

THEWEEK

Peter Thiel is not a supervillain

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In the wake of disasters, it's a common impulse to look for a scapegoat. And almost everyone in our elite class views the election of Donald Trump as a disaster. So the search is on. Maybe it's FBI director and former best friend of the left James Comey. Maybe it's rust-belt working-class whites, the unrepentant racists who nonetheless voted for Obama twice before pulling the lever for Trump. Maybe it's Hillary Clinton (okay, I can get behind that one).

Increasingly, members of the media are beginning to turn their attention to another figure: Peter Thiel.

The Verge recently "**exposed**" that Thiel was about to teach a course about "heterodox science" at a small private school; the school later canceled the course. The article was a perfect example of today's yellow journalism, repeatedly hinting without ever actually saying that the course was evidence of Thiel's allegedly horrible, no good, probably sexist, classist, and racist views. (And it's not like science **needs** some **heterodoxy** anyway.)

Another prominent tech blog, *TheNextWeb*, said Thiel "**may just be the biggest douche of 2016.**" I guess it's a real close-run thing between him and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Vladimir Putin.

Does Thiel need an introduction anymore? He is the co-founder of PayPal, a billionaire thanks to a prescient investment in Facebook, an investor in and promoter of out-there ideas, and an occasional philosopher. And since it now seems illegal to write about Thiel without using the word "contrarian," so there: Peter Thiel is a contrarian.

Scapegoating Thiel for Trump seems like a strange idea, but then again scapegoating is never about truth. Thiel supported Trump, but he seems to have played no role in his victory. Sure, Thiel cut Trump a \$1 million check, but Trump was vastly outspent by Clinton, so that can't be it. There are no reports of Thiel having provided him with any sort of prescient political advice — indeed, the two men seem to have had only tenuous contact since Thiel's endorsement. Thiel's speech at the Republican National Convention seems to have made few ripples outside the media echo chamber, and his endorsement seems to have swayed no other Silicon Valley grandees from their almost unanimous revilement of Trump.

At the same time, scapegoating Thiel makes perfect sense. The point of scapegoating is not to fix problems, it's to make the scapegoaters feel better about themselves. And for this, Thiel is a perfect foil.

First, let's face it, he's weird, and weird is not good. His public presentation leans a little towards looking Asperger-y, and nobody likes the class nerd, especially the former class nerds who write takes on the internet for a living. His ideas are strange and hard to summarize.

Second, he supported Trump, and that's already evidence of a profoundly darkened soul. But in a speech outlining the reasons for his support, what was mostly obvious was a frustration with the narrow orthodoxies of the post-Bush GOP, and foreign policy non-interventionism (which, recall, was popular on the left when it was the Other Side doing the foreign policy interventions). I disagree with Thiel's rationale for supporting Trump, but this is hardly Hitler.

Of course, to scapegoat someone, you first need to demonize them. No capsule intellectual profile of Thiel is possible without dark references to his support for the *Gawker* lawsuit, the Seasteading Institute, or a now infamous essay for the Cato Institute where he mentioned women's suffrage as an obstacle to libertarianism. All of these paint a portrait of Thiel as, **in the words of *The Economist's* business columnist**, a "corporate Nietzschean." Whatever he means by that, that doesn't sound good.

Let's start with the *Gawker* lawsuit. Not to relitigate the whole affair, but it should be restated that what *Gawker* was on trial for was not publishing news, but publishing revenge porn. Find the Florida jury's decision disproportionate all you want, but at least can we agree that that's beyond the pale? It's strange how our fighters for freedom of expression are silent about *Mann v National Review*, a case in which a climate scientist is suing the prestigious conservative magazine for defamation. *National Review's* case has received an amicus brief **signed** by such conservative ideologues as the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, the ACLU, *The Washington Post*, and two dozen other media organization. *National Review*, where I write a policy column and am friendly with many current and former employees, is now launching fundraising appeals and **postponing a planned website redesign** to keep fighting the case. I don't understand why all those who rushed to the defense of *Gawker's* right to publish revenge porn aren't beating the drums equally forcefully. It's just a mystery.

What of the Seasteading Institute, which aims to build self-sustaining colonies at sea, first starting with a planned sort-of "Burning Man at Sea." Firstly, very few mentions of Thiel's association with the Seasteading Institute note that while he gave them a small grant, he seems to have had little association with the group for years. On the merits, I still fail to see why the idea still engenders so many LOLs. If you don't like seasteads, don't go live on them (personally, I have no plans to). Maybe they're possible, maybe they're not. Maybe they're a good idea, maybe they're not. But why does our media class swoon with delight when Elon Musk talks about building colonies on Mars and cackles when another Thiel associate wants to build cities on the sea? I personally love to live in a world where weird ideas get funded.

And finally, what of Thiel's **essay** on libertarianism and women? In the course of a wide-ranging essay on politics and technology, Thiel wrote that the extension of the franchise to women has

made the political field harder for libertarians. Is it churlish to point out that, as a fact, this is correct? Women are, on the whole, as a political constituency, less libertarian than men. In fact, this criticism is often leveled at libertarians by progressives, as evidence of their deficiency. Thiel goes on, not to call for limiting the franchise to men, but simply to explore apolitical, non-violent ways for libertarians to pursue their goals.

Of course, it's quite fair to challenge Thiel's ideas, since he has so many of them and they are, well, heterodox. But that's the point. Thiel is one of the most interesting figures alive today; I disagree with some of his ideas, agree with others, and on many more I have many, many questions. But we would all better be served if what people said and wrote about him was actually about him, not about the scarecrow that they've concocted.

Since "contrarian" has special power when it comes to Thiel, I'm going to close on something that is not contrarian at all in theory but very contrarian in practice: Before you can contradict someone, you should first represent them correctly. When it comes to Thiel, we're wide, wide off the mark.