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Nicolás Ortega. Source: Alamy.

IDEAS

HOW BRONZE AGE PERVERT CHARMED THE FAR RIGHT

An internet personality who espouses fascism, racism, and bodybuilding has won influential converts.

By Graeme Wood
Illustrations by Nicolás Ortega

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In 2014, the actor B. J. Novak, best known as Ryan, the weaselly temp from *The Office*, went on the *Late Show With David Letterman* and confessed to a small role he'd played 17 years earlier in the history of the American far right. The significance of this role could not have been obvious at the time, either to Novak (who was in high school) or to its victims, the bewildered patrons of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Novak had recruited a Romanian classmate with a deep voice, and together they'd recorded an audio tour for the exhibition "Tales From the Land of Dragons: 1,000 Years of Chinese Painting." With the help of friends, they then slipped cassettes containing their tour into the museum's official audio guides.

Art lovers must have wondered about the thick Eastern European accent that greeted them, over the twang of a Chinese string instrument. The Romanian soon became opinionated ("Personally," he said, "I think this painting is a piece of crap"), then deranged. He alluded to his "disgusting anatomical abnormalities." He called his listeners "decadent imperialist maggots" and confessed a desire to smash a glass case with a sledgehammer and "rip [a] scroll to shreds with my teeth, which, by the way, are extremely long and sharp

... more like fangs than human teeth.” At last he offered an interlude of “idiot music” while he fumbled with his script. “This should keep you occupied, you drooling imbecile!” he bellowed at the listeners, by now either amused or complaining to management. The last several minutes were a cha-cha by Tito Puente.

Exit Novak from the stage of American fascism. (His last known political donation was \$1,000 to Hillary Clinton in 2016.) But the Romanian has kept in character, complete with the peevish attitude and hammed-up accent. About the time Novak went on *Letterman*, the Romanian began posting on social media as “Bronze Age Pervert,” a mad-in-both-senses weirdo who had escaped the Museum of Fine Arts and now aimed to take over the world. His message, delivered in tweets, podcasts, and a self-published book, mixes ultra-far-right politics, unabashed racism, and a deep knowledge of ancient Greece. He has never shown his face or admitted his real name. But I know Bronze Age Pervert, and have known him almost as long as B. J. Novak has. He’s an MIT graduate who grew up in Newton, Massachusetts. His name is Costin Alamariu.

It is hard to convey precisely what BAP believes, in part because his views are so outlandish that even when stated simply, they sound like incoherent ranting. America’s civic religion holds that all humans have inherent and equal worth, that they should not be graded according to beauty or nobility, and that they should not aim to destroy one another. BAP says this orthodoxy is exactly wrong. He argues that the natural and desirable condition of life is the domination of the weak and ugly by the strong and noble. He considers American cities a “wasteland” run by Jews and Black people, though the words he uses to denote these groups are considerably less genteel than these.

The modern state, he says, has been designed to empower the feebleminded and the misshapen at the expense of their betters. The strong and noble must humiliate and conquer their tormentors and destroy their institutions. On Twitter, where he has more than 100,000 followers, BAP posts images of seminude Aryan beefcakes, usually in tropical settings, to celebrate the physical perfection of the warrior element of the race that he hopes will someday be restored to dominance.

The world, or at least parts of it, has been more receptive to BAP than one might think. By now he is a leading cultural figure on the fascist right—among both elites, who have cottoned to his political philosophy, and non-elites, who love his brio and aspire to his erudition.

I consider myself a connoisseur of brilliant lunatics, and I have a high tolerance for their lunacy if it has compensating virtues of, say, humor or ingenuity. But even I find BAP worrisome. What starts as comedy can become something more sinister—and BAP’s shtick, while sometimes hilarious, shows every sign of transforming into a new mode of far-right radicalism, with fans in positions of responsibility and power.

Typically philosophy books go unread even by the philosophers’ closest friends and family. But BAP’s book, *Bronze Age Mindset* (2018), tumbled screeching into the world, unignorable, at one point ranking among the top 150 books in the entire Amazon catalog. “It’s still a cult book,” a former Trump White House official told *Politico* in 2019. “If you’re a young person, intelligent, adjacent in some way to the right, it’s very likely you would have heard of it.” His podcast, *Caribbean Rhythms*, has likewise won an avid following.

Only the most incautious admit their devotion. BAP tells his young disciples to burrow into government, to deny him publicly, to wait. Matthew Kriner, with the Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism, monitors the social-media activity of groups that are trying to ignite race wars and revive fascist movements. Their accounts have unsubtle Teutonic names such as Atomwaffen. “Bronze Age Pervert is across the vast majority of them,” Kriner told me. Moreover, he has an odd crossover appeal—among both extremely online misfits and figures with real-world influence. BAP, Kriner said, “represents that bridge to get you from really not-acceptable content to maybe ending up in someone’s legislative activities, within a very reasonable amount of time.”

BAP’s relationship to Donald Trump has been curious. He refers to the former president repeatedly, almost in the manner of a Homeric epithet, as a Borscht Belt comedian, a master of yuks. To BAP, Trump’s chief virtue is destruction. He views the former president fondly, as a kindred insult comic, brazenly impious and generally right about race and immigration. The affection has been repaid in print by Michael Anton, a former Trump-administration

national-security official who wrote a 2019 essay in the *Claremont Review of Books* sympathetic to BAP, while noting his tendency to be “racist,” “anti-Semitic,” “anti-democratic,” “misogynistic,” and “homophobic.” Anton suggested (correctly, I think) that BAP’s vile utterances, whether sincere or not, serve a purpose: to keep whiny leftists so busy cataloging his petty thoughtcrimes that they overlook his more serious heresies. Meanwhile, those capable of reading him without being rage-blinded quietly learn from him and heed his advice to bond, network, and plot.

From the April 2023 issue: America’s terrifying cycle of extremist violence

Anton wrote that BAP “speaks directly to a youthful dissatisfaction (especially among white males) with equality as propagandized and imposed in our day: a hectoring, vindictive, resentful, leveling, hypocritical equality that punishes excellence and publicly denies all difference while at the same time elevating and enriching a decadent, incompetent, and corrupt elite.” Anton, who was once a graduate student in political philosophy, ended his essay by prognosticating a BAPist future: “In the spiritual war for the hearts and minds of the disaffected youth on the right, conservatism is losing. BAPism is winning.”



Nicolás Ortega. Sources: Alamy; Auguste Vinchon.

Bapism, for all its emphasis on bodily perfection, began as an intellectual phenomenon, and its first victories came in intellectual circles. They were so subtle that even the guardians of those circles recognized their enemy only after he was already within the gates.

Last year, at a conference of political philosophers at Michigan State University, a Yale professor named Bryan Garsten told his colleagues that they were in trouble. The topic of the conference was liberalism—not Ted Kennedy liberalism, but the classical version that predates the modern Democratic Party and indeed America itself. Liberalism is the view that individuals have rights and beliefs, and that politics involves safeguarding rights and making compromises when beliefs conflict. It has existed for only a few centuries and is by some measures the most successful idea in history. Just look where people want to live: the United States, the European Union, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom, all liberal places that people will risk their life to reach.

But Garsten said liberalism had some of his best students hopping into rafts and paddling in other intellectual directions. He said they had been “captured” by the belief “that to be morally serious, one faces a choice.” The choice, he said, is not between liberalism and illiberalism. Liberalism had already lost. Its greatest champion, the United States, had run aground after pointless wars, terminal decadence, and bureaucratic takeover by activists and special interests. Garsten said his best students were choosing between the profascism of Nietzsche and a neomedieval, quasi-theocratic version of Catholicism opposed to Enlightenment liberalism. These students considered liberal democracy an exhausted joke, and they hinted—and sometimes did more than hint—that the past few centuries had been a mistake, and that the mistake should now be corrected.

Some at the conference countered that these illiberals might have just not done their homework. “Your students need to become better readers,” said Diana J. Schaub, a political-science professor at Loyola University Maryland. But Garsten’s illiberal students were good readers. Their deficiencies lay elsewhere, possibly everywhere but there.

Many of the participants knew that Garsten was talking about the threat posed by Bronze Age Pervert, though his name was uttered with great reluctance.

Partly this reluctance came from political philosophers' unwillingness to admit that they browse the Twitter feed of a genocidal nudist. Partly it was their worry that they had unwittingly been complicit in BAPism's spread by sending their students to intern in Washington, and to staff offices on Capitol Hill and in conservative institutions such as the Heritage Foundation.

Graeme Wood: Harlan Crow wants to stop talking about Clarence Thomas

From there, BAPism reached members of the right who lack philosophical training—young men whose main interest is not in the rise or fall of the American civic religion but in something more primal, an urge they themselves hardly understand, let alone control. “There is a level of self-loathing, chronic-masturbating anger out there among adolescent and early-20s fucked-up males,” one Republican operative told me. To them the world is dry, purposeless, and designed for the flourishing of anyone but them. Conservatism in the old way—not Bronze Age old, but Reagan old—does not satisfy them. “BAPism essentially involves re-enchanting the world and giving purpose to these young guys,” the operative told me. “And for some reason we can't.”

“Do you watch *X-Men*?” Vish Burra, a 32-year-old legislative aide to Representative George Santos of New York, asked me recently. He said BAP's followers hid out in government like mutants in the Marvel Comics universe. (The leader of the mutants, Professor Charles Xavier, can put on a special helmet and scan the world for fellow mutants.) “The movement's coagulating, connecting,” Burra said, and only at private gatherings and parties will the BAPists on Capitol Hill confess their devotion. Someday, he said, they'll go public, with a “big reveal.” But that moment will not come until the BAPists “get in position first,” Burra said. “Why would I [reveal myself] before I'm in front of the control panel?”

After the museum prank, almost 20 years passed before BAP's politics emerged into the light. And just as it did, the Romanian himself shrank vampirically into the shadows. No one seems sure where he is, or how he spends his days. But a sufficiently colorful and idiosyncratic personality is its own guarantee of detection. When I heard his podcast, it took me about 10 seconds to identify him.

Costin Alamariu is in his mid-40s, and he has never publicly admitted that he is BAP. (He did not reply to requests for comment for this article.) I met him only once, two decades ago, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, after a mutual friend intuited that we might enjoy each other's company. Costin appeared one night wearing a dramatic overcoat—the kind whose wearer is begging for those around him to make a comment. I resisted. He had emigrated from Romania, he said, when he was about 10. That explained the Dracula note in his voice.

We spent that evening striding around Cambridge, having what I vaguely recall as a conversation that started with philosophy and then roamed widely over history, ethnography, and literature. Notably absent from our discussion was mathematics, then Costin's undergraduate major at MIT. He had a gift for finely titrated offense—just enough to appall me but keep the conversation going. He learned that I was studying Persian, and I said the grammar was startlingly simple, because its use as a lingua franca over several centuries had shorn it of many of its complexities. “Is it like Spanish,” he asked, in a mischievous deadpan, “where every time you say a word, you feel your brain shrinking?”

For many years, we corresponded. Costin's messages arrived irregularly, and the tone ranged from friendly and inquisitive to boorish and insulting. I went to South America on assignment. He sent long messages extolling the virtues of Joseph Conrad's novel *Nostromo*, which is set there. A friend who reads books like *Nostromo*, and can talk about them, is a friend worth putting up with. When I traveled to northwestern Pakistan, he suggested that we go in on a cabin in the mountains around Chitral and “plan the freedom of the Kalash,” an Indigenous Indo-Aryan people in the surrounding valleys.

About 10 years ago, he took to calling my friends “fags” and exhorting me not to “be a faggot.” At some point he had begun bodybuilding, and he sent me a picture of himself shirtless, with the message “Do you like this pic of me.” (He had asked me to keep our messages between us, and I continue to honor that request, with the exception of offhand remarks, comments he has repeated elsewhere, and publicly available facts. He must have sent the seminude thirst pic to others, because I have not shared it, but it has surfaced on social media.)

Eventually I decided that the book recommendations and ethnographic whimsies no longer made the slurs worth enduring. I let our correspondence

trail off. I wrote to him when I discovered his BAP persona, and then it was he who stopped replying to me.

Bap's origin story begins at Newton South High School, outside Boston. Newton has an outstanding public-school system, and both he and the friend who introduced us were in a clique of edgy nerds and teenage intellectuals. In philosophy, the group favored Nietzsche; in music, Rachmaninoff; in politics, none of the above. They indulged in adolescent intoxication with ideas, especially the forbidden and obscure. This kind of extremism is a privilege of youth, because if you're still just a kid, you can idolize Che Guevara or Nietzsche all you like, and (usually) no one gets hurt.

Newton also has a large Jewish population. BAP has said on Twitter that he is Jewish, and this appears to be true. Costin has relatives who were interned in Nazi concentration camps. His older brother works as a geopolitical strategist at an investment research firm and has no detectable accent. Costin has kept his Romanian accent in private life. While in character, he speaks in what I believe is an intentionally bad Russian accent.

After high school, Costin went to MIT, where his father worked in the technology-licensing office. *The New York Times* once ran a photo of Costin, wearing his overcoat with Teva sandals, to illustrate the impaired fashion sense of MIT undergraduates. Upon graduation, he briefly worked in investment banking in New York, then began a doctoral program in political science at Yale—where he was a student of Bryan Garsten's. (I teach part-time in Costin's old department, where Garsten is a friend and colleague. Costin had left New Haven by the time I arrived.)

Faculty and graduate students from that era describe him as clever and manipulative. He wrote caustic letters to the student newspaper and contributed to *The New Criterion*, a venerable right-leaning cultural journal. He disappeared for long periods. He claimed he had been living out of a van in Argentina. No one was sure what to believe. His aversion to normal human company echoed Nietzsche's: "When I am among the many I live as the many do, and I do not think as I really think; after a time it always seems as though they want to banish me from myself and rob me of my soul." When among fellow grad students, he mocked them and played tricks. One grad student

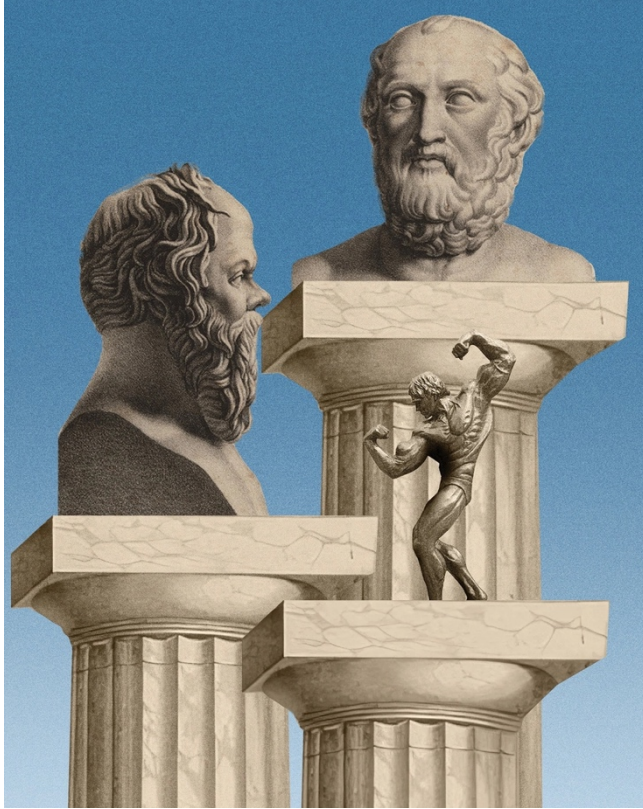
took Costin seriously, only to realize, she told me, “Oh no—I’m an idiot—this guy is just fucking with me.”

One of the best ways to conceal your genocidal fascism is to write about it openly in that most unread of documents, the unpublished doctoral dissertation.

Costin was always ready to talk about political philosophy, but he objected to attempts to enlist him in mundane campus politics. Others gathered signatures to denounce dictators during the Arab Spring. He humbly suggested that if petitions did not topple Hosni Mubarak, a well-attended candlelight vigil might. Yale’s grad students attempted to unionize and to pressure the university to increase stipends and benefits. One wrote to a grad-student listserv with questions about the school’s dental-insurance coverage. “My cousin Benko run Benko-Magnitogorsk Dental Emporium, he make good dental work in white van at Grand Av. and East St. in parking lot outside plumbing supplies store,” Costin replied. “You forward me small price of \$100 he do work ... steel teeth, gold teeth anything you want.” The email was an early exercise in refitting his character to needle and ridicule liberals.

His dissertation is a peculiar document. His adviser, Steven B. Smith, is often identified with the German-born Jewish philosopher Leo Strauss, about whom Smith wrote an elegant book. Strauss argued that great thinkers have embedded hidden messages in their writing, and the apparent meaning of their books and essays often contradicts the recondite meaning that only discerning readers can decode. The upshot: Read carefully, because things are not what they seem.

Costin’s dissertation follows Smith’s and Strauss’s lead. It is eccentric even within this eccentric tradition, as Costin himself allows. He reads Plato in a Straussian style: Plato’s teacher, Socrates, was executed for doing philosophy in a manner vexing to the Athenian state, so naturally Plato would have learned from that experience and written so that only the most perceptive reader could discern his true, subversive beliefs. At least one of those beliefs, in Costin’s reading, is a doozy. Plato, taken by most readers to scorn tyrants, is read by Costin as their covert defender. “Philosophy and tyranny are fundamentally connected,” Costin writes, and their shared aim is eugenic. They seek “the breeding,” the “biological” production of genius, nobility, and virtue: a master race.



Nicolás Ortega. Source: Alamy.

“There is much in this view that is frightening and even abhorrent to us,” Costin writes. Yet he states that Plato’s claims are validated by the history of human cultures. For evidence, he offers a bizarre mix of folklore, history, and ethnography. The development of an aristocratic class, he says, demands conquest, the vanquishing of lesser races by the organized violence of the greater. As an example, he quotes Pierre van den Berghe, an anthropologist who described Rwandan Tutsis, an archetypal aristocratic elite, as “intelligent, astute in political intrigue, born to command, refined, courageous, and cruel.” His dissertation is dripping with admiration for these martial, masculine virtues, and for their feminine counterpart of beauty. He despises, in turn, farming and manual labor, the characteristics of a slave class.

One of the best ways to conceal your genocidal fascism is to write about it openly in that most unread of documents, the unpublished doctoral dissertation. The few who noticed considered it an intellectual exercise rather than an act of incipient fascism.

Costin's advisers were not alone in failing to take his Nietzscheanism as seriously as they might have. Dustin Sebell, a former acquaintance of Costin's from that period and now a professor at Michigan State, told me that political philosophy as a whole has been one big victory parade for liberalism for several decades now. "You have a tradition of reflection that has gone on for decades largely oblivious to these radical Nietzschean critiques," Sebell said. "When those critiques resurfaced, many professional philosophers had little to say for themselves."

When Costin began submitting his doctoral work, Smith, his adviser, became enraged. "I was shocked that his family would escape Ceaușescu's Romania only for Costin to undermine the principles of [American] democracy," Smith told me. "I view that as a shameful act of betrayal." He said he made his disgust known but ultimately signed off, and Costin received his degree. "I was his dissertation adviser, not his censor."

In 2015, Emory University hired Costin for a postdoctoral fellowship, on the basis of less incendiary writing samples. His time there was a disaster. He acted erratically. At one point, he refused to give Emory's human-resources department his home address. During the spring semester, the university discovered that Costin had secretly stopped teaching his classes in person and was instead attempting to teach them over email. Further investigation revealed that Costin was medically unable to teach in person, with a vague but apparently real physical infirmity. His fellowship was not renewed. Later he lived for some time in Brazil, although he has been sighted recently in Japan, Spain, Hong Kong, and Iceland.

Within two years of his departure from Emory, *Bronze Age Mindset* was published—a noxious, digressive summa that incorporated the conclusions in his dissertation, and added many others too outré for any but a self-published document. It is a narcissistic, 198-page love letter to himself, or to the philosopher-as-muscleman that his BAP persona purports to be. The tone approaches at times the onanistic genius of a young Norman Mailer, but much more resentful toward the modern world. "Perversions—lame ones—are born by the thousands and haunt, like myriad cripplette midgets in halls of mirrors, they haunt the world, books, the internet. Minds are lost. If you wait any longer everything will be pounded to garbage, there will be nothing left—it will all turn, the whole world will turn to a Bulgarian rest stop lavatory," he writes. "I

declare to you, with great boldness, that I am here to save you from a great ugliness.”

The “Bronze Age” element of his perversion refers to the earliest days of ancient Greece—an era of virile pagan militarism.

The “great ugliness” is the liberal bureaucratic state. Democracy, he writes, destroys “personal freedom and initiative” by elevating an unworthy caste of subhuman creatures he calls “bugmen,” who flourish only under these debased conditions, like roaches in a pit latrine. On his podcast, BAP praises the philosopher James Burnham, who wrote that the heroic age of capitalism had passed, and that a “managerial revolution” had elevated to power bean counters and bureaucrats (think of his supposed persecutors from Emory’s HR department) over noble intellects and creators. Any person of talent or intelligence is ground down by this system, by “life under the thumb of the empowered old matriarchs and the conceptual dildoes they use to clobber the heads of young men.”

The ugliness extends to art and culture. Low dominates high. Screeching popular music drowns out Rachmaninoff. “From the point of view of real culture and refinement we’re as barbaric as the most obscure herd of the Khwarezm [an ancient Central Asian people] where the women scratch their pubes in public.”

The “Bronze Age” element of his perversion refers to the earliest days of ancient Greece—an era of virile pagan militarism, before the moderns, and even some of the ancients, were beguiled into weakness. Men performed feats of intellect and strength unknown today: memorization of names and poetry, running flat-out for miles under heavy armor to impale enemies. These men prospered under “life at its peak,” which happens “not in the grass hut village ruled by nutso mummies, but in the military state.”

Then things get weird. BAP fantasizes about a near-apocalyptic cleansing:

Here is my vision of the true justice, the justice of nature: the zoos opened, predators unleashed by the dozens, hundreds ... four thousand hungry wolves rampaging on streets of these hive cities, elephants and bison stampeding, the buildings smashed to pieces, the cries of the human bug shearing through the streets as the lord of beasts returns. Manhattan, Moscow, Peking reduced to

ruins overgrown by vines and forest, the haunt of the lynx and coyote again. The great cesspool slums, Calcutta, Nairobi, all the fetid latrines of the world covered over by mudslides, overgrown with thick jungle, this is justice. The beings fit to rule this rewilded landscape are the neo-warriors, men of greatness and violence. “The only right government is military government, and every other form is both hypocritical and destructive of true freedom,” BAP writes. He considers Japan during the late imperial period, when the emperor was a martial god, an ideal political arrangement, and has written elsewhere that it is “the perfect model of national political life and national identity.”

BAP styles his book an “exhortation,” and ultimately he exhorts white people to form military units with deep masculine bonds, and together annihilate lesser races or throw them under the yoke. One could more easily dismiss BAP as a political shock jock, and his racism as cheap and tasteless subversion, if this section were not so obviously heartfelt. He mentions by name the white mercenaries who toppled governments for profit and pleasure in the 20th century. “The coming age of barbarism will not be owned, as so many of you urban cucks fear, by the gangbangers and the unwashed hordes of the teeming cesspools of the world, but by clean-cut middle-class and working-class vets, men of military experience, who know something about how to shoot and how to organize. The fools who think oligarchs will be able to control these men for very long should look to the fortunes of the Sforzas”—the Renaissance clan that controlled, then lost, the duchy of Milan—“and many others, and remember that money is no match for force of arms combined with charm.”

I asked vish burra, the young Hill staffer, how BAP had charmed him. “The power, the vitality, the energy,” he said. “The left has stuck itself in a position of promoting a politics of sterility.” He said he didn’t agree with everything BAP said, but he loved the vision, the verve, the relentless mockery of the bugmen.

The bugmen, as Burra suggests, are terrible at countering BAP’s message. Liberals and leftists are used to sitting in a blind, watching for telltale signs of their enemies’ racism. There is no point in yelling “racist” at someone who is already yelling racial epithets at full volume. And there is, among BAP’s fans, perverse pleasure in watching their critics passionately denounce their hero, to no discernible effect.

BAPists are not supposed to talk about being BAPists, and they even have a term of abuse for those who do: *facefag*. “He wouldn’t appreciate a face—” Rather than utter the word, Burra sort of gestured at it, pawing the air. “He wouldn’t appreciate a guy like me, but I’m a big fan.”

BAP enjoys suggesting how close his followers are to the control panels. He posts pictures of their copies of *Bronze Age Mindset* next to tokens of their power, such as U.S.-government-official passports and patches, IDs, and other items from the livery of the Secret Service, Army Rangers, Department of Homeland Security, and Air Force. He allows one to wonder whether for every Vish Burra, who proudly keeps his copy of the book on the office shelf, there are others who adopt bugman camouflage. To be part of a clandestine movement, so extreme that it feels almost invisible to one’s elders, is part of the thrill. “I mentioned him in class the other day; my students were shocked that I knew who Bronze Age Pervert was,” the Notre Dame political theorist Patrick Deneen said at a conference in April.

A BAPist can take pleasure in having entered an exclusive cognitive club. One of his supporters wrote to me that BAP’s character was layered with irony, and that the ability to see the truth in BAP, and separate it from the hilarious megalomania, is a kind of Straussian test, to determine who can read and think, and who is so offended by the racism, misogyny, and anti-Semitism that he is incapacitated and unable to focus on anything else, even to criticize it. “Nobody who has the IQ to listen to one hour of BAP without tuning out actually believes he recommends becoming an autistic nudist bodybuilder.”

I am not sure I pass that test. Listening to BAP, one gets the impression of florid insanity. He digresses as if not in control of his own thoughts. He barks insults and orders at subordinates in his recording studio, and one can reasonably wonder whether these figures are comic creations or psychotic delusions. He cannot possibly believe everything he says he believes.

BAP glorifies bodybuilding and devotes much of his Twitter feed to images of half-naked white hunks in the flower of youth. Allegedly this is to worship their vitality, their fitness for the aristocratic warrior class that the modern world has dishonored. He stresses that in ancient Athens, the cultivation of physical perfection was a privilege of the elite. Only citizens could train in the

gymnasium. The process of creating an ideal male form was deemed beyond the station of lesser entities, such as women and slaves.

The parade of Adonises has led many to question BAP's sexuality. Bizarrely, Costin is not the only fascist I know who has been dogged by such rumors. Richard Spencer, my chemistry-lab partner in middle school, faced persistent questions about his sexuality when he was a leader of the alt-right. (If anyone out there can explain why homoerotic fascists keep seeking my company, please let me know.) Spencer told me, more than a little exasperated, that he thought the case for BAP's homosexuality had been proved. "If I had posted even one photo of some guy's ass on Twitter, do you think there would be any question in anyone's mind?" In *Bronze Age Mindset*, BAP writes that the confusion of masculine bonding for homosexuality "is misunderstanding and exaggeration promoted by the homonerds of our time," a poverty of our imagination and lack of friendship, "because we can't conceive of such intense love between friends without some carnal or material benefit in play."

From the June 2017 issue: How Richard Spencer became an icon for white supremacists

The sheer length of time BAP has held his pose makes one wonder whether more of it is sincere than his followers think. As a character sings in a Sam Shepard play, "I believe in my mask: The man I made up is me." The breeding of a caste of supermen is not just a pseudo-comic reverie. It is the subject of his dissertation. The fantasies of killing "lower forms of life" are not funny at all, not even as a lampoon of liberal excess. And while some people know BAP personally, and vouch for his intelligence and wit, few have emerged to state with confidence that he's not a fascist and racist. That is because he probably is one.

What might it feel like to experience the modern world as a "great ugliness"—an inverted kingdom of sniveling ass-kissers? "Society became something approaching mass concentration camp," BAP has said on his podcast. "I'm exaggerating only a little." His rejection of this world is matched by his rejection by it. His classmates are successful; they hold good jobs. One by one, the adolescent Nietzscheans grew up into productive citizens, and put aside childish fascinations. The person who introduced us, now decades ago, was once so close to Costin that their friends described them as sharing something

almost as deep as marriage. (They did not suggest the bond was erotic.) That friend has excelled in a normal life: a job at a tech company, a family, leadership in his synagogue. At some point he chose to be normal, which means rejecting BAP.

Liberalism's victory had been so overwhelming that for generations it grew soft, unaccustomed to the hard work of defending itself. Now a ranting nudist poses a real danger.

To take a job, to toil in the modern fields among the bugs and bugmen, is the greatest betrayal. No one respectable wants anything to do with someone who tweets out messages calling for "high violence" against the "kike and nigger" scourge.

BAP has responded to this rejection with bitterness, with what Milton called "a sense of injured merit." I find his message melancholic. Recently he posted a video of himself in Rio de Janeiro's Botanical Garden, following around a wild bird. "Yes, hello," he says. "Do not run from me. Come back. I love you." I do not see much space for true love in the world he has built for himself, whose components are war, purification, and mutual masculine admiration ever fearful of its eros.

Fixation on BAP's monstrous qualities has, I think, led even his fervent admirers to overlook the most unexpected aspect of his philosophy, which is a literal belief in the transmigration of souls, as described in Eastern religions and the work of Arthur Schopenhauer. If this life fails, another will come. When the ironic pose drops, when the outrageous Boratism subsides, this conviction is what remains. "I believe reincarnation is fundamentally true," he writes, in a section of his book that does not appear to be for laughs.

"I think that is the deepest layer of his outlook," Dustin Sebell, at Michigan State, told me. "He believes in an esoteric version of metempsychosis, that our truest selves live on after death and take on different forms. He is profoundly unwilling to accept his own mortality."

No humans receive praise higher than what BAP lavishes on noble animals like jaguars and birds of prey. He is taken, however, with the diminutive Japanese writer Yukio Mishima. In midlife, Mishima took up bodybuilding and raised a squad of erotically intertwined neo-samurai warriors. When it became clear

that Japan's managerial revolution had extinguished its imperial spirit, he attempted to overthrow the Japanese government and restore the power of the emperor. After that failed, he ritually disemboweled himself.

In Michigan, when Bryan Garsten made his comment about the seductions of illiberalism, BAP was like the ghost at the banquet, cackling from the rafters at his professor's consternation. But the remarks went on longer, and they were also searching, and self-critical. Garsten told his listeners that they—he—may have failed to cultivate students' imagination. His illiberal students, Garsten said, had learned why the Greeks admired Achilles, the fiery warrior. But they neglected the Greeks' admiration for Ulysses, a subtler and greater model of manhood. Ulysses's greatness emerged not from his rejection of this world, but from his mastery of its constraints. He owed myriad debts to those around him: to his men, to his son, to his wife.

The students romanticized the tyrant, while assuming that liberalism bred sloth and laziness. "Life in a liberal democracy is full of demanding moments," Garsten said at the conference. I had the impression that he was addressing BAP apostrophically, delivering a warning he wished he had delivered in person. "As far as I have read, life under tyrants is full of lassitude, selfishness, duplicity, betrayal."

One could feel, over the course of these discussions, the stirrings of dormant liberal passions—as if the mere invocation of BAPism, after many years ignored, had inspired a counteroffensive. Another political theorist, a former Marine and a Brookings Institution scholar named William A. Galston, piped up to remind everyone that when liberalism had come under mortal threat in the Pacific theater, "Americans as a whole found it in themselves to do something." Specifically, his fellow Marines charged, shot, and bayoneted their way from island to island until illiberalism, in the form of Japanese fascism, begged them for mercy. "Is there really an opposition between the open society and the virtue of courage?" Galston asked.

The defeat of imperial Japan illustrated the point nicely, I thought. But it also raised a much stranger question, about how liberals acquired such a reputation for sissidom in the first place. The Battle of Iwo Jima wasn't that long ago. But in certain spaces—academia, elite journalism—liberalism's victory had been so overwhelming that for generations it grew soft, flabby, and

unaccustomed to the hard work of defending itself from a vigorous challenger. As such challengers left universities and newspapers, those institutions became self-congratulatory monocultures, inhospitable even to conservatives far less nutty than BAP. By now, a ranting nudist poses a real danger—of poisoning politics, splitting apart societies, and persuading otherwise talented people to spurn the modern world’s greatest achievements, which are peace, tolerance, and prosperity.

The great Straussian Allan Bloom predicted doom for liberalism when these challenges disappeared. “The most essential of our freedoms, as men and as liberal democrats, the freedom of our minds, consists in the consciousness of the fundamental alternatives,” he wrote. An unchallenged liberal democrat, he argued, ceases to want to improve, unless he confronts his enemies in their most potent forms. Those forms will shock and humble us, he wrote, and have “the added salutary effect of destroying our sense of our own worth and giving us higher aspirations.”

To Costin personally, I have never been more grateful. His last message came during the pandemic. I asked how things were looking in Brazil. “Not bad,” he reported, with laconic caginess. He had not yet veered, as he later did in his public statements about COVID-19, into outright conspiracy theory and extended roasts of Anthony Fauci. Since then, I have come to think of BAP’s performances in immunological terms: a gnarly virus that had lain dormant for decades in circles of philosophers and their unread books. Now that it’s loose in the human population, it is a vicious kick to the liberal immune system. And that is not entirely bad. Unchallenged, liberalism’s defenses waned, and liberals forgot, temporarily, why their cause was worth defending. The antibodies are stirring.

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