favor of drawing boundaries regarding ownership based on *de facto* circumstances. Is with no oughts taken to its conclusion.

The combination of formalism and neocameralism entails patchwork, a geopolitical order governed by sovereign corporations managing their patches of land based on Generally Accepted Accounting Principles, with residents having no voice in the sense of political representation, but only the right to exit and whatever privileges of residency are in the covenant that one signs with the sovcorp.

All of this rests on a conception of sovereignty that is Bodinian, and we shall revisit this implication later.

Besides these atoms, however, Moldbug also explored the question of slavery quite frankly, as in “Why Carlyle Matters” (<http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2009/07/why-carlyle-matters.html>) and “The Dire Problem and the Virtual Option” (<http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2009/11/dire-problem-and-virtual-option.html>). Influenced by the thought of George Fitzhugh, Moldbug was also motivated by the question of dealing with criminals, delinquents and dependents in a sovereign patch. Since not all people are capable of self-management or dealing with the burdens of liberty, it appears that a system of patronage becomes necessary, with patrons holding authority similar to that in the Roman principle of *patria potestas*. This is preferable to turning the state into a disburser of charity, as in social democracy. “Power and responsibility are the same thing.” (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/06/mystery-of-gray-government.html>).

The behavior of U.S. foreign policy is likened to that of an “arsonist of the world, as well as the fireman.” (<http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2008/09/america-vampire-of-world-part-2.html>). Rather than Moldbug saying that various regime changes and foreign aid web entanglements performed by the United States are wrong or immoral, his formalism actually gets him to say that they are often perfectly legitimate by the standards of classical international law (Grotius, Puffendorff, Vattel, etc.) Rather, the issue is that the U.S. sees itself as a democratic universalist public charity, leading to the paradoxical situation whereby the U.S. is an empire, yet refuses to actually behave like one. It is too squeamish to actually colonize anyone directly and subject it to a seigneurial regime. As a result, U.S. foreign policy is interpreted as a civil war by proxy between realists and Wilsonian idealists in the state establishment, the latter associated with the State Department, the former with the DoD. The recommendation then is either for the U.S. to start taking empire seriously, or to embrace armed neutrality in its fullest. From this perspective of hardened Realpolitik, he laughs openly at the delusion that governing a foreign country requires “winning hearts and minds,” and quotes Victorian colonial administrator Lord Cromer on setting up a competent colonial regime. (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2008/09/how-to-occupy-and-govern-foreign.html>).

He analyzed U.S. domestic policy in terms of castes (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/05/castes-of-united-states.html>). His original and enduring taxonomy is the BDH-OV system. Brahmins are the intellectual class where status is defined by scholarly achievement or civic participation, thus including journalists, think think analysts, university professors and others. The Dalits are the dysfunctional criminal and welfarist classes. The Helots are the blue-collar immigrant class, whose offspring generally end up as Dalits. The Optimates are the dying remnants of the Gilded Age. The Vaisyas are the working class and all the rest, including the “Middle American Radicals” of Sam Francis. BDH roughly corresponds to “blue state” and OV roughly to “red state”.

He later simplified it to exclude Halits and Optimates, creating a new tripartite structure (after H.G. Wells) of Eloi, Morlocks and Proles (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2008/08/sarah-palin-proletarian-candidate.html>) corresponding to the Brahmin elites, the dysfunctional criminal class and the working class, respectively.

An interesting, though chilling prediction that Moldbug makes regarding the inter-caste conflict is that the decline of “responsible” broadcast and print media and its steady replacement with social and alternative media will potentially lead to the implicit civil warfare behind democracy turning explicit (https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/05/bdh-ov-conflict_07.html):

In my opinion this euphemistic approach to what pretends to be a conflict of ideas and ideals, but is in fact an ordinary and rather tawdry case of communal violence, is inseparable from the disaster of democracy. As Clausewitz observed, war and politics are a continuum. Representative democracy is a limited civil war in which the armies show up, get counted, but don’t actually fight. The BDH and OV factions refrain – mostly – from inciting or participating in outright warfare, for one reason: it is not in either’s interest. If this ever changes, they’ll be at each others’ throats like Hutus and Tutsis.

Democracy, like all conventions of limited war, is fragile. It’s hard to establish and easy to destroy. One of my main concerns is that I think the principal check that keeps the US from degenerating into actual violence is the 75-year-old informational dominance of “responsible” broadcast and newspaper journalism. This system is dying. It is being replaced by people like Amanda Marcotte and Michelle Malkin. And their followers, if not them personally, seem to have enough pure, 24-karat hate stored up for ten or fifteen really juicy civil wars.

Although it is too early to make a call, the ever more frequent recent debacles involving university speaker disruptions and antifa violence seem to be a foreboding in that general direction.

Progressivism is described as a “mystery cult of power.” Unlike most ruling classes in history which were quite conscious of their position in society, Moldbug argues that the uniqueness of progressivism lies in the systematic self-deception of its followers that it is actually the underdog fighting against reactionary forces that are allegedly in real power. Indeed, this delusion is the key driver that gives progressivism the appearance of a well-oiled machine that runs as if it were either Divine Providence or a perfectly coordinated conspiracy. This self-organizing distributed march of progress is made possible by the fact that it entices status-seeking ambitious youths into serving under its institutions, believing themselves to really be independent freethinkers trying to improve the world.

Moldbug traces the origins of progressivism to the English Dissenters (“the Puritan thesis”), a hypothesis which has attracted quite a lot of dispute. One must admit that Moldbug was rather slippery and general in trying to justify his thesis. However, one of his intellectual heroes, Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, masterfully argued the same in his book *Leftism Revisited*. Very briefly: there runs a long line of medieval antinomian and proto-communist heresies from Arnold of Brescia and the Brethren of the Free Spirit right up to heterodox Dominican friars like Tommaso Campanella (who quite rightfully got into trouble with the Inquisition), whose utopian novel *The City of the Sun* [1602] advocated a common ownership of all goods and even the destruction of matrimony and parenthood in favor of holding wives and children as common property as well. The Puritans were part of this lineage, and their sense of self-righteousness is quite visible in episodes like the Boston revolt of 1689. Their heredity and cultural makeup have then went on to influence American society on a fundamental level and to provide the groundwork for American progressivism.

The progressives are constantly engaged in the “Brown Scare (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2013/09/technology-communism-and-brown-scare.html>),” an ongoing hunt for fascists under the bed that makes the much more famous Red Scare seem quite trivial in comparison indeed. Given that everyone on the right is quite familiar with this phenomenon, it is more interesting to outline a Moldbug thesis that is popular but quite underappreciated: *America is a communist country.* (AIACC)

Yet again, AIACC is another thesis that Moldbug could have defended more strongly. He points out Edward Bellamy's national socialist (in the literal sense) movement and the various utopian communes in 19th-century America. Much more interesting, however, is the communist intellectual and party scene that reached its peak at the same time as FDR's New Deal coup, in the 1930s, and Moldbug does allude to this in his discussion of Freda Utey. The American Marxist intellectual George Novack provides an overview along with a reading list of various memoirs, published in 1967. (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/novack/works/1967/sep/x01.htm>). A pertinent example is the case of Partisan Review (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partisan_Review), a magazine that began as a CPUSA front publication, only to drift into Trotskyism and the anti-Stalinist left, before finally settling on a synthesis of social democracy and American civic nationalism. The latter is, of course, what we call "neoconservatism."

Not only is the kingdom of the progressives not of this world, they have a typically gnostic revulsion against the constraints of material reality. Thus, again unlike most other ruling classes, the progressives dislike the customs and traditions of their country on a visceral level. But they do so for a specific reason: they do not conform *enough* to the essence that they envision, even if they are on the "right track". This is the secret of anti-Americanism (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/08/secret-of-anti-americanism.html>), one of the most fashionable creeds in upper circles. It is really ultra-Americanism. Quote: "When Europeans express anti-American sentiments, in my opinion, they are actually acting as loyal servants of the America that conquered them six decades ago. Of course, Europe was invaded by tanks, airplanes and infantry – not diplomats, educators and aid workers. But the America that won World War II was a one-party state that had no place for the Right, and it recreated Europe in its own image. The cold war between State and Defense, eggheads and jocks, blue-state and red-state, broke out only after the shooting had stopped."

This leads us to the Cathedral, by far his most famous idea. Originally it was called the "iron polygon" and defined thusly (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/05/iron-polygon-power-in-united-states.html>):

The Polygon might be defined as the "extended civil service." It consists not of those who hold actual formal GS rank, but those whose position demands a sense of civic responsibility – real or fake. The major vertices of the Polygon, by my count, are the press, the universities, the judiciary, the Fed and the banks, the "Hill" (congressional staff), the civil service proper, the NGOs and transnationals, the military, the Beltway bandits (defense and other contractors), and corporate holders of official monopolies (such as "intellectual property").

Eventually this concept was streamlined into primarily involving just the press, the universities and the NGOs, becoming "the Cathedral". Unlike more conspiratorial ideas of a deep state, it is, per his analysis of progressivism, a spontaneously ordered process with no hierarchical command or even any real coherence, but that nonetheless manages to maintain a fluid direction. Of journalism: "A "journalist" is an *official writer*. A *member of the union of writers*. If he writes for the Times, he may even be a member of the *central committee of the union of writers*. In our democratic society, the official press is entrusted with the *important social responsibility of informing the public*. Therefore, not just any poor schmuck can tell us what George W. Bush said today. No, it takes a 'journalist.'"

A Cathedralized government is thus a "progressive atheocracy (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2008/06/ol9-how-to-uninstall-cathedral.html>)": "There is no nation of autodidact philosophers. Call them priests, preachers, professors, bishops, teachers, commissars or journalists – the botmasters will rule. The only way to escape the domination of canting, moralizing apparatchiks is to abandon the principle of *vox populi, vox dei*, and return to a system in which

government is immune to the mental fluctuations of the masses. A secure, responsible and effective government may listen to its residents, but it has no reason to either obey or indoctrinate them. In turn, their minds are not jammed by the gaseous emanations of those who would seize power by mastering the mob. So if you manage the Herculean task of separating Cathedral and state, but leave both intact, you have no reason to think that the same [social] networks will not just form over again. In fact, you have every reason to believe that they will."

This has an implication that populist revolts will be generally ineffective. An attempted usurper who tries to play by the rules will be crushed by the social networks and information organs within the state. This warning seems ever more relevant with the recent Trump-Syria fiasco, and Trump's 24 hours of repudiating key aspects of his populism

(<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/paloma/daily-202/2017/04/13/daily-202-trump-s-lurch-toward-corporatism-globalism-shows-why-bannon-s-marginalization-matters/58ef11ebe9b69b3a72331e7d/>). Many highly intelligent people suspended disbelief and assumed that this time, the swamp could be drained. Yet the swamp's immune response remains hyperactive. *Especially* ineffective will be right-wing terrorism (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2011/07/right-wing-terrorism-as-folk-activism.html>), an action that only reinforces the progressive delusion of reactionary fascists ready to seize power at the right moment. Effective terrorism is a Mutt-and-Jeff act, where Jeff is an interested third party ready to make concessions or justify the terror act as a legitimate grievance. In an age where all remnants of an old European aristocracy have been permanently liquidated, Jeff only cooperates with those in line with the March of Progress.

A corollary of the Cathedral is Moldbug's creative inversion of the democratic peace theory: the permanent civil service peace theory. Liberal democracies appear relatively stable because they are not really democratic at all in the same way that Jacksonian America once was with the spoils system, ethnic political machines and paramilitary organizations marching on the streets (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wide_Awakes).

However, this type of civil service oligarchy is nevertheless the worst form of anti-democratic government, because (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/10/how-dawkins-got-pwned-part-4.html>): "The post-democratic civil-service state, while not utterly disastrous, is not the end of history. It has two problems. One, the size and complexity of its regulatory system tends to increase without bound, resulting in economic stagnation and general apathy. Two, more critically, it can neither abolish democratic politics formally, nor defend itself against changes in information flow that may destabilize public opinion. Notably, the rise of the Internet disrupts the feedback loop between public education and political power, allowing noncanonical ideas to flourish. If these ideas are both rationally compelling and politically delegitimizing, the state is threatened." Therefore, even if we don't get civil war after the inevitable downfall of "responsible journalism," the Brezhnevite sclerosis, infrastructural decay, social alienation and crime are bad enough.

Elaborating on this state of affairs, one of Moldbug's best political satires was his essay on "rotary management," (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/08/rotary-management-next-big-thing.html>) a thought experiment where a for-profit company is run like a parliamentary democracy.

Criticisms

That, then, covers the main aspects and positive sides of Moldbug's thought. But now it is time to point out his many shortcomings.

All of them ultimately flow from three things: 1) his "reservationist epistemology" (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/08/reservationist-epistemology.html>), which denies a place for sources of knowledge outside of "irreducible and untranscendable reason," 2) his Bodinian (and ultimately Roman) conception of sovereignty, and 3) his Machiavellianism and frequent resort to *raison d'état*.

Neocameralism has a paradox in its formulation. Moldbug takes sovereignty as absolute and not beholden to a higher authority, yet he trusts that a neocameral state will choose to remain financially responsible. He openly admits reservations, but later writes them off: "For simplicity, our realm will do its books in gold. The spectacle of a sovereign corporation that maintains accounts in its own scrip is a fascinating one, at least from a financial perspective, and we cannot write it off quite so casually as yet another 20th-century monstrosity. It is not impossible that fiat currency can be made to turn a buck. It is unlikely that the proprietors will want their dividends in it, however."

In fact, with scrip functioning as a way of being able to theoretically indefinitely expand one's assets and thus to make one's liabilities serviceable almost on the fly, it becomes a very tempting finance strategy. Particularly for larger patches or patches with more capital-intensive economies where residents are allowed to be shareholders. As long as NGDP growth is steady enough to mask or swallow public debt, legal tender laws are in effect and tax payments are mandated to be in scrip, one can comfortably play such an accounting game for extended periods of time. Even better, one can maintain some sort of nominal pretense of a commodity standard as an external standard of value, but employ old tricks that the Bank of England famously played, such as suspending convertibility of notes at inopportune times. This can be expected to occur unless the quantity of patches is great enough to approach perfect competition, an unlikely event as patches could well benefit from consolidation for anything from customs unions to exploiting scale economies.

The essential question is why would an absolute power remain financially responsible, when its position makes it safe to cheat. Moldbug actually goes in to the possible failure cases in "Neocameralism and the escalator of massarchy," (<https://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/12/neocameralism-and-escalator-of.html>), and some of them appear likely.

Although Moldbug had many literary influences, one book that seemed to be particularly valuable to him was James Burnham's *The Machiavellians*, a survey of the Italian elitist school of sociology in the early 20th century.

Unlike other Trotskyists who jumped to the right (relatively speaking, anyway), Burnham never had any pretensions of democratic universalism. Nevertheless, a Machiavellian like him proved to be a highly valuable ideologue for the foreign policy agenda of the National Review. Quoting from Kevin J. Smant's biography of Burnham (pp.67-68) about the 1950s: "He made specific suggestions infrequently, but typical were ideas put forward in late 1957. A policy of 'Balkan politics and paramilitary action' would detach Albania from the Soviet sphere [Ed.'s note: Hoxha would later split on his own initiative after he deemed the Khrushchev thaw counterrevolutionary], with Burnham arguing that Albania was the Soviets' least defensible satellite, and thus vulnerable to a U.S.-inspired internal coup backed up with force. Secondly, the U.S. could demand, with a full propaganda offensive, free elections throughout Korea, as a basis for reunification. This assumed that a pro-Western candidate would win, and that at the least Soviet resistance to elections would give the U.S. a clear propaganda victory. Another Burnham proposal urged the formation of military units from eastern European exiles. The units could be

integrated into NATO and used in insurgency warfare against Communist guerrillas in the third world; at the least they would be a morale booster for those still trapped in eastern Europe.” Devious stuff. The latter proposal comes close to being Operation Gladio.

One of the best overviews of Machiavellist doctrines remains that of the famous German historian Friedrich Meinecke. Of Machiavelli himself, he writes that (<https://archive.org/stream/machiavellismdoc00mein#page/30/mode/2up>). “he did not by any means absorb the whole of the Renaissance movement. He did not share its religious needs, or its urge towards speculative philosophy; and, although unconsciously steeped and bathed in its aesthetic spirit, he still did not value its artistic attempts particularly highly. His passionate interest was the State, the analysis and computation of its different forms, functions and conditions for existence; and thus it was that the specifically rational, empirical and calculating element in Italian Renaissance culture reached its peak in him.” Moreover, he subscribed to the humanistic vision that medieval Christendom represented the Dark Ages: “In spite of his outward respect for the Church and for Christianity (frequently mingled with irony and criticism), and in spite of the undeniable influence which the Christian view had on him, Machiavelli was at heart a heathen who levelled at Christianity the familiar and serious reproach (Discourses on Livy II, 2) of having made men humble, unmanly and feeble. With a romantic longing he gazed towards the strength, grandeur and beauty of life in antiquity, and towards the ideals of its *mondana gloria*.”

Eric Voegelin also pointed out that the conquests of Timur and particularly his capture of the Ottoman sultan Bayezid I during the Battle of Ankara in 1402, made him something of a heroic symbol against Islamic encroachment to plenty of Renaissance humanists. This in combination with the various succession conflicts that were to ravage the Italian peninsula a century later and break the balance-of-power equilibrium established in the Treaty of Lodi, would create an intellectual environment favorable to nihilistic conceptions of *Machtpolitik*.

The absolutist conception of sovereignty is essentially a pagan city-state idea awkwardly implanted back into Christian political thought, which, from the time of the Carolingian monks up to even the humanistic Erasmus, has been based on the doctrine of the two swords most succinctly expressed by Pope Gelasius I in a letter to Emperor Anastasius in 494 (<http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/gelasius1.asp>):

There are two powers, august Emperor, by which this world is chiefly ruled, namely, the sacred authority of the priests and the royal power. Of these that of the priests is the more weighty, since they have to render an account for even the kings of men in the divine judgment. You are also aware, dear son, that while you are permitted honorably to rule over human kind, yet in things divine you bow your head humbly before the leaders of the clergy and await from their hands the means of your salvation. In the reception and proper disposition of the heavenly mysteries you recognize that you should be subordinate rather than superior to the religious order, and that in these matters you depend on their judgment rather than wish to force them to follow your will.

If the ministers of religion, recognizing the supremacy granted you from heaven in matters affecting the public order, obey your laws, lest otherwise they might obstruct the course of secular affairs by irrelevant considerations, with what readiness should you not yield them obedience to whom is assigned the dispensing of the sacred mysteries of religion. Accordingly, just as there is no slight danger in the case of the priests if they refrain from speaking when the service of the divinity requires, so there is no little risk for those who disdain – which God forbid – when they should obey. And if it is fitting that the hearts of the faithful should submit to all priests in general who properly administer divine affairs, how much the more is obedience due to the bishop of that see which the Most High ordained to be above, ill others, and which is consequently dutifully honored by the devotion of the whole Church.

Thus, we may quote John of Salisbury, a representative of this tradition (*Policraticus*, Book IV, Chapter II):

However, it is said that the prince is absolved from the obligations of the law; but this is not true in the sense that it is lawful for him to do unjust acts, but only in the sense that his character should be such as to cause him to practice equity not through fear of the penalties of the law but through love of justice; and should also be such as to cause him from the same motive to promote the advantage of the commonwealth, and in all things to prefer the good of others before his own private will. Who, indeed, in respect of public matters can properly speak of the will of the prince at all, since therein he may not lawfully have any will of his own apart from that which the law or equity enjoins, or the calculation of the common interest requires? For in these matters his will is to have the force of a judgment; and most properly that which pleases him therein has the force of law, because his decision may not be at variance with the intention of equity. “From thy countenance,” says the Lord, “let my judgment go forth, let thine eyes look upon equity”; for the uncorrupted judge is one whose decision, from assiduous contemplation of equity, is the very likeness thereof. The prince accordingly is the minister of the common interest and the bond-servant of equity, and he bears the public person in the sense that he punishes the wrongs and injuries of all, and all crimes, with even-handed equity. His rod and staff also, administered with wise moderation, restore irregularities and false departures to the straight path of equity, so that deservedly may the Spirit congratulate the power of the prince with the words, “Thy rod and thy staff, they have comforted me.” His shield, too, is strong, but it is a shield for the protection of the weak, and one which wards off powerfully the darts of the wicked from the innocent. Those who derive the greatest advantage from his performance of the duties of his office are those who can do least for themselves, and his power is chiefly exercised against those who desire to do harm.

A very far cry from “reason of state,” indeed.

The problem with absolutism, then, is the fact that it is far too easy for the absolutist to become “enlightened” under the influence of a Voltaire or a Rousseau, and to begin unleashing hell. When Joseph II began closing monasteries, consolidating the poor relief system and constructing a modern

judiciary to root out customary law at just the same time that the French Revolution was brewing, the Austrian Netherlands chose to revolt (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brabant_Revolution), making this a rare example of a popular counterrevolution (at least for the faction led by Hendrik van der Noot).

The results of this revolution from above, sanctioned by Bodin, Machiavelli and others, were catastrophic. As an exhibit, we may observe the Reformationist zeal that John Milton exhibits in his commentaries of Martin Bucer's (Luther's right-hand man) *De Regno Christi*, regarding civil marriage (https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/bucer/text.shtml):

But the Antichrists of Rome, to get the imperial power into thir own hands, first by fraudulent persuasion, afterwards by force drew to themselves the whole authority of determining and judging as well in matrimonial causes, as in most other matters. Therefore it hath bin long believ'd, that the care and government therof doth not belong to the civil Magistrate. Yet where the Gospel of Christ is receav'd, the laws of Antichirst should be rejected. If therfore Kings and Governours take not this care, by the power of Law and Justice to provide that mariages be piously contracted, religiously kept, and lawfully dissolv'd, if need require, who sees not what confusion and trouble is brought upon this holy society; and what a rack is prepar'd, evn for many of the best consciences, while they have no certain laws to follow, no justice to implore, if any intolerable thing happen. And how much it concerns the honour and safety of the Common-wealth, that mariages, according to the will of Christ, be made, maintain'd, and not without just cause dissolv'd, who understands not? for unlesse that first and holiest Society of man and Woman be purely constituted, that houshold discipline may be upheld by them according to Gods law, how can wee expect a race of good men. Let your Majesty therfore know that this is your duty, and in the first place, to reassume to your self the just ordering of matrimony, and by firm laws to establish and defend the religion of this first and divine societie among men, as all wise law-givers of old, and Christian Emperours have carefully don.

The doctrine of the two swords became, under Luther, the doctrine of the two kingdoms, and thus the ecclesiastical and spiritual sphere was greenlit for annihilation by the temporal rulers, who having been disconnected from guidance by the John of Salisburies of old as they once were, became prepared to engage in the most heinous of animism, imparting a divine will to their political edicts, with an undying lust for "reform" to be justified in the name of a purely material national interest. The process culminates in the same Hegelianism that Moldbug wrestled with Daniel Larison over (<http://larison.org/2007/07/09/hegel-iv/>).

And then, the rationalistic tendency of international law codified by Grotius, Vattel and others, served to crowd out an older tradition of *jus bellum* by canon lawyers. The calculus of "equal and independent nations" is rather lacking relative to the precepts of Natural Law. We may quote Honore de Bonet's *The Tree of Battles* (1387) on the right to safe-conduct in time of war (<http://www.deremilitari.org/RESOURCES/SOURCES/bonet.htm>): "Now we must consider other people who, of right, have safe-conduct in time of war; for you have heard above how prelates, chaplains, deacons, and also conversi, hermits, pilgrims, and all the people of the Holy Church, should be in security, since even if they have no safe-conduct, it matters not, for they have it by law. And I add that ox-herds, and all husbandmen, and ploughmen with their oxen, when they are carrying on their business, and equally when they are going to it or returning from it, are secure, according to written law. And in truth that this should be so is not without good reason, because it is expedient and convenient for all sorts of people, since those who cultivate the soil plough and work for all men and for everybody, and all manner of folk live of their labour. Therefore right reason does not permit that they should receive any ill or annoyance, seeing that they have no concern with war or with harming anyone."

Moldbug's "Austro-cameralist" approach is thus a form of reactionary modernism, or perhaps best described as the approach to politics that a *really* good Finance Minister might take. But a Finance Minister he remains, and thus a scoundrel.

The Hestia Society still officially maintains Moldbug as the progenitor of neoreaction on their web page, but as a whole, it seems that Moldbug's influence on what went on to become NRx is scant. Nick Land and the ever-shrinking techno-commercialist wing maintains a devotion to neocameralism and patchwork, but mixed with technological accelerationism. The Christian traditionalists are a separate sphere of their own. Mainline NRx appears to be morphing into a more intellectual version of alt-right sociobiological ethnopolitics. The most enduring legacy of Moldbug ends up being simply the use of the term "Cathedral."

But with all those caveats and criticisms having been made, Unqualified Reservations, with its entertaining rambling, its web of primary sources and old books ranging from High Tory anti-democrats to colonial administrators to forgotten contemporary historians, makes for an interesting experience. For people of a more mainline conservative, libertarian or national-populist orientation, it is a very useful source as a first step for going on to something higher.

This entry was posted in [Monarchy](#), [Political philosophy](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

5 thoughts on "Mencius Moldbug, 10 years later: a critical retrospective"

1. Michael Rothblatt says:

[April 22, 2017 at 6:17 pm](#)

Thomas Aquinas went even further

"If to provide itself with a king belongs to the right of a given multitude, it is not unjust that the king be deposed or have his power restricted by that same multitude if, becoming a tyrant, he abuses the royal power. It must not be thought that such a multitude is acting unfaithfully in deposing the tyrant, even though it had previously subjected itself to him in perpetuity, because he himself has deserved that the covenant with his subjects should not be kept, since, in ruling the multitude, he did not act faithfully as the office of a king demands."

Reply

◦ Nulle Terre Sans Seigneur says:

[April 22, 2017 at 7:37 pm](#)

Catholic political thought has a history of permitting tyrannicide (John of Salisbury accepted it, as well), reaching its culmination in Francisco Suarez. It was regarding Suarez that Filmer called tyrannicide a Catholic heresy, I think. Moldbug misinterpreted this as being a joke on Filmer's part, which it most certainly wasn't.

Reply

2. Slumlord says:

[April 25, 2017 at 3:29 am](#)

Good post.

“Moldbug’s “Austro-cameralist” approach is thus a form of reactionary modernism, or perhaps best described as the approach to politics that a really good Finance Minister might take. But a Finance Minister he remains, and thus a scoundrel.”

Priceless.

Reply.

3. Pingback: A Brief Response to Reactionary Future over Monarchy and Oligarchy. | "The Horror! The Horror!"
4. Pingback: Christmas Gift: The Ten Pillars of Mencius Moldbug. – IMPERIAL ENERGY

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