

# Extremism, Society, and the State

Edited by **Giacomo Loperfido**



CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS A Forum for Social Analysis · Volume 20

## EXTREMISM, SOCIETY, AND THE STATE

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# EXTREMISM, SOCIETY, AND THE STATE



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*Giacomo Loperfido*



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To Agata, may she struggle for a fairer world.  
*Zio Tu.*



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# INTRODUCTION

## The Enigma of Extremism



*Giacomo Loperfido*

‘look on my works ye mighty and despair’  
—Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Ozymandias’

The essays presented here discuss extremism, most specifically political extremism, with particular attention to the forces of socio-political oppression and violence that it effects. The focus is upon extremism as a dynamic in the crisis of state orders and the larger civilizational systems that form around state/imperial centres. The chapters concentrate on the contemporary historical moment and primarily upon extremist events in the Western hemisphere and its more immediate domains of influence.

The word *extremism* is broadly used to apply to actions and ideological programmes that are boundary breaking, that attack convention and rule, and which in some way or another defy the status quo. As a political phenomenon it is often associated with the marginalized, the suppressed, or populations in relatively distressed or weak socio-political situations. Extremism or extremist action is a power of the weak, but no less a force of the strong. Reference to action as being extremist is often used to legitimate action that is itself excessive and which mirrors or

exceeds the very extremism that the anti-extremist action of the powerful is designed to control or subdue. Extremism is commonly associated with resistance, rebellion and revolutionary action. The ideological commitment and degrees of closure in ideas behind such action and of that confronted, are dynamic in the generation of the extreme, and especially the violence of the situation. Such features as the foregoing, mean that the term *extremism* is most likely to be used in the context of state orders, and in the contested realms of the social worlds of their control.

Extremism is a difficult concept, and the chapters in this book shy away from a hard definition, although a few chapters directly confront some of the problematics in the usage of the word. But all the chapters by and large attend to events and processes that are obviously extreme in socially and politically destructive effect and all too often human annihilation. Social action that leads to self-annihilation and especially social annihilation and the killing of life should count as extreme. But such is an extreme of the extreme and much that may count as extremism or extreme in thought and action, as should be clear through the discussion of the chapters, is not filled with the kinds of negativity upon which the following essays concentrate. Extremism in its breaking of boundaries, its exceeding of conventions or limits of practice and thought can be creative, liberating and far from necessarily destructively negative.

Extremism often seems to marry destruction to generation. In this it might be seen to manifest a sacrificial dynamic that in many ways fits with Hubert and Mauss's (1964) classic discussion of ritual sacrifice. They concentrate their understanding on the contradictory, virtually imponderable, perhaps maddening intensity, of the life regenerative force of death-dealing action that is the enigma of sacrifice. Sacrifice works at socio-moral boundaries and

crosses them. It is an awesome practice, widely regarded as shocking, that in its taking of life renews life or restores life's circumstance. Many acts of political extremism, particularly those that intentionally involve the destruction of human life, quite explicitly manifest a sacrificial dimension, one that through their destruction of self and other gives birth and life to all that they may represent (see Bastin, Loperfido, and Wilson, this volume; Kapferer 1997). Such extremists in their action, moreover, sometimes assume a sacral virtual priestly quality as sacrificer and sacrificed.

Much action labelled as extremism, of course, does not have the taking of life as its key mechanism or prior intent, although the violence that comes to mark—and to a large degree define—action as extremist may be part of the expectation of the forces that action conceived as extreme brings or excites into conjunction. Thus events of protest, regardless of intent, can take on a sacrificial quality with protagonists presenting as transforming victims, who themselves manifest the inequities, prejudice, social restriction or rejection (forms of social death) associated with suppressive socio-moral orders and their political economic hierarchies. This is so with many features of contemporary acts of protest and resistance in the Western hemisphere and elsewhere.

One of the most powerful images of sacrifice in protest in the face of state extremism of recent times is that of the 'Tank Man' (also known as the Unknown Rebel) who offered himself as a willing victim before advancing tanks of the Chinese military who threatened to continue their violent quelling of protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on June 5, 1989. The act halted the advance and was perhaps a major turning point in the history of state authoritarianism in China.

Extremism, and particularly political extremism, is primarily a matter born of state systems and the societies

or larger civilizational complexes that have states at their centre. It strikes at the *raison d'être* of states, including states that in themselves are the domains of the extreme of power. Political extremism, or social action given political significance as extreme, is often defined as that which threatens state authority, its social institutional orders and its ideological hegemony, frequently the socio-moralities that are the ground of state legitimacy before its citizens. In these senses extremism has everything to do with the state as a system in virtual perpetual crisis, whose vital concern is that of control and order. Understood this way, extremism in the extent, spread and intensity of its realization can be grasped as an index of the degree of crisis confronting the state and the societies of its control.

State systems are virtually by definition highly vulnerable. The archaeological and historical record is clear concerning their fragility in establishment (Scott 2017) and global history is in many senses marked and littered by the evidence of the rise and fall of state orders and their civilizational complexes. This is so to the extent that it could be said that a fear of vulnerability to collapse and paranoia of threat from a multiplicity of sources constitutes the commanding unconscious of state orders, and their process, to be matched perhaps by the hubris of their agents or leaders.

State complexes are expansionist or so in potential, generally as a function of their capacity to war and to trade. Expansion is integral to their formation and to their stability as well as fragility. These aspects and what may be understood as the degree of state vulnerability is connected to the principles of their political economies (including hegemonic ideologies) and their emergent contradictions that place limits on expansion and may impel retraction and collapse. Expansion itself, or over-expansion, is often a response to growing contradictions and

conflicts born of expansion, especially within the larger civilizational or markedly socially and culturally differentiated and heterogeneous complexes that result from the expansion (e.g. see Friedman 1994, Sahllins 2004). It is the very heterogeneity of such state-civilizational systems that constitute major fault lines: spaces of fissure for the manifestation and recognition of a state-threatening extremism and especially that which attacks the ideological (that is often present as the civilizational socio-moral values of state order) as well as key structural points of weakness.

Much of the above is thoroughly evident in imperializing state systems, ancient and contemporary, who are most threatened at their perimeters by groups or socio-political entities that have not been assimilated or co-opted into the state order, or fully embraced by what could be termed its civilizational hegemonic material, social, and ideological processes. It is in relation to those at the edge of the expanding state dominion that concepts or terms that carry the ring of the extreme (and a sense of the crisis of control) such as barbarian, savage, and the exoticism of Othering (as in the critique of colonialist anthropology) are commonly in use.

The foregoing underlines a general point. The extreme or extremism is defined and recognized as such in its threat to the hegemonic structures including the socio-moral values crucial to state-civilizational legitimacy and order. This is so, furthermore, because such structures and values are more than superstructural but vitally integral to the reproduction and continuity of such systems whether at their centre or their periphery. It might follow from this that what counts as extremism is likely to be apparent and excited at the vulnerable and weakening points of state systems, at critical moments of contraction, expansion, reformation or transformation: in other words it is the limiting and weakening points of such systems that



are critical spaces for the extreme. So much international politics might be regarded as a discourse of the extreme and possibly no more so than now when the crises that are arguably endemic to state-civilizational systems are being revealed in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The empirical and ethnographic materials that constitute the basis for the analysis of extremism in the book concentrate on relevant events in the Western hemisphere and in erstwhile dependent areas of Western imperial expansion that have immediate significance for the West in this era of globalization. The limitation of the Western focus underlines this short volume as a prolegomenon to more comprehensive work in which the comparative strengths of an anthropological approach can be given greater rein.

A crucial question that demands pursuit comparatively (a methodological orientation central to the research project of anthropology) concerns the extent to which the perspectives in this volume are—in the main—Western problems influenced in their definition, recognition, and reaction by ideological and structural forces that may have particular intensity in American and European contexts. Extremism may be an issue as it is addressed here that is highly relative to the Western hemisphere. What is understood to be distinctly ‘Western’ is deeply problematic given the global interconnections in many directions of considerable historical depth that preceded the emergence of ‘the West’ before the current era of globalization and the hybridities of practice and value that are a contemporary feature. Nonetheless, the matter of ideological (cultural) and social inflections concerning the matter of extremism remains an issue, perhaps all the more so because of recent globalization.

Some brief hesitant suggestions relating to extremism as a particular Western problematic follows.

Extending from the earlier argument, the situation for extremism and its dimensions as reflecting a crisis of control, may be effected in what some commentators identify to be a decline in the power of Western state orders as a function of insurmountable contradictions in their political economies exacerbated especially by neo-liberal policies. Unemployment has soared, class and ethnic-cum-racial cleavages have widened, fuelling populism, which virtually by definition is a domain of extremism, challenging state authority (as events in Europe and the Americas indicate).

Democratic and associated values have been integral to the political-economic formations of state orders in the Western hemisphere, vital to their hegemonic orders, and active in extremist dissent. Contesting values of the democratic frame the politics of conflict and opposition. Furthermore, a propensity towards extremism may receive impetus in the strong state/society dualism that is a factor in giving rise to the dominance of democratic value, and the way it is turned in challenge or support of ruling authorities. The periods glossed as the Renaissance and Enlightenment are those during which democratic values assume a commanding place, coinciding with the rise of European and American nation-state orders and the capitalist processes at their heart. The course of much current political discourse was largely set in what Eric Hobsbawm calls *The Age of Revolution* (1789–1848).

The singular major defining events are the American, French and Russian revolutions, fuelled especially by Enlightenment philosophical and scientific thought in the wake of major European wars over religion and imperial expansion. The egalitarian anti-hierarchical/oppressive energy of the revolutionary period that was grounded in and expanded from Enlightenment ideas, sharpened an already state/society dualism into greater dialectical tension.

Jean Jacques Rousseau's famous clarion cry 'Man is born free but he is everywhere in chains' expresses a major perspective within dualist thinking that conceives the state, as par excellence the organization of power, to be the thorough contradiction of freedom and its potential within the society. This is so at their extremes that in Rousseau's understanding are emergent in their dialectical tension, as it may be overcome through the dialectic. Thus the extreme of state power, reached in the institutions, for example, of kingship and dictatorship, results in the oppression of society and the extinction of its freedoms in slavery, where the autonomy of individuals is lost. Rousseau's resolution is in the submission or suppression of the state tension to the free democratic participation of individuals in society in what otherwise is reserved as state practice. Rousseau's orientation within Western dualism, which places state and society into problematic relation, of course, is only one perspective emergent in dualist thinking in political philosophy and its post-revolutionary history, which refracts numerous contesting directions on the ground, in the domain of European and American politics. The directions stretch from the extreme far left to the extreme far right—a very Western idiom and still in currency, if weakening, but constituting a scale, constantly changing and relative, for the placing of political ideas and practices and their identification or not as being extreme.

Rousseau's orientation and arguably much Western political philosophy ingrains an individualist value emphasis (see e.g. Dumont 1992; Taylor 1989) even in ideologies that quite explicitly attack individualist thought and practice, to some extent a legacy of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Individualist value assumptions are integral to some of the difficulties in Rousseau's arguments and are certainly manifest in his critics and those who take a different course, but nonetheless within

dualism. A major argument is that individualist value excited in the circumstances of the dynamics of capitalism have shifted the axis of dualist contradiction from that of state versus society to that of both state and society as being different modalities of threat to the individual and vice versa. In this the individual becomes the ground of absolute freedom possibly intensifying all the more the Western hemisphere as a plane of extremism.

The threat to autonomy of action and decision underpins political discourse in the revolutionary and post-revolutionary dualism of state versus society and is exacerbated in associated democratic values of egalitarianism and freedom. Egalitarianism attacks the loss of autonomy in hierarchy and freedom achieves its absolute definition in absolute autonomy. The matter of autonomy and its loss, the submission of the will to another, is a continually immanent contradiction to which Western revolutionary and post-revolutionary orders may be particularly prone and vulnerable.

There is a link between autonomy and authoritarianism, perhaps a dialectical tension, that becomes exposed in dynamics of egalitarianizing socio-political formations. Any assertion of authority over another has the potential to become an authoritarian hierarchical move. The Terror of the French Revolution is a case in point, the revolution collapsing in a chaos of the assertion of individual autonomy against any attempt, usually of authority, at subordination or control. Hegel referred to the Terror as 'the night of the world', a collapsing of the dialectic against itself, born of impossible contradictions at root. The extremism of the Terror was generated from the emergent contradictions immanent at its ideological roots exploding its ideals and bringing down the republican house of cards.

The extremism of greatest fear in the Western hemisphere is that of totalitarian authoritarianism of particular

relevance to state systems. This is directly related to a radical loss of individual and social autonomy, the transfer of individual and social will to the all-encompassing order of the state (Arendt 1951). Totalitarian authoritarian formations are by no means limited to the West, although Arendt argues that their European establishment in Stalinism and Nazism bears relation to their opposition to the European nation-state system, as well as the realization of potential in radical social disconnection, and what she examines as existential loneliness. There is a strong suggestion in her argument that the circumstances of socio-political fragmentation and forces of individualist isolation provide fertile ground for the totalitarian authoritarianism of post-revolutionary Western experience. The value of autonomy—particularly vital in realities of egalitarian individualism and where notions of freedom are equated with autonomous individual potency—may not only excite processes of resistance associated with extremism, but also a tension to authoritarianism, a characteristic of those at the centre of totalitarian regimes and, too, of the cultic both religious and political orders that are extreme standing against controlling political orders and their socio-moral legitimacy. Norman Cohn has argued that extremism of a totalizing and ultimately totalitarian authoritarian kind are among the ‘inner demons’ of the Western hemisphere.

The shadow that is cast over the contributions, forming much of the background to their discourse on extremism, relates to the recent historical experiences of totalitarian authoritarianism (ranging from Fascism, to Stalinism, and most disastrously Nazism) in the West. It is such possibility and the grounds of its birth in the circumstances of imperialism, the growth of capitalism, nationalism, class inequalities, racism, and so on that underpins the critiques of the essays here.

## The Essays

Many of the contributions presented here focus on extremism as a product of the contradictions implicit in the political economies of state systems. They thereby disclose an—otherwise hidden—mutually constitutive relation between the state-civilisational complexes and the extreme.

Kajsa Ekholm Friedman and Jonathan Friedman—for example—explicitly frame their analysis within the context of civilizational decline/contraction. They compare the current global situation to witchcraft epidemics in West Africa in the nineteenth century, where heterodirection, and the breakdown of customary institutions of social control, brought about social disintegration, what Andrew Wilson (this volume) would call ‘apocalypticism’, and the widespread perception of society being penetrated by alien, malevolent forces. With a pessimistic and polemical understanding of hegemonic decline, they also read extremism as a systemic phenomenon, affecting first and foremost the established society. Here the decline of rationalism produces ‘the incapacity of people to understand their own critical predicament, one that leads them to find magical solutions and objects of fear and hate rather than grasping the mechanisms that have brought them to the brink of disaster’.

Pasieka’s analysis uses her multi-sited ethnography with far right milieux in Italy, Hungary and Poland to show how what is commonly categorised as extremism, foreshadows in fact a much larger, and much deeper, ‘extremism of the centre’. Crucially, she grounds in ethnography her understanding of the othering processes operated by mainstream society, exposing the ways in which the transformative impetus, and the heretical critique expressed by these radical formations, becomes

essentialized as ‘extremist’. She claims the main extremism lays in the implicitly repressive and totalitarian attitudes of late capitalist orders, which reject critical stances and erase alternative narratives. In doing so, she argues for the need to rethink and scrutinize ‘the normal’, instead of establishing the extreme.

Focusing on a different area, Caroline Ifeka also addresses the ‘extremism of the centre’. She fathoms the brutal confrontations between Nigerian state troops and Boko Haram soldiers in the lake Chad region, where she describes the progressive emersion and final establishment of a new elite, of which she traces the generative process back to the early times of decolonization. She shows how ‘the oil boom’ triggered a plethora of virulent transformations of intra-social relations, and led to a transition from an early dynamic of social reciprocity between elites and patronage groups, to the interconnection of local elites with foreign corporate capital, and a subsequent disconnection of the former from local populations. She illustrates how all the above engendered acute changes in class structure, and a general polarisation of society between affluent ‘state classes’ and a sphere of lumpenized, uprooted individuals. This is the social context within which Boko Haram’s extremism seems to emerge, as a product of processes of capital extraction, implying social disintegrational effects. She concludes that extremism of the margins and the extremism of the state are one.

Similarly, my own contribution interprets cosmological laceration—and ensuing extremism—as a result of processes of disjuncture and re-articulation between the spheres of political and capital reproduction. Focusing on Spontaneismo, a little known neo-fascist movement of the Italian late 70s, I show how its constitution was at the core of a strange inversion in the ideological configuration of

Italian neo-fascism. A political sphere that was regarded as 'conservatism' became suddenly recategorized as 'extremism' in the mainstream perception. To explain that, I focus on the transformations of state systems during the crisis US political hegemony, to illuminate—locally—the progressive dynamics of disruption of social cohesion. All the above becomes the context of generalized social disorder, a nearly apocalyptic scenario in which new, totalitarian and eschatological understandings of the world are generated, re-shuffling political alignments and producing powerful ideologies of total destruction.

Some of our interventions (Bastin, Roland and Bruce Kapferer) put the stress on current transformations of both technology and capitalism, and signal the progressive encompassment of established political structures and institutions by expanding corporate power. Bastin in particular describes the emersion and proliferation of repressive apparatuses of digitalized surveillance and control, as vectors of a general process of devolution of governance from states' to corporate orders. He sees the above as the process through which extremism and capitalism support each other in the creation of an apocalyptic eschatology that allows for the fulfilment of the totalizing attitudes of current corporate power. The impact of such processes on local societies is described as one of intense fragmentation, individualization, and alienation. Here, the emerging figure of the 'suicide bomber' seems to attempt to reconstitute cosmological integrity, by re-uniting within himself the two poles of a cosmological disjuncture: the archetypical figures of the perpetrator, as well as the victim.

Andrew Wilson's work on white suprematism and the transnational extreme right focuses here on dynamics of ideology formation that are specific to 'the margin'. He describes these 'cultural hinterlands of modern



societies', as a social space endowed with great associative power, where political thinking commingles with religion, conspiracy theory can merge into millennialism, xenophobia and apocalyptic beliefs melt together in a dramatically violent representation of the cosmos. These lateral associations make Wilson talk of these marginal ideologies as 'the expression of unconscious political formations', whose symbolic production seems indeed to function in ways similar to dreamwork. In this context, the marginal critique emergent through current processes of state disintegration seems to take the shape of a resurgence of what was previously repressed as a transgressive, unbridled, violent, and yet imaginative force. Wilson shows how these drives coalesce into the mythical project of a virtual white nation, which the practitioners of 'improvisational millennialism' expect to see raise, after the apocalypse they are calling for (and acting on behalf of).

Finally, building on the Marxist concept of capital's creative destruction, Roland and Bruce Kapferer see extremism as integral to the current transmutation of capital, from one historical form, into a new one. The current Covid-19 situation, they note, has exponentially increased the digitalisation of social interactions, giving state-like proportions to the power of the so called 'com multinationals'. The ensuing disruption of the nation state as the main arena of capital reproduction, becomes here a path-breaking development for both the eruption of extremism, and the substantial transmutation of existing formations of capitalism. Rather than the re-enactment of a fascist past, the key figure of Trump is here understood as an agent of chaos, a future oriented rupturing force, ushering us into a new era of even more pervasive and totalitarian domination of globalized corporate forces. Rather than an antagonist, or the saviour from the totalitarian reality

Trump's presidency represented to many, Joe Biden may very well embody the new—even more authoritarian—power of the corporate state, presenting perhaps less visible, yet equally effective, extremist features of its own.

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# GETTING READY FOR THE DARK AGES?

Preppers, Populists and Climate Prophets:  
The Disintegration of Global Hegemony, PC  
Hysteria and the Deplorable Ugliness of Decline



*Kajsa Ekholm Friedman and Jonathan Friedman*

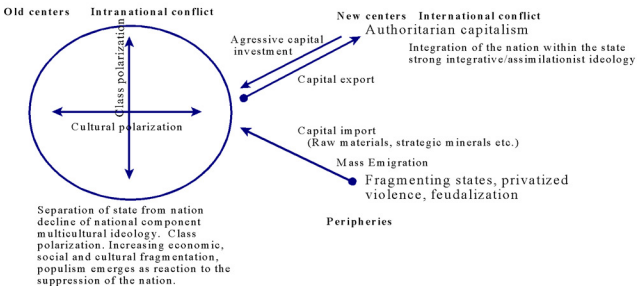
## Scenario

We have been writing about hegemonic decline and its social and cultural consequences since the 1970s. Well, it appears increasingly that there was something to our arguments, as dystopic as they may have sounded.

Below we discuss the way people react in situations of global crisis using a number of cases and focusing specifically on Sweden, a country that was seen as a paragon of the well-functioning welfare state based on a strong sense of belonging and trust in social institutions. If this is no longer the case it is due to a historical context that we can refer to as declining global hegemony, outlined in short order as follows: declining global hegemony of the West, contracting economy and export of capital to new developing areas of the world, shift from industrial to financial accumulation in old centres, increasing competition between old and new centres, increasing exploitation of natural resources, increasing instability as larger political regimes fracture into

opposing units leading to increasing violence and warfare, mass migration from collapsing peripheries to the old declining centres, growing internal conflict in situations of increasing class polarization and ethnicization, and identity politics becomes generalized. This process began in the late 70s with the decline of modernist ideologies and their replacement with cultural identification (roots, religion, gender etc.) and identity politics. It developed into a double polarization, horizontal between identities and vertical between increasingly wealthy elites and increasingly poor working and former working classes. This was associated with a shift in the dominant mode of thought in which associationism replaced rational argument, i.e. association in time and space to label individuals into new categories that are highly polarized, for example if you are against immigration you are against immigrants and thus a racist. If you have lunch with a racist then you are a racist. This is identity talk, in which the content of the discourse is eclipsed by its social indexical properties, that is, what it tells us about the identity of the interlocutor. The context in which this occurs can be mapped in global terms as shown in Figure 1.1.

#### Mapping declining hegemony



**Figure 1.1.** Mapping declining hegemony [created by the authors].

Declining hegemony in the centre is expressed in the double polarization depicted in Figure 1.1, a polarization that increases to near hysteria when elites lose control.

When things get bad we get worse. The title of this chapter refers to the reactions of people in the context of interminable decline. It is important to understand this process since it is so clearly human. The famous nineteenth century witchcraft epidemics in Central Africa were triggered by European colonial expansion in the area and the ensuing breakdown of the social order. Instead of resisting the superior power they took it out on themselves and magic became a major instrument of internal self-destruction. Are we so different?

There is some truth, perhaps a lot of truth, to people's irrational reactions. In a recent publication (Friedman 2019) dealing with political correctness it is suggested that the nervousness of elites when they discover that increasing numbers of people are becoming *populist* transforms their disdain into rage, just as populism itself is a form of people's rage against those who they once thought represented them.

Declining hegemony generates global crises that in worst case scenarios lead to global chaos, a likely result of a tightly interdependent global system.

### **In Sweden!?!?**

Yes, as we shall see below, Sweden, has become a target of political discourse, symbol of the failure of social democracy. Since we have published on this since the late 90s there have been numerous publications dealing with a country in deep trouble (Norman 2019) that more than reinforce what we have been describing for a couple of decades. The following will focus very much on Sweden since it exemplifies the extremism of our times.

Throughout Europe there has been a fusion of social democrats and liberals as well as cultural elites more generally, sometimes designated as the *latte left*. This began in the 80s with New Labour, New Democrats, and the Neue Mitte often partaking in *purple* governments (right-left fusion). These elites are increasingly frightened by the rise of the *populists*, subject of innumerable academic conferences, and now they feel the need to crush the enemy in the name of ‘the truth’. They have replaced a declining working class with immigrants as the people to fight for. The epithets are recognizable: in a recent publication (Friedman 2019) the issue of political correctness is analysed in relation to the rise of new liberal elites who identify as cosmopolitans in relation to the declining socio-economic conditions of the working class and their opposition to mass immigration and multicultural politics. This was dealt with by elites through shame tactics until they realized that there were increasing numbers of people who appeared to be populist. So shaming has been replaced by outright war against what are designated as extreme right populism and racism, *terms that have been expanded to encompass all expressions of national sovereignty*. In this mounting struggle against the new populism identified as the new extreme right by ‘respectable’ politicians and liberal-left media, and aided by Soros investments in the demise of the nation (Andrew 2020), there is no intellectual argument. The only intellectual activity would seem to be to find links that enable one to classify the *Other* as evil and dangerous. Thus, populists have become so because some evil people, the nationalists, have fooled them into believing that the world is moving in the wrong direction, i.e.. globalization. Strange party alliances, for example in Sweden between (neo) liberals and social democrats have been established primarily to keep the rising populist party, the Sweden

democrats, out of any positions of power. It is forbidden by many parties to even speak with them ... or at least until recently, when it became apparent that they have become the largest party in the country, in spite of politicians and media bad-talking.

The inescapable issue centres very much on the question of immigration and elite multicultural politics. There are good reasons for this. Mass immigration from the Middle East and Africa has been occurring throughout Europe. This is not the labour migration of the 60s and 70s to an expanding Europe based very much on post-war American capital investment. It is the continued and increased immigration of the mid-eighties until today and in Sweden, as in Germany, it is primarily from crisis areas in the Middle East and Africa. And it is occurring in a Europe in economic decline, not least in the former industrial foundations that have been exported to China, India and so on. Where there is labour migration it is primarily in construction and services and is a question of labour dumping. As the economy has become increasingly based on finance, class relations have become progressively polarized and welfare states cannot function when increasing percentages of the population are not working or working in subsidized employment.<sup>1</sup> Sweden is an ideal typical example of this. It has led to the virtual bankruptcy of a large number of communes. Immigration into declining economies can only lead to polarization and conflict. The emergence of parallel societies and immigrant ghettos has already begun to take its toll. Instead of integration a new underclass has emerged with all the problems that accompany it. Urban violence has reached new highs in Sweden. There are 60 'risk' zones of which 22 are no-go zones substantially controlled by immigrant gangs, where the police have more or less lost control. The traffic in heavy drugs is more or less open,



and sexual violence has escalated. On top of this record numbers of police have quit their jobs. All of this is well known and has been taken up in the international media, but it has been systematically denied by most politicians in Sweden (until recently): ‘repressed’ is the best word. Instead we hear: ‘we have never had it so good’, ‘crime is declining’, . . . until late summer 2019, when panic broke out after the spectacular murder in broad daylight of a woman holding her baby . . . and in a good neighbourhood to boot! This time the crime could not be covered up. Of course the woman’s boyfriend had just completed an eight-year jail sentence and was involved in serious criminal activity. Now the media have become schizophrenic, reporting increasing violence on the one hand and claiming that it is right-wing propaganda on the other. An amusing example of this is an article published in the *New York Times*, a front page article claiming, just as in the US elections of 2016, that Russian influence, hacking and support for extreme right media had led ordinary Swedes to believe that there was a close connection between rapidly increasing violent crime in the country and mass immigration . . . all of this was described as a propaganda campaign meant to exploit fear and maybe coming elections (Becker 2019). The article does admit that there are problems in a country where 25% of the population is of immigrant background (19% first generation in 2018)<sup>2</sup> but tries to imply that it is all being exploited by Russian agents who pay young immigrants to create trouble. Three internet sites were directly named as complicit in this conspiracy: Samnytt, Nyheter idag and Fria Tider, all alternative news sites that have been critical of accepted or politically correct descriptions of Swedish political reality and the sites were depicted in huge print on an entire page so as to be easily identifiable. This conspiracy, similar to that about ‘Russia

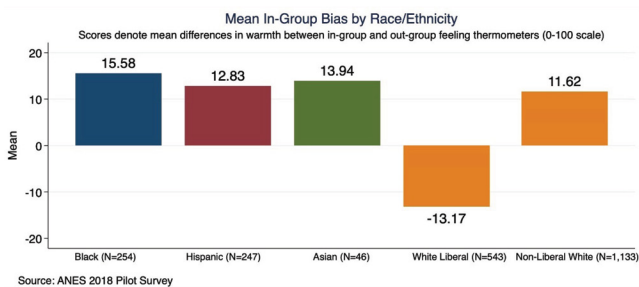
meddling in US elections' blames all alternative interpretations of reality as the work of foreign infiltration.

As the political elites centralize into a purple centrism they continue to use progressive language but have now shifted from class to 'race', especially immigrants and minorities who are now endowed with a 'protected species' identity. The rights of the 'Other' is the new progressive democratic principle while the local/national is relegated to the sphere of reaction. The new opposition is between cosmopolitan elites, 'anywheres' and locals, 'somewheres', as a self-penitent liberal has put it (Goodhart 2017). We interpret this as the outcome of the vertical polarization that accompanies hegemonic decline (Fig.1.1).

### *Ideological Inversion*

In periods of imperial expansion an ideology of domination arises in the form of evolutionism or at least a ranking of peoples in relation to the hegemonic centre. In declines this is often inverted so that all things of the centre are seen negatively. This is documented in Friedman (2019) but it has, as we would expect, become extremist in recent years, in which liberals have become experts in self-hate. Recent polls<sup>3</sup> have demonstrated the divergence between extreme white liberals and all other groups in the US, the latter of whom display more positive feelings to other groups than their own. This is a widespread phenomenon referred to below as Occidentalism, the inversion of Orientalism. It has been suggested in the Swedish media and even in parliament that the recent robbery-attacks by gangs of immigrants against kids (förnärdringsrån: 'humiliation-robbery', including pissing in the victims mouth while calling them 'fucking Swedes')<sup>4</sup> could be labelled racism. The suggestion was rejected by the government.

SAS posted an advertisement on 2 November 2020 featuring ‘what is Scandinavian? Nothing!!’ they took it down after 40,000 hate mails. Liberal media claimed that the hate was all extreme right-wing and orchestrated by Putin.



**Figure 1.2.** Mean in-group bias by race/ethnicity [created by the authors].

### *Displacement*

Just as in the epidemic of witchcraft accusations in late nineteenth century Central Africa, the lack of comprehension of crisis leads to massive displacement of blame.

Part of the displacement process is to take it out on Western white men, especially celebrities. This is an expression of the extremist turn in Occidentalism, i.e. self-hatred of the West. A Frenchman married to a member of the Swedish academy caused a disastrous scandal in 2018 when he was accused publicly of sexual harassment by 16 women, apparently related to an internal power conflict in the academy. The alleged rape occurred some 15 years ago with a woman who had already had sex with him several times, and who accused him of not stopping the oral sex that she initiated following intercourse when she changed her mind. The events were of course related to the ‘MeToo’

movement and the Frenchman was clearly a distasteful individual. There was no material evidence and in Sweden it is very difficult to make rape charges stick, but the court loved the case and said overtly that the plaintiff's recounting of the facts was absolutely trustworthy. Several other media personalities were also accused of sexual abuse, cases that filled the media at the same time as more than 7000 rapes were reported this year, the majority allegedly committed by either non-citizens or by immigrants with permanent residence. While some of those (11% in 2018; 58% foreign born) have been prosecuted, the very great majority have not, precisely on the grounds of lack of evidence, even when there was available DNA. The police have no time for this; they are busy with gang related crime and, they say, the cases would never pass the legal system. Now we don't want to exaggerate. One of us grew up in New York at the height of a major crime wave. And most people never become victims, not even in war zones. But Swedes never worried about this kind of thing in the past. While the media may have avoided much of the worst, some journalists have covered the increasing change and readers of newspapers are increasingly afraid of what is happening. It is partly the contrast and the speed at which it has emerged. Recent reports show that young women as well as increasing numbers of both young and old are afraid of going out at night in many urban areas.

The situation in Sweden as in Europe is also specific in that the majority of immigrants are from MENA (Middle East and North African) countries and many have an extra added ingredient of distaste or even hate for most things Western (De Winter 2016). This is a product of a prevalent version of Islam, not merely among Islamists, something that is constantly denied but which has been well documented. The denial is itself part of the reaction to the situation, the possibility of islamophobia!<sup>5</sup> And all

of this is reinforced by the elite's Occidentalism referred to above (Friedman 2009), which inverts the former imperial Orientalism, i.e. the former centre is a target of self-disrespect and even self-hate (Adamson 2021, for an important analysis).

### **Climate Angst**

Another displacement in relation to the reality of crisis is the shift to climate and especially to global warming ... it is as warm now as it was in the early 80s when 40 elderly French women and men died of the heat. Of course there is an ecological crisis as the result of the acceleration of capitalist competition, but the reaction or perhaps anguish is related to a more general fear of loss of security that is general in an era of hegemonic decline. The head of the Green Party in Sweden exclaimed last summer that her lawn had turned brown, and it was terribly hot! Something has to be done, mostly in the way of higher taxes that hit the poorest members of society, hence the 'Yellow Vests' in France. We even have a prophet from Sweden, an apparently autistic 15-year-old who started striking from school and quickly gained a following of millions and met the United Nations, the EU and even the Pope. Strikes have increased among school children, and it has been invoked by politicians in their effort to raise taxes on fuel. All of this is very much the work of 'climate Greta's' celebrity parents, and a lot of financial and political support from various companies including the Rockefeller Foundation. And this cultish phenomenon is built on 'science'. Science tells us that the world will end if we don't drastically cut CO2 emissions. Yes climate committees that insist on global warming today predicted in the 1970s that we were on the way to a new Ice Age. The relation

between CO<sub>2</sub> and climate is and has been much debated, and if there is a real global warming—which is clearly the case—there are plenty of other explanations. After all there is no explanation for why the climate cooled from the 1940s to the 70s, in spite of increasing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, sparking the fear of new Ice Age. But this time they are right! *And all of this is going on at the same time as nothing is said of the rapid destruction of nature at the hands of an over intensified capitalist surge resulting from competition to death in the crisis of the global system.* Greta Thunberg sailed from England to the US in a zero-emissions yacht supplied by a wealthy German property owner. Greta was accompanied on the voyage by Malizia II's skipper Boris Hermann, her father Svante, and Pierre Casiraghi, the grandson of Monaco's late Prince Rainier III and the actress Grace Kelly. Splendid! Great work for the climate! And many thanks to her supporters. Greta has now gained the status of prophet. Three cheers for Hollywood. And thank you 'green capitalism' (Attard 2019).

Quite a few years ago, French geo-physicist Claude Allègre published a book, *L'imposture Climatique ou la Fausse Écologie* (2012), (never published in English), which caused quite a scandal due to his being a well-known scientist who had served as education and research minister in the socialist government from 1997 to 2000. The book might be uneven and full of typos, but its argument is that the scientific evidence for the relationship between CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and global warming is not established by any means. There was a prolonged attack on the validity of his arguments, some of which were actually somewhat scientifically based, and of course, Allègre was not denying climate change, but rather claiming that we need a lot more real science and not mere correlation-based computer models. An interview included in the book is revealing:

‘For a long time you have been more or less alone in France in your criticism (denunciation) of the thesis that ‘global warming’ is caused by human activity, even if recently, a growing number of experts have begun to join in your struggle ... ‘It is not a ‘struggle’ against the thesis. It is about scientific questioning. My struggle is against extremism in all forms, against alarmism, fear, green totalitarianism, against all extremisms, no matter what their origin. This is a struggle for rationality and for reasonableness. (2012, 17)

Even if there were still room for critical discussion in 2012, it has all but evaporated with the emergence of the ‘climate cult’. It was accurately depicted as extremism from the start. And what is interesting in this cult is its reference to ‘research’ as the source of its authority. A researcher in Stockholm suggested at a conference on the future of food that cannibalism might be a good solution to climate change.

This can be read as mental breakdown, one that has been discussed in other countries as well (Murray 2019; Koppetsch 2019).

While many have now discovered, or rather become aware, that the world is moving quickly to a state of violent fragmentation of identities, as Murray and Koppetsch mentioned above and even the left seem to grasp that liberal and leftist elites have helped create a new and growing populism (Goodhart 2017), none have been able to place these developments within the larger global systemic context, one that would have allowed us to see it all coming at a time when it was not yet an issue or at most politically incorrect. Briefly, the systemic relation is the scenario described above for declining hegemony. It is not at all uniform as a process but differential in geopolitical terms. In the West (the core of dehegemonization),

there was a decline of a dominant modernist identity in the late 70s and 80s leading to its replacement by a focus on culture and especially cultural identities: indigenous, ethnic, religious regional, sexual, and so on. At the same time there was a shift from industrial to financial accumulation generating a plethora of fictitious forms of growth and speculation including the so-called culture industries. This included both flexible capital accumulation, a new class polarization, and the formation of liberal cultural elites who identified as progressive and cosmopolitan, i.e. ‘anywheres’ in Goodhart’s terms (2017) while former industrial working classes, Goodhart’s ‘somewheres’ disintegrated and experienced strong downward mobility. This political economic process included the collapse of former global peripheries into a spiral of violence and mass emigration to the declining centres where integration was out of the question and even opposed by liberal elites who have become Occidentalists, preferring other ‘cultures’ to their own. This process also includes the rise of new centres, in part or whole. China, for example, is not undergoing disintegration as it rises on the road to hegemony, nor is it rife with identity politics even if there are examples of ethnic politics in the peripheral areas of the country. As this process is always fragile and full of potential conflicts, it is not surprising to find major conflicts, but these are unlike those in the West about the expansion of state power where national identity is taken for granted.

As the contradictions of decline proliferate, Hobbes’ state of war is approaching, a war of identities that fractures all domains of life, not only sexual coming out, but sex reassignment surgery among youth, which is not apparently successful since those who undergo it are often even more depressed. Not feeling at home in one’s body has become a social phenomenon; gender dysphoria and



the larger LGBTQ movement is itself ridden with contradictions—for example, why be queer if I can change my gender completely, thus reproducing the traditional dichotomy, and then suddenly claims of ‘transphobia’ (Petter 2019)? So, not just ethnicity, regionalism, nationalism, racism, Islamism, and so on. It’s all about identity dysphoria. In the wake of the collapse of a socially identifiable future we have become a world of fragments.

### **Preppers and Paradoxes**

The more rational and direct response to crisis is to move out of urban areas. Ruralizing migrants are building up stores of water, canned goods, wood to burn, etc. They are often armed and sometimes form communities of people who think in similar ways. These are the so-called ‘preppers’, but they have forerunners in the numerous communes that have appeared in the past century, beginning primarily in the decades of the Cold War with fear of nuclear and other disasters, all under the general rubric of *survivalism*, which has become a more urgent and organized project of late (Williams 2017; Yuhas 2020). It is a relatively rational response even if it has extreme consequences. It consists in a form of social risk reduction that affects all of us to varying degrees. It has long-term historical precedents in similar periods of imperial collapse and ruralization, sometimes referred to as the onset of ‘dark ages’.

But there is also a significant population that has ‘escaped’ or been forced from urban areas because of a combination of high costs and increasing insecurity. These are mostly young families who move into neighbouring, more rural communes. While not preppers, they are part

of an important exodus from declining centres. One might add to this a specific phenomenon in Sweden that has been referred to as structural homelessness, a combination of ordinary people who can't afford their costs of housing and so-called refugees who have their rents paid for two years by the state and are then cut loose. Many of these are forced to move to rural areas that previously experienced depopulation, following de-industrialization, where there are neither jobs nor services. This is a new landscape, or perhaps a mere repetition of the disintegration of former imperial systems.

The current Covid-19 crisis is a perfect incubator for extremism with its hoarding of toilet paper, and hate for the 'Others'. It also demonstrates how identity trumps (haha) political ideology. Some Americans have revolted against the lockdowns that Democrats have integrated into their identity, proof that Republicans are fascists. But in Sweden it's the other way around. The result? Demonstrators revolting against lockdowns in Democratic party-ruled states carry signs exclaiming 'Do like in Sweden'. And some Democrats say that *all* Swedes, i.e. social democrats and liberals, are actually Republicans. If you are *for* lockdowns then you *must* be a Democrat! Strange Covid-19 bedfellows . . . Trump and Swedish left liberals?

Extremism is about the incapacity of people to understand their own critical predicament, one that leads them to find magical solutions and objects of fear and hate rather than grasping the mechanisms that have brought them to the brink of disaster. How many ridiculous theories argued that the end of previous civilizations was due to natural changes, to warm, to cold, volcanic eruptions and what not? As our system destroys itself we destroy ourselves demonstrating, once again, our incapacity as a species to understand our own best interests.

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### Notes

1. In societies with limited welfare, immigration is primarily in the form of cheap labor in services which generates little tax revenue for various reasons, often criminal.

2. ([www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/befolkning/befolkningens-sammansattning/befolkningsstatistik/pong/tabell-och-diagram/helarsstatistik—riket/befolkningsstatistik-i-sammandrag/](http://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/befolkning/befolkningens-sammansattning/befolkningsstatistik/pong/tabell-och-diagram/helarsstatistik—riket/befolkningsstatistik-i-sammandrag/)).
3. ANES, 2018, pilot survey.
4. [www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/2GILRr/tonarsranare-urinerade-pa-sitt-offer—och-filmade](http://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/a/2GILRr/tonarsranare-urinerade-pa-sitt-offer—och-filmade).
5. In our work on the Hawaiian movement we found that Hawaiians who were not engaged in any actions supported them as well as the demand for sovereignty. Similarly, reports have shown that a large proportion of Muslims in Europe support Sharia as a replacement for democracy.

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# ARE WE ALL EXTREMISTS NOW?



*Agnieszka Pasieka*

‘But how numerous are those extremists?’ I hear this question in my head, each word carefully enunciated, as if to prompt me to take the question seriously and, often-times, to recognize the implied authority of the person asking it (*I, a political scientist, can provide sophisticated data on the electoral outcomes of extreme-right parties, but I have no clue what these ethnographic vignettes of yours are proving*). In terms of ‘popularity,’ this is question number two among those I am asked whenever I present findings from my ongoing project on transnational far-right youth activism.<sup>1</sup> No matter whether it is asked with fear (*Are they an actual threat?*), perplexity (*Why would anyone join them?*) or scepticism (*This must be a pretty marginal group?*), the question usually presumes I *can* and *should* provide the audience not only with exact numbers, but also with an assessment of the danger these numbers pose.

I do not know how numerous the youth communities I am studying are. In the course of my ethnographic research on far-right milieux in Italy, Poland and Hungary, I have been visiting different regional centres in which, as I have learnt, ten, thirty, or a hundred militants are active (and to make it clear: I study the movements and associations that are considered the key actors on the youth

far-right scene in the respective countries). ‘People come and go,’ I hear constantly, ‘we have ups and downs’. I am usually told that apart from the militants—‘ever-presents’ and those who can be counted on ‘no matter what’—there are also dozens, or hundreds, of sympathizers who join specific events and can be called upon when necessary. And I also hear, repeatedly, whether in Hungary, Italy or Poland: ‘it is not about the quantity but the quality: our aim is to grow new men.’<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of my research, I would assume that by giving such responses the movements’ leaders were trying to get away without admitting to the declining interest and difficulties. Three years into the research, I recognize they have a point.

What is extremism? Can one measure it? Demarcate it from the ‘centre’? Separate it from what is considered ‘proper’, ‘normal’, ‘common’? Although we intuitively feel that the answer to this question is at best contextual, the terms ‘extremism’ and ‘extremisms’ have often been used in various comparative endeavours. Due to the so-called ‘rise’ or ‘return’ of the far right, the publications on right-wing extremism have been on the rise, too, usually bringing together accounts on extreme right-wing parties and subcultures in different national contexts. But even though the titles of such publications feature ‘extremism’, very few of them actually engage with the idea of ‘extremism’ or ‘extreme’, nor do they explain what the authors consider as such. Quite tellingly, authors often feel compelled to provide other qualifying statements—to distinguish between ‘movements’ and ‘parties’, for instance—but not to explain extremism. Perhaps the scholar who comes the closest to giving any definition of the term is the political scientist Cas Mudde, who suggests that right-wing extremism usually denotes whatever the person using the term considers to be the opposite of his views (Mudde 2000).

This sort of upfront criticism may sound unfair given that my own research and scholarship is burdened with terminological difficulties. When necessary, I use the term ‘far right’ to indicate a set of anti-egalitarian, anti-pluralist and exclusionary ideas, related to some form of identitarian politics—in the case of the communities I study, related to their conception of national, religious (Christian) and ethnocultural identities. Aware that it is *far* from perfect, I employ this term for comparative scopes in an attempt to draw a broader picture of the transnational right-wing youth scene. When possible, I try to engage with the emic categories used by my research participants. They tend to define themselves simply through the membership in a given movement (‘I am a militant of X’), thereby emphasizing the uniqueness of their communities and the fact that their movements escape easy categorizations. This resistance to broader categories is likewise related to the variety of ‘missions’ they claim to put forward (from ‘cultural education’ and ‘ethical upbringing’, through social assistentialism, to the dismantlement of economic-political systems) and, simultaneously, to the awareness that particular labelling has a strong impact on (potential) members and recipients of their activism. In turn, the term *far right* is frowned upon as not fitting the post-ideological landscape as well as neglecting the relevance of the left-wing agenda for the groups in question; *fascism* is rejected as anachronistic and wrongly presupposing nostalgic attitudes; finally, *extreme right* is rejected as the term political opponents employ to describe them.<sup>3</sup> Once again, they have a point here.

Drawing on my own research experience and even more so on its reception, in this short piece I would like to make three proposals regarding present-day extremism. The first is to see extremism as a result of the lack of political imagination; the second calls for recognizing



the extremism of the centre; and the third suggests ways in which this extremism of the middle renders numerous observers myopic. In making these proposals, what I aim to do is to give ‘extremists’ a face and voice. I evidently study them—so at least I am frequently told!—and thus I will hopefully be able to say a few words about them.

## 1.

One of the most instructive exercises for anyone who wants to learn about the perception of right-wing extremism is a look at the book covers and photos that are supposed to illustrate the arguments offered in publications on the subject. Roughly speaking, they fall into one of three categories. The first, and perhaps the most common one includes well-known images of shaven heads, tattooed bodies, fists and raised arms, obligatorily accompanied by expressions of angry, hateful shouts; the ‘Neo-Nazi rally’ category. The second group constitutes images featuring elderly men dressed in ivy caps and cheap jackets, accompanied by women wearing old-fashioned coats and clutching rosaries. You may spot a cross in the background and a banner with an aborted foetus or a picture of the ‘natural family’. Depending on the context discussed, they represent ‘rednecks’, ‘Eastern Europeans’ and ‘transformation losers’, held responsible for the election of right-wing populist governments and traditionalist policies. This is category number two: the ‘backward crowd’. The third group includes images featuring politicians, usually labelled right-wing populists, whose sketched portraits or photos feature an obligatory grimace and discontent. Whether it is Trump, Le Pen, Orbán or Kaczyński, their representations rank somewhere between

mad men and bullies (and differ substantially from those of, say, the elegant Macron and smiling Trudeau).

What such illustrations—or rather, to be more precise, the choice behind their selection—clearly establish is the relationship between ‘extremism’ and unreasonable, ignorant, dogmatic, deviant beliefs and attitudes. They suggest the ways in which extremists do not belong (to the rest of society); occupy some sorts of margins; do not want to or are unable to ‘catch up’ with what is considered modern, appropriate and normal; and represent evils of some kind. The violence is that of one sort and relates to physical aggression and threats. Aspects of scorning and shaming, described by Pierre Bourdieu as crucial for establishing what counts as ‘correct’/‘proper’ (Bourdieu 1971), are also clearly detectable. Although in theory the three categories differ, what connects them in practice is the fact that all these groups are assigned the very same ‘marginal place’, which is understood literally and metaphorically.

What occurs here resembles somewhat the above case of publications that talk about extremism without explaining what is meant by it. Here, the images selected often seem to only partly correspond with the very evidence presented in articles and monographs, leaving open the question of who an extremist actually is. For despite the persistent implication that ‘right-wing extremist’ indicates a person radically different from and alien to the society, the evidence points to the contrary. A growing number of sociological and anthropological works studying the milieux dubbed ‘right-wing extremists’ talk about middle-class, established citizens; about people with a dense network of social ties who by no means feel excluded; about students, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs actively engaging in far-right causes; and last but not least, about people whose ideas are far from traditionalist or patriarchal.

Yet the crux of the matter is that the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of extremism has much deeper causes and, while necessary, the act of presenting data on educated, middle-class, ‘respectable’ members/supporters of the ‘extreme right’ does not get to the core of the problem. The problem with the representation and understanding of extremism does not consist in providing ‘correct’ demographic data, but in altering the very way we conceive of the relationship between extremism and the magical ‘rest’ of society. I believe that trying to rethink this *way* is a useful exercise, even if it does not necessarily need to lead to the perception of the category of extremism as analytically helpful. In an attempt to understand this dynamic, I find Susan Harding’s reflections on the construction of religious fundamentalism (extremely!) helpful. In Harding’s widely quoted article on ‘repugnant others’, she points out that challenging our way of thinking about religious fundamentalists is not contingent upon us saying that ‘they are really in many ways modern’, criticizing popular images and stereotypes, or simply ‘revising’, yet continuously reproducing, the modernist tale of fundamentalism. As she emphasizes, ‘The point is precisely to problematize that apparatus [of thought], its representations, and its constitutive power as a hegemonic discourse which directly defines and dialogically generates its “other” ...’ (Harding 1991: 391–392).

In the case of ‘extreme-right’ actors (some of whom actually blend with the category of religious fundamentalists), an equivalent to Harding’s ‘modern’ is the idea of ‘normality’ and ‘normal’. As I remarked above, the socially established representation of the extreme right tends to equal something deviant, aberrant, anomalous—‘abnormal’ and thereby extreme. Of course, numerous far-right actors employ the very same notion; ‘normal’

lends itself as synonymic to various adjectives denoting the desired state of society (traditional, natural, hierarchical, etc.). However, the point I wish to make here—and throughout this contribution—relates to non-far-right discourses which, to use Harding's expression, define and generate 'the Other' (the 'extreme'). I leave aside the question of 'Othering' performed by the far right not because I do not find it relevant, but because this problem is, in many ways, so much more transparent; it is the 'centre' that demands more scrutiny.

So, back to the question of 'normality': what has been noticeable in recent discussions on the rise of right-wing populism was precisely the idea of 'lost normality' accompanied by the simultaneous conviction that after four or five years of right-wing populist rule, the situation will 'go back to normal'. The socio-political contexts in which right-wing populist parties obtained power or in which they have been gradually getting more support are too varied to allow for generalizations about the causes of their success (the agenda of these parties is also context-specific). Yet what is quite common for these cases is *their opponents'* attachment to the idea of 'regaining normality', without making an attempt to entertain different socio-economic scenarios. Although I am hesitant to use the term 'neoliberalism', it can be briefly stated that the 'normality' often constitutes a variation of it.<sup>4</sup> As early as 2000, Gáspár Miklós Tamás in his essay entitled 'On Post-Fascism' warned against the decline of 'critical culture' in favour of 'apologetic culture' and 'highbrow despair', stating that: 'The mere idea of radical change (utopia and critique) has been dropped from the rhetorical vocabulary, and the political horizon is now filled by what is there, by what is given, which is capitalism . . . What is the point of theoretical anti-capitalism, if political anti-capitalism cannot be taken seriously?' (Tamás 2000).

What I find most convincing in Tamás's essay is the emphasis on idea of *change*, which does not need to translate specifically as an alternative to capitalism but which indicates a willingness to engage with different ways of thinking (even, or maybe especially those, one deeply disagrees with) and to consider change possible. This deliberate lack of engagement and political imagination, often connected with 'highbrow despair', is what produces particular representations of extremism.

To illustrate this issue, I would like to use evidence from my Italian case study. For a few years, I have been attending a far-right summer festival organized in northern Italy, featuring discussions, concerts, and sessions devoted to summarizing the old and planning new activities. The festival has been growing rapidly, transforming from a local event into a nationwide one. As a consequence, it has been gradually attracting more attention from the mass media. During the last edition, one journalist, upon arriving at the site with a camera operator, glanced at the venue and said to her co-workers: *'Ragazzi, ma qui non abbiamo niente'* (Guys, we have nothing to report on here). Evidently, walking through the venue, which resembled a scout camp rather than a neo-Nazi gathering, she did not find the material for the video she had hoped to make. Had she stayed at the event, she could have listened, among others, to a rather complex and well-argued lecture on the advantages of the federalist system for healthcare or the protests against Milan's mayor's decision to raise the price of the ticket for public transport, as inconsistent with environmental policies. To be sure, she would also have had the opportunity to listen to much more 'conventionally' far-right subjects, including critique of the EU, favourable statements on Putin's Russia, and 'illegal immigration'.

The far-right youth I got to know spend a good deal of time discussing politics and the economy. In proposing answers to the socio-economic problems their societies are facing, they present their own arguments as concrete solutions as opposed to the abstractions served by the ruling politicians, and themselves as the voices of ‘common sense’. A similar event in Poland would likely feature a discussion on the interwar ideas on social economy and a strong critique of liberal democracy. The Hungarian one could even include a discussion on the advantages of the monarchy. In citing these examples, of course, I do not mean to evaluate them or assess their potential; it is plausible that many of those engaged in discussions are aware of their utopian dimension. What is important about them is the way in which they reflect the inadequacy of the language and categories continuously used by ‘mainstream’ political actors. And, as remarked above, both critique and utopia are necessary for conceiving of change—of *rethinking the normal* rather than establishing what counts as ‘extreme’.

## 2.

Shortly before the summer event in Italy, I attended a far-right music festival organized by the Hungarian movement, which hosted a representation of their Polish counterpart and ally. It was not the first time I had met with either of them and the group leaders know me quite well by now. When queuing for food with a few Polish activists, I was approached by the Hungarian organizer and his colleague, holding a camera in his hand. They were documenting the festival and decided to include in it the anthropologist who had been following it for a few years.

‘This is Aga’, my Hungarian interlocutor said in English, looking into the camera, ‘she is a researcher and a lefty, but whenever she comes here she suffers because deep inside she knows we are right. Aga, how do you deal with this Stockholm syndrome?’ he asked, laughing. I was so surprised at them approaching me with a camera that I did not even manage to formulate a proper response before I was presented with a new set of questions: ‘So Aga, tell us, who is responsible for this hot weather and climate change?’ (the weather was truly unbearable, with temperatures around 40°C and an invasion of mosquitos). We went back and forth, me naming all the culprits and my interlocutor shaking his head, acting as if he were a disappointed teacher or father. ‘Oh come on, say it’, he uttered eventually, pointing with his index finger at his face and drawing the shape of a hooked nose in the air, ‘Of course it’s THEM’.

It was not the first time that the stereotypical image of Jews would come up in the conversations. I have attended numerous events in which the idea of the world Jewish lobby or the image of Israel as the chief enemy were taken quite seriously, leading to offensive commentaries and slogans. But I have also been present at numerous conversations in which the activists, sometimes from the same country, sometimes from different ones, would engage in *supposedly* antisemitic conversation to make fun of the stereotypical claims that are often described as ‘far-right talk’, as their way of thinking. In a similar vein, Hungarian activists would present the *supposedly* serious account of their country’s mythic origins and the antiquity of the old-Hungarian script they actually promoted during the festival in question, to conclude with a wink and a chuckle: ‘So truly authentic’.

The argument I want to make here is not easy due to the weight of antisemitic discourses in the past and today.

I by no means want to diminish their importance. It is also not easy, because one needs to distinguish here between the different types of actors involved in production and dissemination of certain discourses, the leaders quite aware of the ‘authentic’ value of the national script and the audience who is the target of that discourse, and of nationalist branding more broadly. At any rate, one of the most interesting features of my work was observing my research participants being at times ‘damn serious’ about performed identities and tasks and at times very ironic about them, demonstrating a distance to themselves and sometimes even a willingness to engage in self-parody. This is an aspect I am still trying to ‘work through’ in analysing my data, to move beyond a simple statement that makes the far-right activists I am studying into full-fledged, complex individuals.

Here, I would like to use it to make a somewhat reverse argument. If the lack of capacity for irony and self-distance is what makes an extremist, then, yes, surely, there are many of them among the so-called far right (politicians, ideologues, militants alike). What also follows from this, however, is the recognition of the extremism of the centre.<sup>5</sup> The link between the limits of the political imagination mentioned above and the lack of irony and self-distance is no doubt one of the defining features of present-day extremism. In a recent piece, the political scientist Martin Plax elaborated on the problem of the lack of irony in contemporary societies as sustaining extremism, and more specifically the inclination towards what he calls ‘idealistic extremism’ (Plax 2013).

This sort of extremism leaves no place for contradictions, incongruities, and self-doubt, assuming instead a position of a moral authority. Worth discussing in this context are recent debates on whether the current moment ought to be considered a ‘replay of the 1930s’, marked by the rise of



authoritarian, extreme-right regimes. The analogies offered are often framed as warnings, as a call not to commit the very same mistakes as our predecessors when ignoring the danger of totalitarian ideologies.<sup>6</sup> As such, they may be said to comply with Plax's observations on 'idealistic extremism', which sustains the belief that learning from the past is possible, assuming the past to be coherent (Plax 2013: 202). For they are often framed as much more than a scholarly and political project, as a sort of a moral battle fought between the defenders of liberalism and its—real or purported—annihilators. What accompanies this view is a contempt of anyone underestimating it, often linked with ignorance when it comes to the reason why some (perhaps many?) people think differently.

On the one hand, then, the extremism of the centre manifests itself in this sort of moralizing and/or high-brow despair, and, on the other hand, in the assumption that any 'intelligent/reasonable/normal' person could not conceivably support certain ideas and is on the good side (this way of thinking is dominant at many scholarly conferences, where certain views are simply taken for granted). Ironically or not, this sort of self-image cannot but mirror the vision it purportedly fights against.

### 3.

At the very same Hungarian festival, I had the chance to talk at length to one of the former leaders of the Polish movement. He told me, among other things, about frequent attempts to delegalize his movement. Since his association does not have a headquarters, all the correspondence used to be sent to his private address. One day, he found in the mailbox a letter from the court stating that a Polish left-wing movement had demanded

the delegalization of the right-wing one on the basis that the latter promoted totalitarian ideology. My interlocutor crossed out the name of his movement, replacing it with the name of the left-wing one, replaced ‘promotion of fascism’ with ‘promotion of communism,’ and headed to the post office.<sup>7</sup> The letter exchange did not lead then to any further legal action against either of the movements involved. Having reported that episode to me, my interlocutor concluded: ‘You know, we sometimes feel as Jews did in that joke from the 1930s: Two Jews meet and one tells the other: “Reading contemporary newspapers makes me feel good: they say we own all the shops and businesses and rule in the town.” I feel the same when I read articles on us’.

Are the contemporary mass media indeed misrepresenting the strength of the ‘extreme right’? A look at any press title clearly indicates that the number of acts of—physical *and* verbal—violence against immigrants, people of colour, and sexual minorities has risen in many countries around the globe and that the perpetrators often claim to be inspired by far-right rhetoric. Police raids on organizations’ headquarters and private homes in search of Nazi/fascist publications and symbols have also frequently been reported. These reports included both accounts of the arrests of potential perpetrators of violence and evidence of rather ridiculous debates on whether a cake with a swastika constitutes a public threat. Brought together, all these accounts shed light on the peculiar perception and representation of the danger posed by the extreme right, as well as the possibility of eradicating it.

First, the fact that delegalizing an organization, i.e. sending it to the underground, is considered a way of ‘solving’ the problem, i.e. pretending it does not exist, is but one example of the myopia caused by the extremism of the centre.<sup>8</sup> The delegalization in this context

demonstrates ‘idealistic extremism’ which simply does not allow for the manifestations of certain ideas/beliefs. Second, numerous scholars have proven symbols and objects (from statues and tombs, through flags, to elements of clothing) to be very powerful agents (often ‘on their own’) and one ought not to disregard their use and presence. Yet the way they appear in the discussions on the extreme right simply leads to removing from the centre of attention what is actually at stake, where the strength of the contemporary far right lies. This argument may sound quite banal to scholarly ears, yet it is necessary to repeat it to understand the broader societal context as a producer of extremism. This is a context which in recent years has been fed with two kind of narratives offered by observers of the ‘extreme-right’ scene: those stating ‘I saw a man with 88 tattooed on his neck and realized the situation’s seriousness’ and those saying ‘I saw many middle-class people joining the anti-immigrant rally and realized the situation’s seriousness’. These two seemingly different narratives, in which the latter is supposed to constitute the corrective of the former (‘it’s not only the unemployed working class; socially established people join too!’), only end up reinforcing the long-established take on right-wing extremism. This is because a better understanding is not to be reached by providing ‘more accurate’ demographic data, but, as I have been suggesting throughout this piece, in rethinking the way we conceive of the relationship between extremism and ‘healthy’ society.

This myopia is well exemplified by the Italian journalist mentioned earlier, who arrives at the location of a far-right festival and comments: ‘We have nothing to report on here’. No Nazi-era publications (perhaps hidden somewhere), no white supremacist slogans, no burning of the Israeli flag. Instead, dozens or hundreds of young people socializing, talking and listening: about the threats of

globalization, about how to procure a better future for all of them, about the need to make children, about making their country's economy stronger and more competitive, about sensible environmental policies. Apart from that, planning of new undertakings, ranging between assisting the poor inhabitants of the major Italian cities and organizing humanitarian missions for persecuted Christians around the world. The fact that all of these undertakings are implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) linked with the defence of the white race, autochthonous Europeans, Christian heritage, and heterosexual normativity, and that the way this discourse-cum-activism is construed makes far-right activism powerful and consequential, continue to escape attention. No matter if the blindness to this problem results from the lack of 'familiar' indicators or it is the blindness caused by the very refusal to engage with the demands and modes of actions offered, its source is the extremism of the centre: the aborted political imagination, lack of self-criticism, and highbrow despair. Ultimately, the extremism of the centre is an admission of defeat.

'But how numerous are those extremists?' Quite numerous, it seems.

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## Notes

1. Question number one being the perpetual ‘But how can you talk to them?’
2. Various declinations of such drives towards palingenesis and political renewal within a nationalistic ideological frame have been identified by Roger Griffin as one of the defining features of ‘fascism’ (1991: 38–44). Material from the contributions to our volume seems to indicate that a perceived obsolescence of state orders and the emergence of vitalistic, palingenetic, ‘extremist’ ideologies, are part of a relational dynamic between the ‘centre’ and its political margins (see Ifeka, this volume).
3. The contexts I am studying differ from the German one, in which the distinction between ‘extreme’ and ‘radical’ right has legal ramifications.
4. This is certainly true for many post-communist countries, such as Poland, where the support of the right-wing populist party Law and Justice should be seen, at least in part, as a consequence of nearly a decade of rule by the centrist Civic Platform, dominated by a discourse of Polish economic success and characterized by an arrogant approach and considerable ignorance of the everyday realities of most Polish citizens.
5. ‘Extremism of the center’ was the expression used by Seymour Martin Lipset. I do not draw here on his work.
6. See, e.g. J. Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House, 2018); T. Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017).
7. He was referring here to the Polish constitution from 1997, which mentions both fascism and communism as totalitarian threats (Art. 13 reads: ‘Political parties and other organizations whose programmes are based upon totalitarian methods and the modes of activity of nazism, fascism and communism . . . shall be prohibited’).
8. For an example of this outcome, see Loperfido’s chapter in this volume.

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# HOW BOKO HARAM'S 'LIMINAL' CHILD WITCHES AND CHILD SOLDIERS CHALLENGE THE CAPITALIST STATE

An Animist Critique of Neo-Liberalism's  
Ideology of 'Extremism'



*Caroline Ifeka*

The African god Ogun kills on the right and destroys on the right. Ogun kills on the left and destroys on the left . . . Ogun kills the owner of the house and paints the hearth with his blood . . . 'Master of iron, chief of robbers. You have water, but you bathe in blood'.

—Ulli Beier, *Yoruba Poetry*, 1970, 33-34.

"'Savages' want the multiplication of the multiple'.

—Pierre Clastres, *Archeology of Violence*, 1994, 167.

This chapter presents an animist critique of contemporary Western neo-liberal theories of 'extremism'. That is, political and/or religious ideas considered by contemporary ruling classes to be beyond mainstream notions of the 'reasonable' behaviour expected of elites ruling on citizens' behalf. Loperfido (this volume) conceives

extremisms to be produced as marginal spaces by a centre that defines this marginality as threatening to its very existence. Indeed, in their alter ego roles of 'bandits', African 'liberator' governments of the postcolonial capitalist state, slaughter and toss into the wastelands Islamist and anarchist groups deemed to be positioned to the state's ideological 'far-right' or 'far-left' (Debos 2012). The Nigerian state defines Boko Haram as a 'far-right' terrorist insurgency against the secular, sovereign nation-state. Yet, applying the Kapferers' (this volume) more general insight, it is conceivable that the jihadist group's fundamentalist and totalitarian war against the Nigerian 'infidel' generates in quid pro quo mode the Nigerian military's extreme violence towards all 'barbarian' combatants and unarmed civilians—and vice versa. In fact, after a decade-long war, Amnesty International (Thurston 2020) documents how jihadists *and* the Nigerian state's armed forces commit crimes against humanity.

Various writers and researchers have documented how African and Euro-American military, financial and political interests have benefitted from destructive civil and religious wars on Western capitalism's marginalized 'black' periphery. (Ellis 1995a, 2016; Reno 1998). In my view, wars invoking the divine are especially effective in masking the postcolonial capitalist state's real agenda. That is, the African ruling class belief that when 'brigands', 'bandits' and 'jihadists' threaten the state's control over its sovereign borders, elites are entitled to seize (lower class) 'illiterate' people's land, forests and pristine rivers as well as their cultural knowledge. Powerful rituals, secret songs, body parts ground into powders and blood sacrifices activate strong spirit beings and magical forces which are believed to cause death and disease (Bayart 1993). Rulers feel free to accumulate capital by violent means the states exercises directly by war, and indirectly



by theft of public funds as well as theft of sacred shrines and fetish objects. The latter destroy when they 'eat' human and animal flesh and drink sacrificial blood (Pietz 1995). African underclasses in towns and rural areas are being forcibly alienated by capital from their customary rights to forests, farmlands, diamonds, gold and other primary resources known to be present held in common.

African state and enemy insurgents kill rightless immiserated civilians with (extremist) and violent impunity. Appalling crimes against humanity, especially women and girls, continue to be committed by armies of the West African state and jihadist militias (Human Rights Watch 2013; Amnesty International 2021). Government justifies a decade long war against Islamist insurgents in order to prevent the multi-ethnic and religious Nigerian nation from collapsing into 'barbarism'. Nigeria's national motto engraved on the federal government's standard (flag) is 'Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress'. The Nigerian government conceives of state power as legitimized by faith in the one God, in theory either Muslim or Christian. In reality, this African state's ideological, military and juridical institutions are modelled on those of the democratic Western (not Arabian) state. Though associated historically with Christianity, the postcolonial African state accepts religious pluralism and is notionally nonpartisan.

On their part, commanders or amirs of jihadist muja-hideen armies justify war against the state as a holy deed ordered by the one God (Allah). Their sacred purpose is to remove state corruption, an immoral Western education system, and infidels' persisting attachment to Sufism and pagan gods. In 2015 Boko Haram in Nigeria's northeast adopted the Islamic state of Iraq and Syria's black standard. On it is written in Arabic the *Shahada* or declaration of faith: 'There is no god but Allah (God). Mohammad is the messenger of Allah'.

Foucault (2003) reminds intellectuals that we have a duty to interrogate ideologies and practices of biopower in order to determine what is power's real agenda for controlling a population. This chapter takes up the challenge. I expose differences between the state and extremist Islamists for the chimera they are in reality. Secular *and* religious systems of power in the Lake Chad basin states engage in violent extremism. However, when the scale and mode of violence—physical, cultural, and psychological—is considered, I conclude that on balance the secular state's extremism is the greater.

In what follows I define violence as 'an act of physical hurt deemed legitimate by the performer and illegitimate by (some) witnesses' (Riches 1986). As noted by Bowman (2001), the act of violation breaks apart recipients' integrity as human beings whether in contexts of war or peace. In the past decade jihadist warfare has forcibly dispossessed millions of rural subaltern (underclass) family households in transborder war zones of the Lake Chad Basin states—NE Nigeria, SE Niger, SW Chad and NW Cameroon. They have been brutally alienated from customary (noncapitalist) lands and natural resources held in common. Clansfolk are separated from physical locations where ancestral ghosts, and spirit beings may manifest when approached correctly in the customary ritual manner. Families are separated from their community's priests and familiar rituals through which in times of crisis community priests, spirit mediums and others offer blood sacrifices empowering medicated objects (fetishes) and spirit beings. Ritual relations convey divine sanctions, some conveyed by priests of the Bori-Zar spirit possession cults, driven underground in urban and peri-urban areas since the 1980s by fundamentalist agents of Salafism/Pentecostalism, but still active in borderlands and beyond (Masquelier 1994). Archaeological and historical records

regarding the Lake Chad states demonstrate how forests, rocky crags and caves in the Adamawa mountain range dividing NE Nigeria, SW Chad and NW Cameroon have offered, and still provide, refuges and armed redoubts for folk 'outlawed' by fundamentalist terror and/or monarchical extreme violence (MacEachern 2018). Here, and elsewhere, Bori-Zar spirits announce 'the law' protecting the wider community from the terrifying extremism of invading malevolent spiritual and human armed forces (Monfouga-Nicolas 1972; Besmer 1983; Echard 1992). Shadowed by enemy warrior spirits, contemporary Chadic states' looting militaries break with deadly violence vulnerable kinship relations. Violent killing by state soldiers of jihadist combatants and 'cleansing' of alleged pro-Boko Haram villages further expands widespread dispossession and dispersal into nomadism of more than nine million Chadic state citizens (Maclean and Hilaire 2018). As distressed human rights observers have reported, extreme violence in the war against Boko Haram is driving dislocated kinless subaltern peasants, petty artisans and traders, clerics, itinerant hawkers and traders into death from disease, insecurity, and starvation (Debos 2016).

### **Socio-Political, Economic and Cultural Contexts**

In the late nineteenth century, on the eve of European colonization, complex rituals in centralized black kingdoms and segmentary lineage societies centred on human and animal blood sacrifice to sacralizing spirits. Political power was enveloped by, and embedded in, the greater mystical powers of divinities, spirit beings and fertility gods, male and female. Production on lands held in common by the clan or lineage was not in general for money. It was primarily to ensure the biospiritual reproduction of

reciprocal and thus dangerous relations between spirits and human beings (Meillassoux 1970). Energizing life forces could manifest in human, animal and spiritual forms, each one of which demonstrated their incompleteness (death) without the other. Law making by family and clan heads, ancestral priests and chiefs always entailed consideration of what the ancestors, nature spirits and animals might require. At the time of Nigeria's colonization, violent mystical sanctions requiring human or animal sacrifice enforced fear of, and respect for, the spirits of the earth and the ancestors in the patriarchal Muslim north and Christianizing south. As recorded by ethnographers (Talbot 1912; Frobenius 1913; Greenberg 1949; Smith Bowen 1954) and the novelist Chinua Achebe (1958), fear of 'spirits of the law' upheld social cohesion and ensured theft was rare indeed.

After colonization, and the legal abolition of slavery, individuals were forced to pay head tax. At times they were compelled by chiefs on the white man's pay roll to perform forced labour on plantations or road and bridge building projects. Some families were driven away from ancestral farms and forests. Their lands were forcibly enclosed and exploited by foreigners and elite nationals for cash crop production. Families everywhere experienced food shortages and fell into financial debt (Forde 1946; Watts 1983). So younger males embarked on labour migration to earn the white man's money. Those who found their way by connecting with clansmen 'known' to the colonial regime might win employment contracts. Joyce Cary (1939) describes how a semi-literate youth from the bush was employed by a white district officer for a small wage. Mister Johnson saw himself as having assumed the role of (dependent) client to his white benefactor patron. The young man interpreted the relationship in customary fashion as asymmetrical *and* reciprocally egalitarian.

The first generation of Nigerian politicians were patrons who shaped postcolonial state norms to the effect that the polity should move away from the colonizer's meritocratic ideals and embrace African values. Clients at home in the bush expected patrons (e.g. wealthy traders, transporters, market 'mammies', native court magistrates and newly elected senators) to live up to customary norms of 'sharing'. A 'good' patron showed his/her unselfish intentions by getting appointments for junior relatives and other clients. In the 1960s and post-civil war 1970s 'oil boom' era, good patrons were many and helped moderate economic inequality. However, by the 1980s and post oil boom recessions, economic downsizing imposed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, weakened patrons' commitment to respecting non-capitalist, notionally egalitarian values of reciprocal 'sharing'. Now middle ranking Nigerian elected and appointed officials of the postcolonial 'oil boom' state were empowered as players in the emerging bourgeoisie. These 'fixers' deployed cash, commissions and political appointments to mediate between 'big' men or women of the rising political, judicial and military class and their allies among wealthy traders, big transporters, native court magistrates, and manufacturers. They attracted and dominated dependent kinsfolk who served them as 'small' men, subordinate clients. But despite these inequalities, big men and clients retained a common belief in multiple beings. The latter mediate through human emissaries (priests, mediums, diviners, herbalists) relations of life and death between human beings, ancestors, and spirits of land, water and sky (Bayart, Ellis and Hibou 1999).

Social inequality in recognizable class format was emerging into public view. In the early 2000s, Nigerian political, commercial, judicial and military elites were consolidating their position as a ruling elite that, in Marx's

terms, was a class in and of itself (Ifeka 2004). As they honed their thieving skills, they accumulated seriously large sums of money. Some of their strongest material and cultural ties were with family and clan members in the African diaspora. Certain youngsters in Europe and the USA learned how to engage clandestinely in offshore banking and money laundering through investing in global real estate and corporations. Back home, ruling elites were accumulating even more capital by stealing public funds to the tune of millions, and in a few cases literally billions of US dollars (e.g. an oil minister's reported theft of \$22 billion in 2010–14). Though the senior echelons of the Nigerian ruling class still shared the 'dividends of democracy' with influential clients, the latter were drawn less from rural and urban underclass households and more from junior ranks of the burgeoning ruling class (Mustapha 2014). Intra-class marriages between senior and junior Nigerian families are reminiscent of the English landed aristocracy's dynastic alliances that consolidated their hold over political and financial power in the eighteenth century. Contemporary marriages between daughters of Nigerian politicians and sons of well-educated banking, legal, IT and financial families confirm the importance of ties of kinship and affinity in enhancing the relative power of a few dynastic families at the expense of others. Yet overfocussing on popular consciousness obscures the realities of power in a two-class capitalist dominated society. Nigerian society today is divided significantly into a tiny ruling elite and a very large, growing underclass. A small, relatively insecure bourgeoisie of professional, administrative and commercial families intermediates the sociopolitical divide between ruling elite and majority subaltern class. Secular ideologies of the African nation-state reinforce this division through ruling that in constitutional law politicians are accountable to all

citizens regardless of ethnic and religious differences. Interestingly, capitalism's division of the population into ruling holders of private property and largely unpropertied labouring workers is counteracted by the principle of one nation regardless of ethno-religious identities. This unity is upheld by a longstanding trend in social life. Elites and subalterns share common beliefs in the reality of spiritual powers who, if approached correctly, can make the poor rich. They can also protect power holders from 'spiritual attack' by envious witches and sorcerers, who emanate from elite and/or subaltern classes.

A predominantly non-capitalist petty commodity producing sector harbours the majority of Nigeria's estimated 180–200 million inhabitants almost equally divided between Muslims and Christians in whose shadow subsist a small but growing animist ('pagan') minority. In the country's ever expanding urban fringes and vast rural hinterlands most women, men, youth and older children work for subsistence and a small cash surplus. Usually these indebted family households sell what modest amounts of food the household can spare, obtaining marginal rates of return. Some households of wealthier cattle herders or farmers cultivating fertile riverine lands employ migrant and local labour on a casual daily basis. A number of households are also small-scale for-profit capitalists. They operate rented or self-owned medium-sized farms, fabricator workshops, and small IT enterprises (Ifeka 2013).

Contemporary bourgeois ideology constructs state power as secular, ideologically non-partisan, and singular. This model reflects the monocentric theological authority of the Western Christian god. At the political centre are positioned elected presidents, church bishops, the armed forces commander in chief, the nation's supreme court chief justice. The Chadic state defines itself as centrist

in part through its armed opposition to Salafist forces it defines as far to its right. Customary egalitarian values of reciprocity, sharing and equality before sacred law are waning before the hierarchizing forces of competitive for-profit individualism. But there are still many subaltern communities whose social relationships are influenced by customary norms inculcating in the young respect for clan rituals of communication and sacrifice to the multiple powers recognized as ancestors, gods of the land and sky (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004). These original owners of the landed commons still uphold spiritual sanctions whose mystical attacks on wrongdoers are feared.

### **Verticalization of Power Relations**

Population growth at about 2.8–3% per annum, an unproductive subsistence rural economy, and massive unemployment propel frustrated majorities to seek money making by illicit means (Ifeka 2010). Nigerian state governments turn a blind eye as senior office holders and corporate sector patrons operate through their 'managers' who employ 'boys' to toil in (illegal) tin and gold mining, logging inside national parks, narcotics and human trafficking rackets. Organized criminal syndicates in the role of propertyless client or property holder patron fashion their relationship not in terms of class but in the customary moral language of 'trust' widely used between buyers and sellers in the market. Patrons 'helping' a trafficking syndicate should reciprocate by 'sharing' with clients the business's financial 'dividends'. Patrons aim to merge this illegal capital with legitimate gains. In so doing the Nigerian political class integrates the state's criminal and legitimate economies. There is another consequence. As a few very powerful persons and dynasties dominate capital



flows in licit and illicit economies of accumulation they verticalize power relations in national society. Keen to avoid detection when moving their ill-gotten gains overseas, the mega-rich and powerful in the Nigerian state and global criminal syndicates disconnect themselves from minor patrons and clients at home. They focus vertically and upwards toward Western or Asian metropolises, centres of risk taking financial capitalism where some Nigerian diaspora entrepreneurs are building substantial fortunes.

Bayart (1993) describes the African ruling class's outward facing investment engagement with overseas capital as 'extraversion'. This is an obfuscating concept. As Loperfido argues (this volume) verticalization is a key function of peripheral imperialism. 'Extraversion' fudges the pivotal role of dispossession and financial capital in generating greater profits from imperialist wars, colonialism, and present-day land grabs. Bayart's concept obscures too many realities of life on capital's colonial peripheries that Rosa Luxemburg (1951) analysed so brilliantly. She argued that to stay alive profitably, capitalism must invade non-capitalist worlds. The boundary between these worlds is conceptual, not geographic, though the two often coincide. Increasingly though, greed ensures surplus value (profit) is located in fewer global and African locales, and is concentrated in a handful of increasingly wealthy ruling family dynasties. as capital becomes ever more financialized (Amin et al. 2010).

A once more differentiated postcolonial political economy is homogenizing into two main classes. There is a mega-rich, dominant and highly acquisitive elite utilizing military and legal apparatuses of state power to further increase and integrate licit and illicit sources of capital flows. Siphoning off funds that could be utilized to grow national productivity, and pay labour a true living wage, diminishes the real incomes of major sections of the

underclass, for example petit bourgeois, waged workers and subsistence farmer households. As in Nigeria's northern war zones, failing petit-bourgeois family households collapse into, and merge with, rising numbers of impoverished underclass (subaltern) households. They seek a means of subsistence by labouring or marketing small products and services in both the non-capitalist and capitalist licit and illicit economies. Formerly, they were often sustained in times of famine, drought and conflict through clan based customary reciprocities. Today, vast numbers of subaltern households (40 million in 2019 out of a reported estimated total of 43 million households; EuroMonitor International 2019) in a national population at the time of about 180–200 million, live precariously without consistent extended family assistance. In Nigeria's northeast abutting Lake Chad, the decade-long war against Boko Haram has forcibly separated Christian and Muslim peasant farmers, small artisans and petty traders from subsistence farming on common lands. Relatives formerly exchanging home-farm-produced food for payment of a child's school fees, are now unable to help feed a poor client's family. Social bonds are attenuating in Nigeria's northeast as the state's soldiers forcibly 'remove' (terminate) men and boys suspected to be Boko Haram supporters. The army transports survivors, mainly women and children, to refugee camps or fortified settlements with tiny allotments for minimalist cultivation. Family units are reduced to a young woman with perhaps her mother and surviving children. Humanitarian agency reports estimate about nine million people in NE Nigeria, SW Chad, SE Niger and NW Cameroon have been propelled by extreme violence into an African version of bare life: kinless and therefore rightless destitution, despair and degradation into dehumanization (Maclean and Hilaire 2018; World Food Programme 2020).

## Boko Haram



**Map 3.1.** Map of Nigeria and Lake Chad Basin States. Made by Tom Farrington with Natural Earth free vector and raster map data@naturalearthdata.com.

Verticalization of power and capital is also a feature of those religious fundamentalist organizations the sovereign state defines as ‘extremist’. Boko Haram is much discussed as a terrorist entity, too often on the basis of barely credible and repeatedly recycled data. First, the group has been little analysed in regard to the civil war’s impacts in reordering social relations and class divisions in Nigerian and Lake Chad Basin war zone populations. Little or no attention, other than that of Prieri and Zenn (2018) and a few francophone scholars (Debos 2012, 2018) and Lombard (2016), is given to ways in which

mujahideen and Nigerian soldiers (Muslim, Christian) are interpreting extreme violence. They are drawing on non-capitalist cosmologies. and constructing a common culture of hybrid beliefs in multiple spirit beings, some of whom manifest in malevolent attacks by adult and child witches. Millions of Chadic state subalterns dispossessed by 'bandits', 'brigands', 'criminal gangs' and jihadists experience themselves as enduring unending 'spiritual attack' amidst war imposed 'spiritual insecurity' (Lombard 2016; MacEachern 2019; Ellis 1995 a, b). Most Western observers deny African people's very common belief that mystical assaults create spiritual insecurity causing disease, despair and death. Analysts insist, rather, that in northeast Nigeria all nonarmed populations, especially women and children, live in a state of generalized 'civilian insecurity' on account of Islamist terrorism (Dowd and Drury 2017; Oriola 2017). Second, there are few explorations of similarities and differences in how the jihadist group's rhetoric of its sacred duty to kill the 'infidels' might or might not differ compared to the Nigerian or Cameroonian state's ideologies of righteous killing of (jihadist) 'barbarians'(Barkindo 2016). Finally, most scholars fail to situate Boko Haram analytically in relation to the civil war's restructuring of Nigerian society in the northeast and further afield into two classes: that is, ruling and ruled groups intermediated by a shrinking bourgeoisie. These topics are discussed further below.

Until 2015 Boko Haram's full name was *Jama'at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da'wah wa'l-Jihad* (Group of the People of Sunnah for Preaching and Jihad) (Thurston 2018). After giving allegiance (*bayat*) to Islamic State in 2015, the group was known for a couple of years as Islamic State in West Africa Province. But the latter operates today as a separate entity from Boko Haram, which is still under Amir Abubakr Shekau's violent leadership. I

use the group's Hausa nickname 'Boko Haram' (Western education is sin) by which it continues to be known notwithstanding Salafist criticism (Brigaglia and Iocchi 2017). Scholarly writing on religious warfare in Nigeria's northeast, especially Bornu state in the Lake Chad region, focusses on Boko Haram's organization: its 'mad' leader Amir Abubakr Shekau, and the Nigerian state's struggle to contain the perceived chaotic violence of jihadi warriors in Nigeria and the West African Sahel (Zenn et al. 2013; Barkindo 2018).

Boko Haram certainly does not see its conception and practice of political power under the one God as similar to the Nigerian state's ideology and practice of political power. Viewed from Boko Haram's perspective, the Nigerian state—'the tyrant'—and its security forces carry out acts of unparalleled illegitimate ferocity against the group's 'brothers' in the Lord. That is, commanders, wives, children and other Salafist Muslims. But whether Christian or Muslim, subalterns do not call these massacres violent religious extremism. They are not 'exposed', as Nigerians say, to the international and national political elite's concept of legitimate power and the illegitimacy of groups deemed to be 'far-right' or 'far-left' of the bourgeois state's political centre. Underclass and petit bourgeois subalterns include petty traders, farmers, fisherfolk, graziers, artisans, *mallams* (Qur'anic teachers), butchers, and petty clerks. They are mostly unfamiliar with the manners and thinking of Western and Nigerian political elites. Subalterns' underclass position in the social formation is evident in their exclusion from positions in government from where they can struggle to carve out remunerative gatekeeper roles in state ministries. The latter hope to receive bribes from multi-national corporations in exchange for securing lucrative state contracts. Unlike most subalterns, elite contacts mean gatekeeper

notables may be familiar with English idioms used in international organizations' reports that Salafist 'violent religious extremists' violate 'human rights'.

For Boko Haram, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb, and several Malian Salafist groups, the West African ('crusader') state is sinful and utterly illegitimate (Thurston 2018). All these groups invert the state's ideology of their 'criminality' so jihadists assume the righteous position of controllers of legitimate god-sanctioned violence. In their view, it is the 'tyrant' state and its armies who demonstrate their 'wildness' when massacring Muslims with illegitimate killing force. On the other hand, the Nigerian and Chadian armies slaughtered up to 4,000 innocent civilians including babies and small children when, in 2015, they recaptured Gwoza, the capital of Boko Haram's Caliphate (Amnesty International 2020).

Declared Boko Haram's Amir Abubakr Shekau in 2014, 'I enjoy killing anyone that God commands me to kill.' Allah commands him to avenge Nigeria's injustice to 'our brothers' (McCoy 2015). Revenge justice is thought to be reciprocal. It may restore a customary balance between, for example, two tribes, each of which sees the other as perpetrator or victim of the other's perceived wrongful violence (Gluckman 1963).

A Boko Haram *mujahideen* leader explained to the world in January 2015 why they massacred an estimated 2,000 and more men, women, and children in the town of Baga (Borno state, northeast Nigeria): 'they are infidels ... We have made sure the floor of this hall is turned red with blood ... killing, slaughtering, destruction and bombings will be our religious duty anywhere we invade' (Adekunle 2015; McCoy 2015). Boko Haram declared via video link that the massacre was in God's name. Therefore, as Allah commands, the blood of the dead will cleanse and purify society of the sin of unbelief. Refusal to convert to

Salafism is a symptom of society's and the state's collective sin. That is democracy, the constitution and Western education must be erased because they represent and reproduce unbelief or social disorder. This is synonymous with the chaotic polytheism of the multiple. In Allah's reported words 'Disorder is worse than killing . . . kill them wherever you find them . . . ' (Qur'an 2:191).

### **Animist Practices of the Multiple**

Political and military elites of both monotheistic religions are reluctant to admit they consult animist ('pagan') priestesses/priests and diviners for magical protection against jealous rivals' witchcraft. Many soldiers of the Nigerian state as well as Boko Haram's mujahideen buy magical charms that claim to protect the wearer from enemy bullets, witchcraft, and sterility. Amulets placed under clothing directly against the skin give the believer the power of invisibility on the battlefield (Ellis 1995a, 2004; Prieri and Zenn 2018: 651–660).

Perhaps neighbouring Cameroon's lifelong dictator, President Paul Biya, feels the same. A Catholic, in 2016 he overrode his country's legislation criminalizing witchcraft. The president ordered up-country chiefs to use their witches and wizards to fight and destroy the 'blood thirsty sect'. A Cameroonian IT-with-it journalist tweeted enthusiastically that chiefs, hunters, and vigilante youth must use their spiritual powers to wipe out the group. Hundreds of youth rushed to consult marabouts (holy men) and buy magical charms to place on their bodies, boasting no Boko Haram bullet will touch them (Afriem 2016; Locka 2017).

West Africa offers another perspective on the cleansing powers of the blood of sacrifice by mujahideen martyrs in Allah's name. Monotheist and polytheist foot soldiers and

jihadists as well as subaltern civilians and ruling elites, across Nigeria, identify Boko Haram with mystical powers. These energies rush like the wind (*iskoki*) (Greenberg 1949; King 1967; Masquelier 1994, 2001). In war zones they are even wilder, endangering but creating potencies from the blood of (human) sacrifice and wild slaughtering of 'enemy devils' (McCoy 2015; Kramer 1993; Ellis 1995a, 2004). Animist sensibilities are indicated in popular discourses of Boko Haram's proclaimed sovereignty over Nigeria's Sambisa Forest. This is a vast 'black' (spiritually dangerous) bushy space in the Adamawa mountain range dividing Nigeria from Cameroon. Until recently the group's long term operational headquarters was located in Bornu state's Sambisa Forest, as were some senior commanders and their families. Women and children cultivated small farms and livestock (Matfess 2017). Sambisa is physically and mystically on society's margins, long feared for its dangerous spirits and sorcerers. These beings are commonly symbolized as demons in snake form as well as in Amir Shekau's bloody executions of rebellious commanders. Their heads, impaled as a terrifying deterrent on posts close to refugee camps and market towns, attest to unending killing, bloodshed and terrifying insecurity. Frightened journalists shuttling between villages and small towns under the contested jurisdiction of Boko Haram, Islamic State *and* the Nigerian government call this bloodshed 'our new normal'.

### **Liminal Zones, Child Witches and Child Soldiers**

Victor Turner (1969) demonstrated in his classic analyses of Ndembu rituals how such 'anti-structural' drives are produced in liminal marginal contexts. There, relational processes in practice oppose *and* support a centre's ongoing reproduction as structurally dominant.



Points where centres of political and religious power clash violently constitute liminal thresholds at which 'violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence' (Echard 1992; Agamben 1998: 31). For Agamben, such thresholds constitute states of exception beyond the sovereign state's law. Terrified citizens are forcibly dispossessed of their rights, dislocated from their families and loved ones. Compelled to become refugees, homeless vagrants, beggars, and 'brigands' they struggle to create new social relations with similar others, all battling to survive as kinless and therefore dehumanized outlaws.

The Nigerian state's armies and jihadist militias violate daily the population's basic human rights. Both armed parties to the war have forced apart families, orphaned children and burnt too many alive. Mothers have lost children, husbands and supporting aunties and uncles. These desperate and despairing women struggle to survive rape, enslavement and enforced prostitution, severe hunger, loss of family members and death (Oriola 2017). Children lose a surviving parent and so are orphaned and forced to fend for themselves in war zone wastelands. Others, young as they are, are recruited or volunteer (for cash or food) to fight with small arms for Boko Haram. Some recruits use their small size to go undercover where they identify Nigerian army hideouts, roads along which convoys of food and military equipment will pass, and plan ambushes. Children are sent on highly risky journeys because they are expendable and too numerous to be fed. However, soldiers and refugees may fear stranger children's potential malevolence and trickster tactics. Children emaciated and stunted from hunger look younger than their years. They may be perceived as still attached to spirit worlds where children await birth and rebirth; such children are mystically dangerous to the living (Monfouga-Nicolas 1972).

Child soldiers play a prominent role in Africa's civil wars past and present, for example, in the Lord's Resistance Army (Uganda), the Revolutionary United Front (Sierra Leone) and various militias in the Liberian civil war (Ellis 1995a). Since 2015 Boko Haram and Islamic State of West Africa Province militias combat the joint armed forces of Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon and Niger. Children, drugged and forced to detonate themselves and others in suicide bombing events, may also be deployed in armed conflict in northern Cameroon and southwest Chad. Boy, and at times girl, children are equipped as human soldiers with small arms while their spirit counterparts equip them with powers of divine violence and retribution (Allotey-Pappoe and Lamptey 2019).

Child witches and child soldiers may carry different kinds of messages. The latter may convey messages along physical roads to army officers, big men in government offices and wealthy traders asked to lend cash to customers or clients working for Boko Haram or Islamic State in West Africa Province. Child witches can help these child soldiers complete their assignment. Child witches enlist the assistance of spirit beings tasked with deploying their divine violence against the Nigerian army. Child soldiers and witches not necessarily exclusive (De Boeck 2004; 155; Geschiere 2013: 192–197; Debois 2016; Falen 2018: 41–45).

Children in particular are represented in animist thought as lacking strong socio-spiritual boundaries between human society and spirit worlds. A child witch may morph into the form of a child soldier and vice versa. Their presence among humans is fluid and flexible, they come and they go. Souls and spirit elements are popularly known among the southern Nigerian Igbo as *ogbanje*, and among the Yoruba as *abiku* (Ifeka 1962; Henderson 1972).

Northern Nigerian Hausa people call such children *kurwa*, or *iskoki*. These soul substances are widely thought to be connected to spirits of the preborn, the born, the dead and yet to be born (Kramer 1993).

As Robert Brain (1970) reported in his classic study of child witches among the very rural and bushy Bangwa of the late 1960s, children may die so as to revive their relations with spirit children or they may transform into dangerous animals (Ruel 1969). Young boys and girls are therefore endowed, latently or actually, with occult ambiguous powers. In northern Nigerian war zones child witches and soldiers mediate through their occult liminality. Thus endowed, they are thought to shape relations between human (state/jihadi armies) and the spirit world's fierce projection of divine, life-giving and destroying violence. It purifies and cleanses society of malevolent or polluting substances. The child's ambiguous nature is veiled from family and community until a mother's death or disappearance. If kidnapped or sighted as having been slaughtered on a killing field, messages may reach a family member warning them of that child's uncontrollable malevolence.

Child witches can also manifest in war zones in the form of child soldiers recruited by Boko Haram (and formerly by the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone, in war torn Liberia and far away Uganda) as four-foot high warriors, porters, IED and suicide bombers (Ellis 1995a; Human Rights Watch 2013). Children possessed of such malevolence must be cast out into the 'bare life' of human and spirit beings lacking rights in society. Child witches become mystically empowered as death-bringing soldiers. Imaged as incarnations of singular, uncontrollable force—power—they share mystical and social qualities of the other in the role of blood-shedding warrior.

## **Similarities and Differences**

Several aspects of highly unequal social relations in war's freshly revealed two-class political system relate to the verticalization of political power in Nigerian society. Institutionalized power in the form of the Nigerian state and its jihadist enemy, Boko Haram, shows certain similarities. These may be a consequence of centring processes of capital accumulation, whether licit or illicit. Commanders concentrate their control over strategic resources, material and mystical, so as to make very extreme the violence they deploy to destroy the enemy other. As Marx and Rosa Luxemburg argued, human greed and the nature of capital's financialization for greater profit inevitably verticalize power relations.

Important indicators of similar organizational and ideological tendencies between the jihadist group and the Nigerian state are outlined below. These processes should not be surprising. Kapferer (2004) has argued, following Gluckman (1963), that war and conflict are dynamic processes reordering and reinterpreting social relations. Nigeria's long war is exposing how the bourgeoisie's lower income households are descending into an underclass of subalterns homogenized by violence. A more socially redistributive, horizontal stratification system is being reconstituted vertically. Killing violence, enclosure, and dispossession is splitting society in Nigeria and neighbouring states into two basic strata. A small but dominant ruling elite and an expanding underclass of rural and peri-urban households depend for survival on non-capitalist relations and powers. Capital's addiction to war for easy accumulation by dispossession is further verticalizing power. Capital loves war because in destroying others' lands and assets it opens up fabulous opportunities for

criminal elements. In the Lake Chad Basin these include state politicians, corporate executives and lowly carpet-bagger entrepreneurs whose de facto patrons in state institutions have the means to engage with force in illicit varieties of resource grabbing (Ellis 2016). People who get in the way must be exterminated. As Agamben (1998) argues, human beings dispossessed substantially by the state's extreme violence are reduced to the lowest common denominator of rightless bare life.

(i) The jihadist war has impacted negatively on families located, perhaps temporarily, on one territorial side of the conflict or the other. Many such families were formerly units in larger labour cooperating households in rural, peri-urban and even city shanty towns. Separation from relatives and the death of parents, orphaning of children, and brutalization of women has compounded the already existing divide between elites and underclass majorities, regardless of whether they have landed up with Boko Haram or the state. In the Lake Chad Basin and Nigerian borderland war zones dispossession, poverty and unpredictable terrifying violence have reordered a formerly economically, ethnically, religiously and politically differentiated population of about nine million into a mass of suffering humanity. Fleeing into forests, wastelands, camps, hill top redoubts and caves they seek safety.

(ii) The war is generating some surprising similarities in 'mainstream' centrist and extremist ideologies of political power. The nation-state exercises a form of mythic violence which legitimates war as necessary to defend the sovereign state's boundaries and population from annihilation. In practice, protestations to the contrary, the capitalist state's ruling class welcomes war on account of many opportunities in zones of war for illegal capital accumulation. On its part, the jihadist group claims it exercises the divine violence of Allah whose Prophet

enabled true believers to live purely under Shari'a law. Yet after ten years of unending warfare, Boko Haram's ruling commanders resemble somewhat the Nigerian state's 'elected' political class. The latter proclaim their commitment to the country's coat of arms—'faith, unity, peace, progress'—but rely in practice on the nation-state's monopoly of sovereign force to repress subversive religious or political movements on the centre's far-right. Likewise, jihadism conceives of its mythic violence as a singularizing force that destroys infidel resistance. In the early years of jihad (2009–2015), Boko Haram's young martyrs were passionate about wielding the One God's divine, purifying violence. After several years the group reinterpreted its violence more in theocratic terms of the Caliphal state's enforcement of one system of taxation, forced labour, education, conversion to Islam and obedience to Shar'ia law. Adulterers, witches and prostitutes could be or were executed (Kassim and Nwankpa 2018).

(iii) Supreme power is concentrated vertically in the hands of Boko Haram's elected ruler or amir and a cabal of close associates. The latter intermediate fund-raising operations. Money is needed to cover salaries; in 2013 or so about \$100 per month was paid to each new recruit. Food, logistics, ammunition and other costs have encouraged the group to adopt strategies as kidnapping wealthy persons (and possibly killing them if sufficient ransoms is not offered). Trafficking deals with regional and overseas (Indian) narcotics dealers, and arms sellers, are another popular option. Invoking Shari'a law and jihadist power's mythic violence, Amir Shekau executes commanders who appropriate money for themselves (Kassim and Nwankpa, 2018). However, the president of the Nigerian state also calls mythic violence 'lawful' when he approves the death penalty for persons the state's courts designate criminal 'bandits', 'brigands' and 'saboteurs'.

Equally, supreme power is concentrated vertically in the office of the Nigerian army's commander in chief of the armed forces based in Abuja, the national capital, and Maiduguri, Bornu state's capital city. Yet vertically organized military power is cross-cut by customary officer-foot soldier patronage relations. The Nigerian army offers ample opportunities for senior officers in the role of patrons, and clients drawn from junior ranks and warrant officers, to 'share' the 'dividends' of war in amounts proportionate to their status. Serious investment by senior officers in 'stomach infrastructure' takes place. Documented ventures include selling guns from the army's armouries, exchanging out of date weapons for narcotics, selling young girls and boys through intermediaries in safe houses, turning a blind eye (for cash) to the buying and selling of young girls to young foot soldiers and mujahideen for marriage.

(iv) The state and Boko Haram engage in extreme violence, at times in the form of tit-for-tat reprisal raids. For example, in 2014–2015 the Nigerian army slaughtered thousands of civilians in Gwoza while Boko Haram slaughtered thousands in Baga, both places located in Bornu state. Are these instances of deep brutality and crimes against humanity also instances of divine violence at work? Can divine violence like Ogun's (see the head of this chapter) replace state myths of national heroes who died fighting for peace? In reality, though, doesn't the war mask the deployment of extreme violence to achieve capital accumulation by dispossession? The Nigerian state's armed forces have also engaged in crimes against humanity for profit. Logically, then, both sides have committed serious crimes against humanity.

(v) Reportedly, by 2014–2015, Amir Shekau had become cynical. He had lost his original passion for holy war. Possibly he had been corrupted by needing money obtained

by whatever means to pay his mujahideen about \$100 per month. Boko Haram was, and is, chronically 'hungry' for the cash with which to purchase weapons and ammunition and provide fuel for tanks captured from the Nigerian army. Perhaps, though, Shekau was also corrupted by his and the group's dependence on organized crime to raise funds for the holy struggle.

(vi) Elected politicians have supported Boko Haram's cause while in official receipt of salaries and emoluments from the Nigerian state. Patrons of both parties to the war are linked indirectly through client associates to human and other forms of trafficking. Each side utilizes profits from one commodity to raise the cash with which to purchase another desired commodity as arms or drugs. For example, the state turns a blind eye to certain families selling young Nigerian women into sex slavery in Italy where they operate on territory 'governed' by Nigerian secret societies. The latter invest prostitution monies in buying into the transatlantic narcotics trade. In another instance, the Indian head of a global narcotics syndicate allied in 2013 with Amir Shekau who reportedly travelled incognito to Lagos for a key meeting in which he hoped to receive cash for narcotics. He successfully avoided arrest!

(vii) Both sides to the war are impacted by the dislocated population's collapse into destitution living rightless in bare life in camps, remote bush and peri-urban shanty towns. Salafist jihadist and Muslim/Christian Nigerian soldier alike share a general belief in the multiple powers of gods, spirit beings and witches. Many folk believe in child witches. But, uniquely in the annals of West and East African postcolonial warfare, only Boko Haram has regularly deployed child suicide bombers, some of whom are promised martyrdom and a new life in paradise.

(viii) Liminal zones connect both sides to the war as personages (child witches/soldiers, the ghosts of murdered



clans folk, the spirits of grieving ancestors) who simultaneously disappear and re-appear as mystical presences mediate relations between conqueror and conquered. For some refugees, praying for help, resorting to magical charms, flows of spiritual sociality may temporarily extend a protecting shield. Humanity's differences diminish as masses of fleeing people are caught in zones of death diffusing animist beliefs in magical talismans among state and jihadist soldiers and civilians. These liminal zones of danger and spirit presences connect territories and populations fought over and contested by Boko Haram and the Nigerian army. A few closely guarded roads connect the army's fortified capital city, Maiduguri, barracks, and militarized settlements (garrisons) to tiny allotments for cultivation by frail elderly men, women and children. These are destitute remnants of former extended family-households. Boko Haram mujahideen in the bush, and silent jihadi cells in the city, also signify liminal thresholds where small groups of jihadists hang out uncertainly, contiguous with state institutions but below the military's radar. Small boys or child soldiers may carry messages to and from, enabling jihadi cells to relate and communicate safely. This way they avoid being overheard by state intelligence officers monitoring enemy mobile phones.

Does animism's divine violence interact with secular and Shari'a legal codes in these nebulous zones? Are there deathly flows of violence intermediating state law based on individualizing Western values, and Islam's more collectivist Sharia law? Do these processes signify liminal thresholds represented by child soldiers and child witches? Perhaps these persons of ambiguous childlike malevolence signal the technological violence of the Nigerian state versus the mystical and human violence of Salafist child suicide bombers.

Seemingly their interconnecting forms and changing shapes demonstrate the liminal qualities of ambiguous multiple powers.

Animism structures human beings as being born, living, and dying in one vast open ended field of multiple mystical powers that, on occasions of extreme terror and violence, people may experience as manifesting in singular form as power. Spirit mediums, children, and natural powers as the wind and thunderbolts are all formed in and through spiritual energies. Vitalizing and destroying *iskoki* (winds) intermediate visible and invisible dimensions of existence—in war and peace—as do infants or young children. If sickly, or ‘troublesome’, small children and babies may be imagined as ‘hanging’ over their family, floating in transition between spirit and human worlds.

## **Conclusion**

In hardcore Salafist eyes society only becomes moral when divine violence establishes the theocratic state by righteous killing of infidels and Muslim heretics in accordance with their interpretation of Shari’a law. The law institutes society’s purification by the one and only God, Allah. He demands the erasure by death of infidels (e.g. Christian Pentecostalists) and heretics (e.g. lapsed or non-Salafist Muslims not living under Shari’a).

Walter Benjamin (1996) concluded his 1921 essay on divine violence with the statement that it is released in response to the pent-up sufferings of millions. Divine violence is, therefore, that which is in abundant excess of bare lawful life, lashing out at those forces and beings which restrain it. From the neo-liberal state’s ‘reasonable

man's' perspective we need to ask what kind of purpose is served by divine violence. After all, argues Benjamin, if this kind of violence were to express itself in revolution that resulted in political, social, or cultural change, it would be law itself making violence instead.

Law, then, in Benjamin's understanding, is unjust. Legality only serves a ruling capitalist class's means and ends of preserving its political and ideological monopoly of state power. Neo-liberalism, though, persists in its imaging of threats to the (bourgeois) mainstream from extremist groups to the left and right of the officially god-less state's centrist ideologies.

This chapter has taken up Foucault's challenge to engage critically and radically with state bio-power. My animist perspective has exposed certain differences between the state and extremist Islamists for the chimera that they are. Secular and religious systems of power engage in extremism. The greater operator of direct and indirect extreme violence is the sovereign state.

### **Note**

My research area is Nigeria and West-Central Africa. But Nigeria's Salafist war zone and impacted populations in the borderlands of Lake Chad (Niger, Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon) is still off limits to 'non-essential' workers such as journalists, anthropologists and human rights workers. This analysis, therefore, is based on my experience over many years of sociality, cultural violence and predatory ruling class exploitation for personal and familial profit in West African contexts. I thank Giacomo Loperfido for his very insightful and constructive comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

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# THE EMPIRE AND THE BARBARIANS

Cosmological Laceration and the Social  
Establishment of Extremism



*Giacomo Loperfido*

‘Western superiority of force has reached its limits and shows strong tendencies towards implosion’.

—G. Arrighi, 2008:9

## **Prelude: Alibrandi’s Death**

On 5 December 1981 the neo-fascist militant Alessandro Alibrandi (21) was hanging around in Rome’s Labaro neighbourhood with two of his comrades. He was—as usual—armed, and he was seeking revenge. He and his other two fellow travellers were among the last members of the so-called Spontaneismo Armato (Armed Spontaneity): a neo-fascist movement, or rather a galaxy of movements, that had quickly radicalized through the second half of the 1970s and left a trail of bloodshed behind. They had killed a number of adversaries with broadly left-wing political alignments, random police agents, lawyers and judges that had conducted inquiries against right-wing individuals and organizations, and

even—at times—political leaders of their own movement whom they felt had betrayed them. At this stage at the end of 1981, the majority of the Spontaneista had either gone abroad, were in jail, or been killed by the police or armed left-militants. Alessandro had just come back from a year in Lebanon, where he had fled to avoid prison, and to acquire military training with the Phalange. He had returned incognito, full of prestige and aura from the experience of war, and had led his comrades into a series of murders that he said were ‘to avenge wrongs’ (Rao 2006) that both he and the group had allegedly undergone. In this instance, his plan was to kill agent Angelino, the police officer that had arrested him years before. With his two armed companions, he made rounds of the officer’s house, waiting to ambush him. Yet, agent Angelino hadn’t shown up. They were now killing time—as teenagers normally would do—wandering about the neighbourhood. They stopped at a street-food seller and bought some tangerines. Alessandro was eating his alone on a little wall on the side of via Flaminia, while the other two remained chatting in the car. When a random police car passed by, Alessandro did something that all the witnesses would later describe as ‘mad’ (Anonymous: interview). He took a gun out of his belt and, without warning his accomplices, started shooting towards the police car, injuring one officer and killing another. Alessandro in return was shot in the back of the head, and died on his way to hospital.

I tell this story because it somehow situates Spontaneismo as an ‘extremist’ phenomenon, that is, one that is governed by a logic that is seemingly far removed from the normative predicaments of mainstream society, and thus released from its rules. While I do contend that extremist phenomena follow a functioning logic that is (at least partly) freed from the normative command of the

centre,<sup>1</sup> I will try in this chapter to demonstrate that this does not mean the two are unrelated. On the contrary, my goal is to illustrate how phenomena that we qualify as ‘extremist’ should not be regarded as an externality to the social-political systems they manifest themselves within, but are in fact a—historically situated—consequence of their earlier development. I will thus try to balance my analysis between phenomena of a thoroughly different scale: the general process of crisis and ensuing disintegration of the political system that was established in the West under American leadership after World War 2, and the particular explosion of Spontaneismo as ‘extremism’. As distant as these phenomena may seem, I intend to make the point that they are intimately related.

## **The Empire and the Barbarians**

Like the barbarians of the Roman empire or—more recently—the mujahideen whom the CIA helped and supported during the Soviet-Afghan war (subsequently reorganized into Al-Qaeda), the Spontaneista people were the remainders of past structures of para-military control over an imperial periphery. Since the late 60s, the US imperial decline triggered a process of disintegration of those structures. Some of the fragments found themselves autonomous and isolated for the first time, armed and trained for war, and revolted against their former masters. From this perspective, several points need to be kept in mind:

1. The (relatively advantageous) position Italy held within the systems of politico-economic relations established under US hegemony after World War Two, was the result of a fundamental trade-off

between Italian, non-communist, socio-political elites, and the US ruling class. The Italian Communist Party (PCI) was considered a major threat to the US hegemony within the geopolitical relevance of Italy. The non-communist Italian elites were thus able to obtain further economic integration within the US-led market arena.

2. Within this frame, the formation of a neo-fascist sector in Italy was instrumental to the containment of local communist expansion.
3. The action of a local elite is always the result of a precarious balance between two forces, pushing in opposite directions: a) the drive by elites for further integration within the epicentre of the hegemonic system, by which they can access goods and resources necessary to local development;<sup>2</sup> and, b) the need to preserve the internal cohesion and social integration of their local society by which they can claim the right to leading/ruling role (Tainter 1988: 37).
4. The loss of such equilibrium can lead to major processes of social laceration and fragmentation, fostering social disorder and the subsequent increase of cultural, or even cult reactions to the former.

It is only by bringing together the various scales of this diverse and historically deep evidence, that we can make sense of Alibrandi's death.

To understand the historical constitution of Spontaneismo, we need to look at the *longue durée* of the Italian neo-fascist sphere, of which the Spontaneista teenagers were both a continuation and a negation. One can see how the early vitality of Italian neo-fascism was a result of the hegemonic competition between the US and the Soviet Union. Italy, right in the middle of the Mediterranean, was

geographically a fundamental launchpad for both naval and air power, towards Eastern Europe and North Africa. Even more importantly it was a border zone to communist Eastern Europe, while the Italian Communist Party—the biggest in the West—constituted an enormous internal threat to US hegemonic interests. Within this frame, the full integration of Italy into the US world order, as well as the constitution of a neo-fascist sphere, were part of the US's hegemonic strategy. Since the late 1940s neofascist militants were used as a proxy to counter the territorial spread of the PCI, via physical intimidation (Cento Bull 2007; Ferraresi 1995, 1996; Rao 2006).

An explicitly neo-fascist party, Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) was founded in 1946, some three decades before any other fascist organization in Western Europe. By the end of the 1960s two more radical, extra parliamentary groups, Avanguardia Nazionale (AN) and Ordine Nuovo (ON), emerged. These were later found to be heavily involved into what has become known as 'the strategy of tension': a political and para military strategy to organize terrorist bomb attacks for which progressives were blamed in order to spread fear through the peninsula, and favour electoral success for conservative forces. The operational network animating this strategy, between the latest part of the 60s and the early 70s, involved the neo-fascist radical sphere, Italian secret services, the CIA and the NATO secret services. The attacks were materially perpetrated by members of the two groups ON and AN, with the logistical support and political covering of Italian intelligence, as well as some 'sympathetic' politicians, often from the MSI and the Christian Democratic Party (DC).<sup>3</sup>

After a few years, it was clear that there was massive public disbelief in this theory of left-wing responsibilities. At the same time, allegations about involvement of

segments of the state and US secret services in these attacks were becoming established in the public sphere. As the ‘strategy of tension’ was proving inefficient, it was abandoned and—to reassert the credibility of the Italian state—both the neofascist groups were labelled as ‘extremist’ and disbanded by law: ON in 1971, AN in 1976.<sup>4</sup> It was a heavy blow for the neo-fascist scenes, especially the extra-parliamentary movements, which all of a sudden became labelled as ‘extremists’. They lost political support, found themselves leaderless, and were exposed publicly as being solely responsible for the horrible slaughters of the early 1970s.

Spontaneismo came into being at this time.

### **Inversion of the Cultural Frame: from Orientalism to Occidentalism . . . and the Nihilist Cult**

The first Spontaneista group, *Costruiamo l’Azione* (CLA), was constituted in 1977, initially as an attempt to restructure the neo-fascist arena as it was before the banishment of the existing groups. Some veterans thought that they could use neo-fascist youth to pursue their old authoritarian project. Philo-American neo-fascism had been imperialist and orientalist, its ideological structure grounded in the strenuous defence of the Italian state, from ‘the leftist threat’.

With this in mind, Paolo Signorelli and Fabio De Felice, two older militants who had survived the state repression of the mid-70s,<sup>5</sup> set to enlist younger activists and give new life to the deserted movement.

They soon discovered that the neo-fascist youth had significantly different ideas. They had not seen the war, and had been socialized, instead, after the reform of

mandatory education. They had watched closely the excitement of the revolutionary breeze their classmates from the left were experiencing during the 70s. The anti-authoritarian revolt, sexual liberation, access to light drugs, cultural emancipation, involvement in political violence, all looked appealing to neo-fascists, who had culturally much more in common with their peer group political opponents than with the veterans of their own movement. The youngsters of CLA were not to be controlled by their elders. Instead of backing the state's authoritarian power, admiring the imperial grandeur of their American allies, and laying their orientalist gaze over the imperial peripheries, they turned towards another direction. Still loyal to the fascist liberating narratives of violence, nihilism, and war, they now discovered that the Italian state and the US empire had betrayed them, and started moulding a new critical idiom, generally orientated against Western values and social institutions.

These changes were not specific to the neo-fascist sphere, but part of a larger transformation, or even inversion, within what might be called the 'Western identity space' (Friedman 1994; Jacoby 1999). Emerging signs of the USA's imperial decline were also transforming the way people identified within it. This has been described as 'Occidentalism': the reversal of a previous 'Orientalist' relation in representations between the 'West and the Rest', whereby a dominant Western rationality essentialized its (colonized) Others (Said 1978). In the Occidentalist frame, a declining Western civilisation had lost the power to hegemonize the representation of its Others, and it was the West to be now stereotyped by the gaze of its (internal and external) critics (Buruma and Margalit 2004; Friedman 2009; Ekholm Friedman and Friedman, this volume).

The ideological repositioning of neo-fascist youngsters generalized the conflict expressed by cultural minorities



all over the world. If the left was supporting liberation struggles within and without the Western world (from black power movements to anti-colonial revolts in Africa or South America), Spontaneista supported the mujahideen against the Shah, Muḥmar Gaddafi's revolt against the West's ally, King Idris, and even looked towards Che Guevara as a hero of the struggle against American imperialism. Invariably, both left and right perceived Western political orders as the living matrix of oppression against free peoples and cultures in the world.

Younger Spontaneista started loudly proclaiming anti-authoritarian messages in their supporters' magazine (a fanzine of sorts) and organized 'counter-cultural activities'. They had an 'armed wing' of the movement, which they called—somewhat awkwardly for neo-fascists—*Movimento Rivoluzionario Popolare* (People's Revolutionary Movement, MRP). They targeted the symbols of the state's authority, like prisons and courts, while publicly claiming responsibility for the attacks.<sup>6</sup>

When—from the pages of the fanzine—they offered an alliance to the extreme left,<sup>7</sup> it became too much for the neo-fascist veterans to take. A conflict exploded in which the youth emerged victorious, expelling older militants and setting the frame for further transformations in the extreme right. Soon enough two new groups were founded, both following CLA's ideological path: *Terza Posizione* (Third Position, TP) and *Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari* (Armed Revolutionary Squads, NAR). All three displayed ideological features almost diametrically opposed to what neo-fascism had shown in the period immediately after the war. They were anti imperial, anti-authoritarian, and against the state. TP claimed to hold a 'third position' between communism and liberalism, based on local communitarianism, local sovereignty and local solidarity;<sup>8</sup> while NAR reiterated CLA's offers

of alliance to the extreme left. They asserted a post-ideological stance claiming that their goal was to expose the general decline of society, and their project was not grounded in the interests of a given social part. Rather, they maintained they were interested in ‘the whole’, and claimed that they were acting in *everybody’s* behalf. They would induce a thorough regeneration of the social world, an upside down reversal of reality which would give birth to ‘a new man’. Within this discourse, death and birth were intimately connected projects, as the death of the old order also meant the birth of a new, desired one.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these efforts, the project of political regeneration that the young Spontaneista were attempting to put into operation, by transforming enemies into friends and old friends into enemies, didn’t succeed.. The hard realization of this failure came about on 7 January 1978, with the unfolding of what is known as ‘the Acca Larentia event’. Two young neo-fascists were shot dead by a left-wing commando while they were leaving the MSI party branch of Acca Larentia in the Tuscolano neighbourhood of Rome. Shocked by the killing, Roman neo-fascists gathered at the spot, to mourn their deaths and to demand justice. The police force were also present in large numbers, and the tension was palpable. Rioting broke out, and in the commotion that followed, a police officer killed a third neo-fascist militant.

This event, remembered to this day by a highly ritualized march to the site of the killings (Loperfido 2013), was deeply shocking to the Spontaneista, who saw their failure acquire an apocalyptic dimension, as old enemies and old friends seemed to be coalescing in a common project to annihilate them. It brought about a wave of deep nihilism among the young neo-fascists, who became convinced that they needed to take action and take steps to realize the apocalypse they themselves had been announcing.

It was the beginning of a half a decade long wave of violence from the Spontaneista, one that, as we have seen, targeted nearly everyone: leftists, state representatives, random people, and even the Spontaneista themselves. As Alibrandi's death shows, there was neither a project nor a strategy, be it in favour or against the state. Only death and violence were left. In the leaflet in which they took responsibility for the killing of yet another police officer, Alibrandi and some of his associates wrote:

We're not going after power, nor after educating the masses: what matters to us is to respect our ethical predicament, by which enemies are killed and traitors annihilated. . . . We're not afraid to die, neither are we to end our days in jail: the only fear we have is not to be able to clear the world from everything and everyone, but be assured: we won't stop until our last breath. (NAR's leaflet claiming responsibility for the Straullu murder, 1981)

This sort of chilling nihilism is not a unique to the Spontaneismo, and can be found in what Vittorio Lanternari has called 'evasion religions' (2003), as well as—more generally—in revolutionary messianic movements of colonial times. His and others' studies (Adas 1979; Pereira de Queiroz 1964, 1968) show how the cultural disintegration triggered by the transformations in the structures and dynamics of social control, appears to have given way to cultic tendencies and apocalyptic beliefs. These revolved around an obsession with death, and a profound desire for it, as death was seen as the fundamental principle of cosmic regeneration (Lanternari 2003: 245). Alienation plays obviously an important role here as it seems to push subjects to sever their identity from their own life experience, and to produce projective identifications with a future of destruction and renewal (see also Bastin's, and

Wilson's contributions to this volume). This is—it shall be noted—the kind of situation where death becomes ubiquitous, first in representations, then in reality.

### **Social Fragmentation, and the Violent Attempts to Restore Cosmological Unity**

Throughout the late 1970s, with the escalation of left-wing violence, on the one hand, and the Spontaneista attacks against the men of the state, on the other, a new expression became common currency in the narratives of institutional power. The struggle against 'opposed extremisms' of left and right, became a rhetorical device to sustain the claim that respectable citizens, regardless of their political persuasion, should unite against the threat of extremists. This is a common pattern during periods of acute social turmoil, which we have also seen more recently, for instance, in the #jesuisCharlie campaign (Zagato 2015). Here 'the people', re-emerge as an undifferentiated category, as vastly differing social and political constituencies are asked to unite with institutional power in national solidarity, regardless of their views, to face 'the invasions of the barbarians': the physical threat represented by 'uncivilized others'.

Curiously, Spontaneista people held a similar stance, asking both left and right to forget their differences, for the 'people' to unite, to defeat their rulers and punish them for their greed, and their subservience to American interests.

There seemed to be a symmetry within the spatial logic of this opposition. The critique of Spontaneista was enacted on the basis of rulers' allegiance to foreign potencies while the categorisation of Spontaneismo as extremism, located them out of the social body, and represented them as allied to foreign, threatening and destructive forces.

These reciprocal oppositions appear to represent the inescapable cosmological remoteness of the Other, itself an expression of the inability of the two poles to exert any sort of control over one another.

Marshal Sahlins (2008) has shown how ‘taming the barbarians’ is a foundational archetype of the very symbolic structures of political (and perhaps more specifically imperial) power. In an essay about the countless variations of popular legends about ‘The Stranger King’, he explains how the symbolic constitution of political power heavily relies on metaphors of the violent encounter (and final conciliation) between forces that are claimed to be ‘external to society’, and the indigenous, autochthonous ‘owners of the land’. While I concur in the recognition of a recurrent symbolic structure, I would argue for a more historicised understanding of it. There is more in the ambivalent representation of the civilized and the uncivilized, the central and the marginal, those identifying outside and above and those identifying inside and below, than a simple symbolic affair between cosmic forces of opposed nature. These recurrent oppositions are produced throughout, and embedded within, the historical pulsations of civilization cycles of expansion and contraction, and underpinned by material historical processes of rearrangement and reconfiguration of translocal power structures and alliances, that find in these metaphors and narratives their own legitimization.

In fact, the archetype around ‘taming the barbarians’ (extremists, pirates, etc.), seems to gain strength and social recognition when imperial hegemony starts to decline, and society finds itself ridden by centrifugal tendencies and intra social conflicts of various sorts.

The constitution of hegemonic orders depends on local elites’ capacity to integrate larger commercial-political systems through alliances with foreign elites, which are

situated outside the identity field of their local communities (Van Der Pijl 1998: 117). This is how a given community can get 'access to external resources and to other people's labor and skills', thus becoming able to 'transcend the limits of what is culturally/materially possible in a closed and socially undifferentiated local society'. (Ekholm Friedman 2005: 55). But the equilibrium between extra-local expansion and intra-local cohesion is delicate, and can only be maintained for a limited period of time, after which we see tendencies towards hegemonic contraction, fragmentation, and internal disintegration of the previously constituted orders (Ekholm Friedman 2005; Tainter 1988).

These logics apply to post-war development strategies of Italian elites. We have seen how both the political (for having been part of the fascist axis in the war) and economic peripherality of the country were overcome through commercial and political post-war alliances with the US establishment. This allowed Italy to integrate the then expanding commercial and political arena of the US hegemony. American help had of course a very strong geo-strategic purpose, since it served the formation of both political and paramilitary structures of defence of hegemonic interests in a country considered as an imperial frontier (Smith 1991).

The alliance between Italian and US elites worked well initially. It was sustained locally by the very economic expansion it was itself making possible. Italy was inundated with American investments and its productive economy grew immensely through the 50s and 60s, favouring economic redistribution, social peace and a strong solidarity between DC, the party that had dominated the after-war, and its constituencies. But the balance between identification of elites with foreign allies and their communities identification with them, is always precarious,

given the natural tendency of the political establishment to transform ‘into a bourgeoisie increasingly active in the global political economy on its own account, as part of an immanent world capital facing the working classes’ (Van Der Pijl:1998, 117). In this frame, the elite’s involvement in long distance political economic relations tends to realise ‘the primordial alienation from the community that is the precondition for market relations, exploitation for wage labor’ and—for that matter—surplus extraction *tout court* (ibid.: 99).

From the mid-60s on, various processes of social and economic change started to undermine DC’s relative political and cultural hegemony. The progressive unfolding of a systemic economic crisis (which acquired structural proportions in the mid-70s, which—perhaps not coincidentally—was also the time of Spontaneismo’s first manifestation) heavily hit the market relations that underpinned US expansion. This implied the progressive decay of economic growth, the shrinking of available resources, and the weakening of the US’s hegemonic position. In this conjuncture, the USA’s mode of control over peripheral regions of the empire switched from ‘trade’ to ‘warfare’, often using paramilitary ‘proxies’, formerly put in place and financed, as in the cases of the Chilean (1973) and the Greek (1975) putsches (Arrighi, 2009). These developments were more nuanced in Italy, where the ‘strategy of tension’ threatened rather than carried out a putsch. Yet, local political elites appeared less secure, and if the politically established parties like the DC became even more subservient to the American will, outsider parties like the Communists looked to appear more moderate by allying with their historical adversaries, the pro-American DC, in what became known as ‘the historical compromise’. Moreover, the crisis had opened the door to the greed of the political class altogether, progressively abandoning

distributive policies, voting for the public funding of parliamentary parties (against the advice of a the popular majority), and exposing themselves to a long series of bribery and corruption scandals. Last but not least, the ‘opposed extremisms’ rhetoric, justified repression via a negative moral essentialization of political opponents from both left and right as being part of a lower order.

It was the final collapse of the relative social harmony and homogeneity that had been the basis for post-war development. The alliance between representatives and represented, which had sustained the social peace in Italy, started to break apart, while the more extreme fragments of previously more homogeneous constituencies (like the Spontaneista and the extreme left) became increasingly violent.

One of the main contentions of this chapter is that, in face of the shrinking of the conditions of possibility for mutual identifications between the elites and their constituencies, often violent processes of social and spatial fragmentation are likely to attain the social field.

We can find testimonies of such evidence not only throughout the long decline of American hegemony, but as a general feature of imperial decline, from the Mesopotamian, to the Roman and British empires. Much like contemporary ‘preppers’ (Ekholm Friedman and Friedman, this volume), what we see is uprooted groups deciding to live outside society, forming their own communities, refusing to recognize any value in the state or centralized authority. Of such kind are the interesting connections between different ‘localisms’ revealed by Dahl in the US (1998), but also—in more distant historical eras—the revolutionary-messianic groups who retreat to isolated areas (sometimes as residents and at others as nomads) in times of decolonization (Adas 1979; Lanternari 2003; Pereira de Queiroz 1968), or even the Abiru self-isolating



communities that emerged during the collapse of the Late Bronze Age (Ekholm Friedman 2005: 83; Heltzer 1988). Spontaneista also planned their own cultural enclaves, where they would live autonomously under their own rule (Rao 2006: 263–264).

In this scenario, the increasing inability of different segments of society to identify with one another seems to inspire cosmological lacerations of the kinds described above, where the potencies of alterity are felt to penetrate the social field and bestow the power to destroy it.

This is also the context in which antinomic categories become established in the institutional discourse (i.e. the extremists, the barbarians, etc.), which are often defined as ‘foreign’, as a threat coming from the margins. Attributes of this threat vary between the irrational/anti-rational, pre- or anti-social, impulsive, natural and uncivilized, as opposed to the cultured and civilized nature of the centre. It is to be noted that these dichotomies are mutually reinforced within the oppositional relation between the centre and the margins, where each defines itself as the opposite of the other. The attributes remain the same, here (both the centre and the extremes see the centre as ‘civilized’ and the margins as ‘irrational’), but what changes is the moral value ascribed to those (each side ascribing totally positive value to its own features and a totally negative one to the other’s).

A general disordering of the social field is the more likely outcome, where socially shared feelings of anxiety and fear, which have variously been termed ‘cultural anxiety’ (Grillo 2003), ‘cultural despair’ (Stern 1974), or ‘depressive overload’ (Alberoni 1984), are likely to sublimate into apocalyptic imageries, and ‘end of the world’ kind of predictions.

This is the context in which the model of extreme alterity exemplified by the rulers/extremists oppositional

dichotomy tends to emerge. Cosmological laceration opens the way to very violent attempts to restore cosmogonic unity via a project of ‘destruction and regeneration’. This is because, to the extremist aggressor, the power to create a new order solely depends on this ability to violate the old. One of the Spontaneista leaders explained to the judges his impressive record of murders in the following way: ‘In order to create a “new man” you’ll have to destroy the “old one”, as there is no point in seeking to change his mentality and morality’ (Valerio Fioravanti, cit. in Bianconi, 2003: 47).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have tried to illuminate the transformative trajectory of the Italian neo-fascist sphere, from a para-military formation integral to the imperial structures of social control, to a formation of ‘extremism’. I have argued that the understanding of such transformation is only possible via historically informed approaches aimed at overcoming othering narratives implicit in the label of extremism. More specifically, I suggested one should look at the neo-fascist milieu in its constitutional relation with larger processes of reproduction of statehood within complexes that are produced as civilizational.

My main argument was that contraction of hegemonic orders tends to trigger—locally—processes of intra-social disintegration. I have argued that in Italy (like elsewhere), the cultural terrain for this processes was the shrinking conditions for mutual identifications between political representatives and their constituencies. Crisis, and the decline of mutual trust between ‘the people’ and the ‘elite’ paved the way for contestation and at times violent social conflict (both against the political class and

between social/political groups themselves), political stigmatization of marginal groups, and, more generally, the relentless decline of the relative social cohesion that was achieved in the period after World War Two.

The general disintegration processes referred to above, also implied a crisis of the homogeneity of social forms and the way they were represented culturally. The 1970s saw the resurfacing of ethnic and linguistic diversity, the resurgence of localism and emergence of autonomist and independence movements in Italy and more generally in the West. More specifically this general process of heterogenization also was at the core of transformation of the neo-fascist sphere. As we have seen, neo-fascism had become established early on after the war as a 'legitimate' formation, integral to the structures of the USA's hegemonic expansion in the Mediterranean area. This was in spite of many individuals and groups from that milieu practising political violence, murder and terrorist attacks against the national population, and at times even against the state's security forces, within a context of the so called 'strategy of tension'. But when that strategy was no longer functional to the purposes of hegemonic control, Italian neo-fascism was abandoned to itself and institutionally re-categorized as extremist: an ontological other that had penetrated the local cosmos, threatening its very substance.

In this scenario, the progressive decrease in social cohesion, the fragmentation and multiplication of social/political identities, and the increase in intra social conflict, led to a cosmological laceration in which different groups and subjects were becoming increasingly unable to recognize each other as parts of a shared social universe.

This is the context in which the neo-fascist milieu, dismissed and newly labelled as 'extremist' by the institutional sphere, formed an apocalyptic eschatology of its

own, finding new meanings and directions for its violent actions, and attempting—in their own words—to accelerate the dis-integration of a world that was too sick to be cured (Freda 2000), and expecting, at the end of that path, the millenarian resurgence of a new Golden Age of national resurgence. The heretical, nihilist violence, the ravaging, degrading, grotesque, and at times carnivalesque violence of what we call extremism, seems thus to be rooted in this paradoxical, profoundly ambivalent dimension of hegemonic decline, one that is suspended between catastrophe and regeneration, degradation and renovation, social death and revival.

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### Notes

1. By ‘centre’ here I mean, very generally, the established social order and its institutions, as opposed to extremism (the latter including, also very generally, social phenomena that radically deviate from the norms and rules expressed by that order).
2. This is, Ekholm Friedman reminds us ‘ . . . a project run by elites and oriented towards elite consumption’ (2005: 81), more than anything else.
3. Cento Bull 2007; Ferraresi 1995, 1996; Salvini 1995.

4. On the inefficiency of this repressive strategy, see also Pasieka, this volume.
5. De Felice in particular was known to have had consistent relations with Italian secret services.
6. As we mentioned, previous generations were instead perpetrating terrorist attacks and deliberately blaming the leftists.
7. 'We recognise our former mistakes and we are saying to leftists: wake up boys! Don't let them fuck you again, haven't you been the trained monkeys of the state for long enough? ... Our enemies are the same and they all gang up against us, let's fight the filthy shit-hole together! (Anonymous, *Costruiamo l'Azione*, April 1978, n.I, p. 1).
8. On localism as a response to crisis situations, see Dahl, 1998. On localism as a critique to state power, see Diamanti, 1996.
9. This vision was heralded by the neo-fascist ideologue, Franco Freda, who professed the need to 'destroy the system' in order to give place to a new order (Freda 2000: 60; Stellati 2001: 69)

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# SUICIDE BOMBING AND SOCIAL DEATH



*Rohan Bastin*

Suicide bombing is foremost an act of violence that draws together the ingredients of terror and its relation to human being. It is a form of altruistic suicide that plays upon the twinned elements of madness and despair and seemingly resolves their differences in an act of rage.<sup>1</sup> It is an ultimate form of violence whereby the victim and the killer become one, and the survivors are left with a photograph or a potted-biography of the killer. In the case of the suicide vest, a decapitated head found perhaps on a roof nearby might be all that remains. The era of suicide bombing thus revives the old practice of the death mask and the horror of the guillotine. It forces a dramatic re-examination of sovereignty and exceptionalism in the contemporary world.

The 2001 attacks on New York's World Trade Center and other US targets ('9-11') confronted many in the West with a form of extremist violence that has existed elsewhere for some time. Suicide-bombing gained notoriety in Lebanon at the height of its civil war from the early 1980s. Where car bombs employed by different elements and their supporting countries had become a common feature of civil wars and insurgencies (e.g. Palestine in the 1940s, South Vietnam in the 1960s, and Northern Ireland



from the 1970s (Davis 2007)), the use of vehicles driven at speed to gain access to the target and for the driver to detonate its explosive load and thereby kill himself became a new dimension of guerrilla warfare seemingly inspired by the offensive martyrdom of Iranian revolutionary militias following Iraq's invasion in 1980 (Khosrokhavar 2005). In more recent times, however, the vehicle attack has involved no explosive charge at all. The Nice (2016), London Bridge (2017) and Barcelona-Cambrils (2017) attacks consisted of the vehicle alone. In London, the attackers then sprang from their van, wielding knives taped to their hands and wearing fake suicide-bomber vests. They raged indiscriminately until they were gunned down by police paramilitaries. As with the bomber, the attackers had thus made themselves one with their weapons, their deaths one with their acts of homicide and their desired victory something to be enjoyed someday by someone else.

These instances of vehicle-only killing do not indicate suicide-bombing to be over. Rather, they highlight how the practice has changed in response to the kinds of measures taken to combat it as well as in relation to the locations where the attacks occur. Principal among these responses has been the growth of surveillance and, with that, new forms of exceptional state power. In films like *Eye in the Sky* (Dir. Gavin Hood 2016) we see the use of macro- and micro-surveillance devices working with global military and political networks to assassinate would-be suicide bombers after fudging the statistical probability of innocent civilian casualties. In a similar vein, *Zero Dark Thirty* (Dir. Kathryn Bigelow 2012) celebrates the use of torture to hunt down the alleged mastermind of 9-11. Suicide bombing thus contributes to a broader state of exception—a categorical condition of abstract peril that fills but is never completed by factual instances (Schmitt

2005). As both films portray, these exceptions occur in exceptional places—post-colonial frontiers of the Global North where necropolitics predominate (Mbembe 2003). Since the development of vehicle-killing, be it an airliner or a ballast-filled van, the targets have been major cities of empire, the weapons have been harder to identify, and the attackers typically ‘computer addicts in search of their parents’ roots’ (Khosrokhavar 2016: 3). In other words, the killers are ordinary citizens of Global North countries with personal histories of migration and socio-economic marginalization in the host country. Records of petty crime often suggesting police harassment are usually all that can be found once the killer has been identified. In regular communication with those same necropolitical fringes where the Global North routinely practises its ‘eye-in-the-sky’ exceptionalism, these attackers might also have chosen to join new forms of the Spanish Civil War’s International Brigades such as Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or Daesh). Where that earlier war generated romanticism—a Hemingway novel or the 1942 film *Casablanca*—these wars provoke demands that states strip their participating citizens of citizenship and refuse to allow their or their families’ repatriation. There is thus more than just a difference of ideology between a Spanish Civil War participant and a member of ISIS, more too than a willingness to sacrifice one’s life. Where the Spanish Civil War was part of a war *against* fascism, the so-called ‘War on Terror’ highlights what the ‘victory’ over fascism established (Wolin 2003): a ‘beautiful friendship’ with a police state.

As far back as the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, terrorist bombing has been coextensive with violent antagonism to a prevailing politico-theological order whether that is a colonizing power or some other kind of enemy. In several civil war and insurgency settings, bombers pursued

surprise attacks with specific or very general targets. Typically, though, time-delay fuses were employed to enable a bomber's escape or an additional form of attack. In some instances (admittedly rare), warnings were issued to minimize civilian casualties. In recent times, however, bombers have become one with the bomb to ensure its success, especially when the target is heavily armed or difficult to approach. Preventative measures have increased including barriers, bomb disposal technologies, and surveillance technologies that are visual (CCTV), chemical (including sniffer-dogs), and communications-based (or spying). Commercially produced explosives like Semtex have had detectable chemical agents known as 'taggants' added by their manufacturers. The ability to park a car and leave the scene without raising suspicion, leave a package in a rubbish bin, or check-in an explosive suitcase at an airport has been curtailed in direct response to previous attacks. So, the bombers choose different targets and make themselves an integral part of the destruction. Warnings are no longer issued. As Scott Atran (2010: xiv) observes: 'Perhaps never in the history of human conflict have so few people with so few actual means and capabilities frightened so many'. The critical point, though, is that *both* sides of the conflict are bringing that situation about by racing away from each other toward the poles of the human and the machine.

As the hegemonic superpower, the US and its 'coalition of the willing' responded to 9-11 by declaring war on an abstraction—terror. It was the first formal declaration of war by a Global North state since the mid-twentieth century; albeit a declaration that involved no recall of ambassadors, because there was no embassy from which to recall them, only fear. To put a face to this profound anxiety, an 'Axis of Evil' was identified and a course of action undertaken that, in the words of Walter Davis (2006: xiii)

'is also uncannily suited to the designs of global capitalism'. The Cold War disaster of Afghanistan was revisited and revived. The failed-ally-now-rogu-state Iraq was invaded ostensibly because 'terror' had been found in the form of 'weapons of mass destruction' that, of course, only existed in our imagination. The real target—Iran—was once again besieged, while the breakup of the old Second World empires, going on apace since the end of the Cold War, was encouraged as the spread of inherently world-saving democracy, while Muslim elements in the two Second World empires—the USSR and China—were encouraged to realign and separate. The double-edges of the sword of terrorism were thus sharpened. For the terrorists who attacked the US in 2001 and have continued to attack subsequently there and elsewhere, are themselves the victims of terror from those sites of the colonial frontier and its modern developments—primarily civil wars which need no diplomacy, treaty or non-aggression pact. Like the Gauls invading Rome, the products of civil war bring to the walls of the city the horror of the empire and turn the public into startled geese. The War on Terror thus describes a state of exception whereby governments and citizens hitherto feeling safe in the post-racial, post-sexist, and post-colonial categorical imperatives of Gettysburg, Auschwitz, and My Lai suddenly do an about-face and welcome torture and other war crimes and crimes against humanity as pragmatic necessities for a world—their world, which they rule so benevolently and good humouredly that they are not even aware they are ruling it—being terrorized by deadly serious suicide bombers. In the words of a contemporary mythologization of our times, *Clash of the Titans* (Dir. Louis Leterrier, 2010): 'Release the Kraken'!

In keeping with all forms of war technology, suicide bombing thus emerges as part of an 'arms race' between

antagonists. Replacing the car-bombs that swelled in numbers from the late 1960s when bomb makers discovered the deadly amalgam of the easily-obtained crop-fertilizer ammonium nitrate and fuel oil (ANFO) (Davis 2007), the incidence of suicide bombing and suicide killing rose dramatically from the early 1990s. In Sri Lanka, the separatist Tamil Tigers developed special undergarment vests to carry the explosive charge (usually a plastic explosive such as Semtex or C4) and, reminiscent of the Japanese Special Attack Force (*Tokkōtai*) of aerial and submarine human bombs used in the later stages of World War Two, created a special suicide squad—the Black Tigers—to undertake missions against the Sri Lankan Navy and to assassinate politicians and military commanders. Suicide vests were quickly adopted by others or the explosives were hidden in seemingly harmless and ubiquitous backpacks. Women cadres became significant participants as they exploited their putative harmlessness to gain access to their targets. In some instances, the explosives were made to make the bomber appear to be pregnant.

Noting the Tamil Tigers and their contribution to the practice of suicide bombing gives pause to the extensive literature on suicide warfare that proliferated after 9-11. For while those and other attacks were associated with radical Islam movements, the Tigers were, if anything, Hindu albeit with large numbers of Tamil Christians in their ranks. Expressing at times an egalitarian ideology opposed to caste and the subordination of women—arguably two planks of conservative Hinduism—the Tigers have been classified as ‘secular Marxists’ (Pape 2005) and as ‘nationalists’ (Khosrokhavar 2005: 9) because their acts of martyrdom have been both offensive rather than defensive, and because they were tied to a military strategy to oust an occupying government and declare a separate state. Defensive martyrdom is, of course, more common in

the region, with Tamil-language nationalists setting fire to themselves from the 1960s to protest the introduction of Hindi as India's national language, and Buddhist monks making the same public gesture in Burma and Vietnam from the same time. In that sense, too, the adoption by the Tamil Tigers of the *kuppi*—the vial of cyanide worn around the militant's neck to be used in the event of capture—was a defensive martyrdom, albeit one that directly led to the offensive practice of suicide bombing.<sup>2</sup>

Kurdish suicide bombers are interpreted in the same way as nationalists rather than simply Islamic and as military strategists rather than hateful individuals whose motives are principally vengeful and exemplary rather than strategic. These interpretations, which strive to debunk the popular 'crazy jihadist' arguments are, however, missing the point. In appearing to be non-religious, the Tamil and Kurdish suicide bombers highlight the dynamics of contemporary religiosity. In the case of the Tigers, for example, the cult of the suicide bomber was tied to the value of freedom in the conditions of a separate Tamil state, the exemplary charisma of the Tiger leader/prophet who incorporated powerful themes of birth and rebirth in Tiger membership and training, and a ritualized cult of heroes that became integral to the ideal state the militant movement celebrated once it had acquired control over parts of the country.<sup>3</sup> Very similar practices are evident amongst the Kurds and, as Khosrokhavar (2005) argues about Iranian martyr movements, they did not simply react to and reject the strong leftist groups and ideology that had also opposed the Shah rather than incorporate leftist ideology in a new religiosity that broke with tradition precisely as it declared a new traditionalism—a fundamentalism.

All forms of suicide-militancy are thus religious including those secularist forms that prompt some commentators

to debunk the ‘mad mullah’ arguments and to look instead for an underlying strategy—a rational pragmatism that enables a politics of recognition. Employing a techno-militaristic (i.e. easily acronymed) terminology such as ‘Human-Centered Weapon System’ (Lewis 2013), these commentators such as Robert Pape (2005) and Iain Overton (2019) thus promote the pursuit and eradication of militant group leaders as the evil geniuses who marshal the martyr mentality converting its defensive despair into hateful weapons. It was in this way, for example, that the Sri Lankan president who waged the aggressive military campaign against the Tigers in 2008/9 routinely obsessed over the need to exterminate the Tiger leader. In the bloodbath that followed, the government then ensured the eradication of the Tiger leader’s family including his 10-year-old son who was shot in captivity, the razing of the parents’ house, and the demolition of the underground bunker that had briefly become a museum managed by the Sri Lankan Army. If the ethnic pogrom of 1983 displayed features of a demonic exorcism mobilized by de facto state forces such as members of the ruling party’s trade union (Kapferer 2012), the final onslaught by the state itself was staggeringly total. In a similar way, the US hunted and executed the alleged mastermind of 9-11 before observing a proper mortuary rite on board a US warship—seemingly respectful of Islam but effectively denying Osama bin Laden’s martyr status—and disposing of the body at sea. Put simply, therefore, the religiosity of suicide bombing is matched by the ‘exterminate the brutes’ religiosity of the campaigns against it. The ‘arms race’ of terror continues.

In seemingly dispensing with the ‘crazy jihadist’ or ‘mad mullah’ approach, the commentators also fail to connect suicidal militancy with the predominantly US phenomenon of the lone gunman who targets sites of

enjoyment such as open-air concerts and nightclubs; biopolitical institutions (schools, universities, medical centres, libraries, and places of worship); and ostensibly secular gatherings like the Norwegian Worker's Youth League summer camp in 2011. Where attacks on public events like the Boston Marathon, public spaces like London Bridge and the Nice promenade, and other sources of enjoyment such as *Charlie Hebdo* magazine are attributed to Islamic militancy, attacks like Columbine High School, Virginia Tech, or the 2017 Las Vegas concert are quickly 'outliered' through a forensic psychology that anchors the demons firmly inside the perpetrators' heads rendering them as variants of the arsonist and serial killer. Much debate then focuses on the means—the guns—rather than the parallels and what these parallels suggest about the contemporary world and the religiosities of homicidal suicide. When, however, Khosrokhavar (2005: 45) insightfully describes the suicide bomber as using radicalized Islam to express 'the despair of an embryonic individual who maintains his links with the sacred whilst striving to assert himself in a world that is deaf to his aspirations', he could as easily be describing Stephen Paddock (Las Vegas), Omar Mateen (Orlando), or Seung-Hui Cho (Virginia Tech) albeit without the Islam. To include the anti-Islamic terrorists such as the Norwegian Anders Breivik or the Australian Brenton Tarrant here would be especially galling for them because unlike Paddock et al. Breivik et al. imagine they have higher cause. Their passionate denial of any psycho-pathology is matched by the public demand that they be pathologized. What I suggest is that their pathology be situated. The demons are, quite simply, ranging more broadly than inside their heads.

Major changes to the nature of nation-states have been taking place in this context of suicide-killing and state response. The invasion of Iraq combined state



power with global corporations such as Haliburton whose principal activity is servicing the oil industry and whose management was closely articulated with the presidency of George W. Bush. Where a previous US president, Eisenhower, had cautioned against the excessive influence of the military-industrial complex, its growth has contributed to the rise of what Wolin (2003) refers to as an inverted totalitarianism and what Kapferer (2005) calls the oligarchic-corporate state (or more simply the corporate state). For Jha (2006) these developments are the inevitable rupture of the nation-state as a container of capital that had itself contributed to previous ruptures as an inherent quality of capitalism itself. And this is Walter Davis's point about the resonance between capitalism and the war on terror or, indeed Hardt and Negri's point about the invention of wars on abstractions as a feature of Empire (Hardt and Negri 2005). The martyr, the *reductio ad absurdum* of such abstraction, bears witness precisely at that point of his or her *déchirement* (fragmentation).<sup>4</sup> Mastering an imminent apocalypse as a Mexican stand-off between nuclear superpowers that appeared to have ended war because no one would be so crazy as to start one—a perpetual peace of a truly symmetrical war complemented indeed fed by the asymmetric civil wars of the frontier—the veneer of gentility would be preserved if good citizens remained good, their categorical imperatives nurtured by another Hitler/Holocaust book, documentary or film, or tale of deprivation of freedom and consumerism in the Second World. There was even talk of shifting the theatre of the nuclear stand-off into outer space. The suicide bomber, a figure who seemed to appear just when the Cold War seemed to be over, throws that bizarre sense of peace into disarray. The categorical imperative of pragmatism at the limits of modern technology nurtured by an exclusive club of member countries

that appeared to align with the veto-holders on the UN Security Council, was then ruptured when the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was broken by the successful testing of weapons by India, Pakistan and North Korea. In hand with the rise of the suicide bomber, therefore, we also saw the invention of the 'rogue state' as the concomitant of the 'failed state'. The 'unexampled masterpiece' of terror, 'Hiroshima' (Davis 2006, 156), thus became a new aspect of an evolving state form increasingly orientated to a sense of global catastrophe.

The 'War on Terror' thus becomes its own kind of Terror in the French Revolutionary sense. People are made to feel safe in the presence of an increasingly militarized and invigilated world as they are told to welcome the surveillance, quietly hopeful that *they've* done nothing wrong and that the deadly surveillance systems will not make a mistake, or, if they do, they make it somewhere else or to someone else who came from somewhere else such as the Brazilian tourist shot dead on the London Underground in the days after the 2007 attacks. Questions regarding the nature of these parts of the world are largely left unanswered apart from a few murmurings from the Left about growing inequality and the inherent or systemic violence of capitalism (Zizek 2002) or a few Orientalist murmurings from the Right about the inherent corruption and repressive inequalities (especially gendered) of traditional politico-theologies (read 'Islam').

Any vehicle is now potentially a weapon and any site a target. Even at the quiet regional campus of the Australian university where I work, heavy concrete and stone barriers were erected in 2018 to go with the heightened systems of surveillance and the employment of security consultants whose principal activities are the management of fear and the protection of corporate liability. Two of these gigantic tub bollards deserve special mention for

the way their tops have been informally converted by staff members into dioramas with children's plastic toys creating a farmyard in one tub (complete with a wind turbine) and a battlefield of toy soldiers and helicopter gunships in the other. In the face of climate change and the associated bushfire tragedies of 2019/2020, both dioramas form war zones demanding state response.

Other manifestations of terror are the high enrolments in criminology programmes around the Australian country, the rise of the readily-available for media comment 'terrorism expert' usually found in a specialist 'centre' or 'think tank', and scholarly emphases on policy, risk and 'precarity' to accompany 'real-world applications' of research that is 'impactful'. In a recent television advertising campaign, these real-world applications are depicted as brightly coloured smoke coming out of the back of the smiling head of a student. The campaign was entitled 'Deakin University Arms Students with what it takes to "Be Ready"'. Highlighting the times as full of 'rapid change and global uncertainty', the executive director of marketing explained that 'universities need to do more than ever to prepare students for the real world'. (retrieved from <https://lbbonline.com/news/deakin-university-arms-students-with-what-it-takes-to-be-ready/> 24 July 2019). In more recent campaigns, the university declares that the future 'belongs to the ready' and thus continues to promote a sense of threat and futurism reminiscent of Europe a century ago, but at the same time preparing the world for the extremism created by the global pandemic.

Where Zizek (2008: 153) sees Hitchcock's *The Birds* in the image of the crashing 9-11 aircraft, one could be forgiven for seeing Tim Burton's *Mars Attacks* in these exploding heads. More seriously, though, the ads depict a university overdetermined by its fears, which it shares with an anxious public. It isn't declaring the

self-combusting student to be a suicide bomber any more than it is advocating vaping. It is, however, suggesting that the student will be 'impactful' and will rise above the 'precariat', his or her head 'exploding with ideas', as if to say, 'I am dynamite'. The terror of suicide bombing thus feeds a larger anxiety identified by Dardot and Laval (2019) as the permanent state of crisis informing neoliberalism since the global financial crisis of 2008. This is the profound anxiety regarding employment and financial security in a post-manufacturing society and fragmenting nation-state, amplified in the thunder of a global pandemic. The suicide bomber prefigures and participates, therefore, in a larger apocalyptic eschatology participating in the 'liquid surveillance' (to use Zygmunt Bauman's term) of the wages of fear. By this I mean the diasporic proliferation and privatization of multiple panopticons that replace the more centralized surveillance institutions of the modern state (Bauman and Lyon 2013). Digital and matrix technology, 'Big Data' (Zuboff 2019) and the neo-liberal checks on the excesses of *laissez faire* through continuous audit-ranking (Dardot and Laval 2013) are all components of this liquid surveillance that is almost continually generating corporate solutions to corporate problems (Dardot and Laval 2019). Identified several years ago as the society of control (Deleuze 1992) and the society of the apparatus (Agamben 2009), the proliferation of panopticons engages in the larger spectacle of global warfare demanding unprecedented curtailment of information-freedom that simultaneously presents itself as an unrestricted spectacle.<sup>5</sup> This is the same context as that of the computer-addicted jihadists described by Khosrokhavar (2016). It is the world of the Arab Spring, of the anti-government protests in Hong Kong, the Extinction Rebellion movement, and more recently the mass demonstrations inspired by singular albeit synecdochic

acts of racial and gendered violence, as well as ‘witch hunt’ impeachment campaigns against political leaders. It is a world heavily dependent on satellite communications and a profound sense of victimhood. The suicide bomber occupies the extreme of this extreme.

## **Conclusion**

Bauman coined the term ‘liquid surveillance’ as a complement to the transformations in modernity inadequately rendered, he felt, by the term ‘postmodern’ (Bauman 2000; Bauman and Lyon 2013). These included the extension of the market into every sinew of life associated with the transformation in the centralized institutional form of the surveillance state. Entailing more than mere ‘outsourcing’, the rise of multiple panopticons and the shift from production to consumption, discipline to control, the traditional role of the state apparatus focused more on different modalities of violence and boundary management. It amounts to the narrowing intensification of centralized state power to policing and exclusionary border protection. Along with the growing array and scale of panopticons was also the development of ‘ban-opticons’ (Bauman and Lyon 2013: 60–6). Ranging from private security firms managing gated communities and ID card workspaces to state-run borders including internal borders such as the wall built by the state of Israel to deal with its growing suicide bomber threat, ban-opticons are also the migrant detention centres and navy blockades that restrict human movement in an era of unprecedented mobility. At London’s Gatwick Airport and I daresay elsewhere in the UK, the slow-moving queue of arriving passengers awaiting electronic scanning and, for now at least, face-to-face interrogation, is greeted by the sign ‘Welcome to the

UK Border' not 'Welcome to the UK'. For the border has become its own ban-opticon run by, also for now, a public department renamed as 'Border Force' to embrace the previously separate realms of customs and immigration. In hand with these corporate-state developments are the television entertainment programmes whereby the public becomes part of the surveillance apparatus by watching how the 'Border Force' goes about its work, usually with arriving passengers who were unaware of their right, again for now, to decline to be recorded. 'Reality TV' programmes of all kinds are thus part of the surveillance exercise. Indeed, there is even a programme where people can watch people watching television. Like the mythical oozlum bird that flies in ever-decreasing circles, the society of liquid surveillance risks an ultimate 'closure'. The suicide bomber is one of its possibilities.

I noted at the beginning of this chapter how the film *Eye in the Sky* addresses the proliferation of surveillance as a direct outcome of suicide bombing. It depicts a high technology military operation involving the governments of the UK, the USA and Kenya employing micro (flying beetle) and more conventional satellite-operated drones to locate a Muslim extremist safe house and there discover two suicide bombers preparing for an attack with explosives being added to special vests they will wear, probably to a shopping mall, and a video camera being set up to record their last words to broadcast later on social media. Drone cameras reveal an innocent young girl sitting in front of the house compound selling bread that her mother has made at their home nearby. Liquid surveillance thus clatters into a typical scenario of the Global South where innocent civilians are held captive by occupying extremists as a human shield. At one point we see the girl playing with a hula-hoop in her own house compound; her father then being castigated by a visiting

militant for allowing his daughter to behave in such a flagrantly un-Islamic way. Their own house compound is thus deterritorialized by Islamic fundamentalism. Meanwhile, the two US drone pilots (male and female whom we know have just met) enjoy the sight of the girl playing as it is telecast by the cameras of their aircraft which they are flying from a base in the USA. It is another invasion of privacy, but it is harmless because it is joyful and necessary because of terrorism. The contradiction is heightened by the knowledge that the English army general presiding over the operation from London went to work that day tasked with replacing the toy doll he had bought for his daughter's birthday with the brand/model the girl's mother knows she really wants. Busy with the global terrorist threat he delegates the task to a female subordinate who, of course, knows what it is all about. An identity of innocence—child's play—is thus established between the girl in the village and the daughter of the general. The ultimate eye-in-the-sky—the film's audience—feels safe in the conviction of what it is fighting for. The terrorists on the other hand have no motive other than the twisted Muslim male obsession with curtailing women's and children's freedom. Like the evil routinely displayed in Anglo-American horror fiction, the terrorists' greatest sin is their supposed hatred for kinship while the good citizens' greatest sin is neglect. And just as evil is always vanquished by a 'Holy Family' consisting of a (male or female) warrior mother temporarily commanding the exception, the destruction of the terrorists is achieved. Of course, though, the little village girl—innocence—is killed. The general really did get the wrong doll, but we can fix that through the eye-in-the-sky. To twist the memorable line of another deeply ideological film of our times of corporate-state warfare (*A Few Good Men*), *Eye in the Sky* reveals how we *can* 'handle the truth' of a permanent

state of exception seemingly forced upon us by religious extremism and suicide bombing without giving pause to our common ground.

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### Notes

1. The phrase 'madness and despair' twists a phrase from the final section of Joseph Conrad's novel *The Secret Agent* (first published in 1907). The novel is based on the true story of a bombing by a French anarchist of the Greenwich Observatory in 1894. Conrad (1967: 9) called the event 'a blood-stained inanity of so fatuous a kind' because it killed the bomber without damaging the Observatory and provoked the bomber's sister to commit suicide; an act subsequently reported as one of 'madness or despair'.
2. This form of martyrdom is also more common elsewhere as hunger-striking (Feldman 1991; Bargu 2014) and the deliberate surrender to state violence such as the early Christian refusal to sacrifice leading to the Christo-mimetic internalization of sacrifice (Khosrokhavar 2005: 6). As Khosrokhavar and others note, the term 'martyr' originally describes one who bears witness.
3. In *Structures of Tamil Eelam: A Handbook* published in Switzerland in 2019 (Gemini 2019), surviving Tigers describe the institutions of the de facto state with a view to preserving them for the future. Closely aligned with secular grassroots development discourse, the book contains no references to either the military structure of the Tigers or to the ritualism the Tigers created.



4. This is my translation of the French term following Jonathan Strauss's translator's note regarding its use for the German *zerrissenheit* by Kojève and Bataille (Bataille 1990: 14n5). Strauss uses the term 'dismemberment' but notes how *déchirement* also has the meanings of shredding or tearing.
5. A further feature of this within the academy is the intensification of surveillance over research through increasingly dogmatic and Roman geese-like research ethics committees charged with ensuring that no intrusive human research is conducted. And because some students commence their studies before the age of 18, all university staff must acquire a 'Working with Children' permit—essentially a police check of their criminal records about which management is then informed.

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# RETREAT TO THE FUTURE

The Role of Apocalyptic Thought in Current  
Ethnonationalist Extremism



*Andrew F. Wilson*

This chapter will show that the extreme right relies upon a divergent version of ‘the nation’ to that typically referred to in far right discourse. In its rejection of, and rejection by, the political and cultural mainstream, the extreme right has never enjoyed the waxing and waning of acceptance that the radical right parties have since World War II. The extreme right is instead associated with a marginal set of beliefs that have existed solely in the cultural hinterlands of modern societies. This has resulted in an ongoing commingling with other forms of rejected knowledge, and this has resulted in multiple hybrid forms of extreme right ideology such as National Socialist satanism, Hitlerian UFO conspiracy theories, and the like. This might be seen to be a continuation of pre-war trends, such as early Nazism’s ideational common ground with Ariosophy, but it is argued here that this cross-fertilization of ideas has been intensified and become *characteristic* of the extreme right in recent years. Further, this chapter will show that the extreme right—in all its variations—can be understood as millennialist in its dependence on the organizing idea of a futural, paradisaic ethnostate, what is referred to here as ‘the apocalyptic virtual nation’.

Whilst this chapter was being written, a braying crowd chanted ‘send her back’, at rally held by Donald Trump, the president of the United States. The crowd were referring to Ilhan Omar, the Representative of Minnesota’s Fifth Congressional District in the US House of Representatives. Elected as part of the Minnesota Democratic–Farmer–Labor Party, she is affiliated with the Democratic Party. The chants referred to her status as a Somali-American. She was a child refugee who became a US citizen in 2000. Omar and her political allies and fellow women of colour Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, have been targeted by the US president who suggested that they should ‘go back’ to ‘the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came’.<sup>1</sup> With the exception of Omar, they were all born in the United States. Trump’s tweets and the chanting crowds highlight the increasing presence of racist tropes and attitudes in the political mainstream. The ethnonationalism of Trump and his supporters is part of a continuum of hate-based ideologies that were once far right positions but which have entered the mainstream of Western political discourse.

The far right continuum is generally understood as being constituted through two relatively distinct formations: the radical right and the extreme right. Cas Mudde’s useful summary of the distinction between them in *The Far Right Today* (2019) is organized around their differing relationship with the state, ‘The *extreme right* rejects the essence of democracy, that is, popular sovereignty and majority rule ... The *radical right* accepts the essence of democracy, but opposes fundamental elements of *liberal* democracy, most notably minority rights, rule of law, and separation of powers’ (Mudde 2019: 7). The extreme right thus roots its nationalism as *external* to the nation-state while the radical right seeks to express its nationalism

*through* the nation-state. The extreme right is a marginal formation whilst the radical right seeks to redefine the centre ground. The radical right is therefore ‘reformist’ and the extreme right ‘revolutionary’ (Ibid.). That their ends differ does not exclude the possibility of ideological common ground, as the following example demonstrates.

Trump has continually exacerbated rifts between cultural communities and he and his administration have consistently referred to Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis (Haynes 2019; Musgrave 2019; Thrush and Davies 2017). This rhetoric of intercultural conflict has a dark, millenarian undercurrent that casts the binary division in apocalyptic terms. What the radical right considers politically, the extreme right understands religiously. When Brenton Tarrant murdered 51 people at the Al Noor mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand, he did so with weapons and equipment marked with symbols and slogans referring to anti-Muslim and white supremacist sentiment. Notable was the use of ‘14’ in reference to white supremacist terrorist David Lane’s 14-word formulation, ‘We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children’. Lane espoused a bleak, revolutionary politics that was suffused with an idiosyncratic reading of Germanic religion; in essence, he promoted white power terrorism in the face of what he conceived of as an existential threat to the ‘white race’ and gave this political mission a spiritual dimension that he termed Wotanism. By inscribing Lane’s symbolic legacy on his weapons, Tarrant continued this mission.

Lane’s ideas have become associated with the ‘white genocide’ conspiracy theory and this overlaps with Renaud Camus’s similar but more widely known notion of *le grand remplacement*, or, the ‘great replacement’ (Williams 2017). Both are understood to frame current history in

terms of a broad conspiracy against, in Lane, the ‘white race’ or, in Camus, European Christian culture. Camus’s book (Camus 2012) has no English translation and so it is almost certainly through the populist interpretation of it by alt-right figureheads such as Lauren Southern that it has become more widely known among white supremacist groups and other extreme right elements. In 2017, Southern posted an 11-minute YouTube video providing a summary of her understanding of Camus’s ideas; the video has since been viewed over 650,000 times (Southern 2017). A screed that Tarrant circulated immediately before carrying out his attack used ‘The Great Replacement’ as its title and repeats many of the themes associated with Camus’s work although it does not name Camus as a source. Similarly, it refers directly to ‘white genocide’ and includes idealized images of ‘Aryan’ female and juvenile archetypes but does not refer directly to Lane. It was, though, the work of an internet-dwelling terrorist so the likelihood for Tarrant to be inclined to provide references is minimal. It concludes with a series of aphorisms that exhort the reader to ‘keep marching forward’ to the ‘final destination, total victory’. It concludes ‘Europa Rises’ (Tarrant n.d.).

Tarrant’s manifesto is futurally orientated (‘most of all there is only the future ahead’). It is millenarian in that it is concerned with a future that will be achieved in the wake of a cataclysmic struggle that will overturn existing structures (‘power structures will be tested and likely will fall’). It therefore conforms to Mudde’s description of the extreme right as revolutionary. It is also characterized by a crude but self-evident cosmological outlook in which ‘the folk’ that Tarrant believes he speaks to and for are deified and transcendent (‘we must march ever forward to our place among the stars and we WILL reach the destiny our people deserve’). This chapter argues that this kind of

vernacular millennialism is an overlooked and key component of extremism today. Concentration on the political form undermines the impact of the religious forms at play. Moreover, this chapter will also make clear how the interplay of thematic concerns of millennialism and conspiracy theory lend themselves to appropriation by—or, indeed, fuel—extremist political ends.

Catherine Wessinger described ‘catastrophic millennialism’ as the belief that paradisiacal living will become possible in the wake of a cataclysmic event, or series of events, and that this will finally resolve an ongoing battle between opposing powers organized around a dualistic axis of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ (Wessinger 2000). A recurring feature of the groups and beliefs identified in these terms is the way in which their millennialist reading of worldly events coincides, and is exacerbated by, a conspiracist outlook. We can see this, for instance, in Walliss’s (2004) treatment of the Japanese catastrophic millennial group, Aum Shinrikyo. Infamous for its sarin gas attack on Tokyo and in its latter stages possessed by a fear of, if not a New World Order, then certainly globalized forces of conspiracy, ‘Aum increasingly saw itself as the victim of a conspiracy of global proportions involving, aside from the Japanese government and rival Japanese religions such as Sōka Gakkai, such “usual suspects” as the Vatican, the CIA, International Jews, and the Freemasons’ (Walliss 2004: 187).

Aum reflect a number of the characteristics that typify the extreme right: a rejection of the nation’s institutions of power and a xenophobic outlook in addition to apocalyptic conspiracies. Their commingling of conspiracy and apocalyptic prophecy is typical of the milieu. Barkun (2003) highlights the manner in which unstructured combinations of stigmatized knowledge produces an eclectic apocalypticism that he terms ‘improvisational millennialism’ and describes it as,



[B]y definition an act of bricolage, wherein disparate elements are drawn together in new combinations. . . . Such belief systems have become increasingly common since the 1960s, and freed as they are from the constraints of any single tradition, they may incorporate conspiracist motifs whatever their origin . . . this has given conspiracy theories an unprecedented mobility among a wide range of millenarian systems. (Barkun 2003: 11)

It is with this thematic interrelationship and discursive slippage that this chapter is concerned; moreover, the concern here is to show how these can contribute to the production of violent alterity by ethnonationalist extremism.

Far right nationalism is distinct from civic and liberal forms (Bar-On 2018) and, as has been noted above, within the far right a distinction can be made between the radical right and the extreme right. The latter's nationalism is thus politically external to the nation-state. But just as a nation is constituted through its institutions, so too are its people constituted through a shared culture; what Raymond Williams calls the selective tradition that frames lived experiences of culture within institutionally maintained canons (Williams 1977). And within liberal democracies those works that reflect liberal values are typically incorporated into and become definitive within the canon. So the extreme right are also culturally exterior to their host nations and so experience a doubling, or confirmation of their marginality. In this, they share a milieu with other forms of what Barkun (2003) calls 'stigmatized knowledge'.

The implications of this enforced marginality are twofold:

- (i) The commingling of extreme far right ethnonationalism with other forms of rejected knowledge in the

cultic milieu provides fertile ground for exposure to the hybrid conspiracist-apocalypticism described by Barkun.

- (ii) For the extreme right, the nation can only come into being after the millennial catastrophe that ends the existing liberal democratic nation; it is thus virtual and apocalyptic—foretold but not yet in existence.

This latter point (ii) will be discussed below with reference to the work of Emilio Gentile on the religious dimensions of nationalist politics and Roger Griffin's use of Peter Berger's concept *nomos*. The former point (i) is underlined by the capacity for the interplay of ideas within the cultic milieu to cross-fertilize. An idea that initially appears to be neatly contained within clear conceptual boundaries may, in fact, be produced through an amalgam of earlier ideas that are linked through their shared status as stigmatized knowledge.

This is a central aspect of the improvisational millennialism that Barkun (2003) describes as being at the heart of apocalyptic conspiracy cultures. It is their ability to traverse the porous boundaries between apocalyptic belief and conspiracy theory that marks the interplay between these two categories of stigmatized knowledge. There is much work that draws attention to the extent to which conspiracy theory depends upon an eschatological dimension to maintain the internal logic of the threat contained within the malevolent intentions of identified conspirators. For instance, Richard Hofstadter's classic essay identifying 'the paranoid style' in US political rhetoric. In this he refers to the paranoid spokesman trafficking 'in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values. He is always manning the barricades of civilization', (Hofstadter 1964: 82). More

recently, major works in conspiracy theory scholarship make similar points (Barkun 2003; Fenster 2008; Knight 2000). To a large extent they reject the terminology of Hofstadter's essay but retain the cosmological dimension within it. This is crucial because it makes evident the case that the conspiracy theorist is claiming agency within a material battle against an overwhelming force, the outcome of which will determine the eschatological predictions present within the conspiracy theorists' system of thought. What is clear in the literature is that millennialism, and Barkun's improvisational millennialism, is invariably rooted in secular experiences. These secular roots point to the opportunity to listen to these marginal voices as potential expressions of unconscious political formations. Raymond Williams's (1961, 1977) insights are useful here for understanding how ephemeral forms can capture concrete realities, in what he terms 'structures of feeling'.

Structures of feeling, the undercurrents of as-yet unarticulated—or inarticulate—political formations may be progressive or reactionary. It is argued here that currently there are those that also reflect a retreat from reason altogether and express a political absolutism that lends itself to extremism. In 'From apocalyptic paranoia to the mythic nation: Political extremity and myths of origin in the neo-fascist milieu', the improvisational millennialism of David Lane and the visual archive of the extreme right webzine *Mourning the Ancient* are discussed in terms of the symbolic forms that they draw on and seek to associate with their politics of race hate (Wilson 2012). These are typically appropriated 'Nordic' and European pagan mythic symbols. It is here that the intentional bricolage that can shape an authorial improvisational millennialism is most apparent in its attempt to retroactively infect relatively unfixed<sup>2</sup> symbolic forms with modern political

formations. By seeking to recast established symbolic forms of marginal religious beliefs as being rooted in 'white' ethnonationalism, figures within the extreme right seek to establish its legitimacy and establish their own position as part of a tradition. This is the boundary setting through which the extreme right maps its cultural territory, its marginal selective tradition. In this, though, the pagan elements signify a religiosity that denotes sacred culture—the extreme right's *mythos*. Thus, the extreme right seeks to establish its apocalyptic virtual nation through a faith-based culture. The example here is pagan but the appropriation of Christian symbols and stories by the World Church of the Creator and its variants might have served as an equivalent example.

The association of extreme forms of nationalism and myth is not new. The French syndicalist Georges Sorel is often identified as a proto-fascist, although, whilst his ideas were lauded by Mussolini, he was wary of Mussolini and fascism (Sternhell et al. 1994; Meisel 1950). Nonetheless, his commitment to the idea of the necessity of a spiritual dimension to subjects' identification with the state coincided with fascist ideology. That he took this approach from a broadly left position is suggestive of how readily mythopolitics can be transposed from one political context to another. Commentaries on left-wing political apocalyptic thought suggest that Marx's teleology was derived from eschatological structures that are culturally embedded in the Judeo-Christian tradition (Baumgartner 1999; Pellicani 2003; Zimdars-Swartz and Zimdars-Swartz 2001). Sorel writes from within the Marxist tradition and is clear that the potential for myth-building should be utilized to revolutionary ends. Here, both the extreme left and right look to a futural paradise from their position on the margins of the political centre. In his survey of the development of fascist thought Sternhell clarifies Sorel's

position, '[Sorel believed] the essence of Marxism lay in the symbolic and apocalyptic content of the system. The idea of the general strike was a translation into concrete terms of the Marxist apocalypse, and the sole real historical function of Marxism was to act as an instrument of war' (Sternhell 1998: 50).

The centrality of the symbolic power of myth in Sorel's work is consistently emphasized by Sternhell and Sorel's influence on the development of Mussolini's thought is well established. But myth, as such, is also more widely acknowledged across diverse articulations of fascism. In developing his influential work defining the 'fascist minimum', or, as he encapsulates it, 'generic fascism', Roger Griffin draws attention to the centrality of myth to fascism. Griffin's application of it is very specific and he uses it in order to delineate between an approach to understanding fascism that is rooted in political theory alone and one that considers the workings of fascism in the round. It thus allows fascism to be considered in a fuller context, one that recognizes its reliance upon emotive affiliation with a transcendent idea of 'the nation'. As Griffin has it, he intended to 'use 'mythic' to refer to the inspirational, revolutionary power which an ideology can exert whatever its apparent rationality or practicality ... bringing it close to the way 'utopia' is used by some social scientists' (Griffin 1991: 28). In Griffin's formulation this is suggestive of fascism as a vital force that is futural, as opposed to reactionary, in orientation. The utopian dimension is realized in Griffin's formulation as a core component of generic fascism: a revitalization of the nation that he characterizes as palingenetic ultranationalism. Myth, then, is used here as a motive force in defining and sustaining the fascist nation. Griffin seeks to demarcate between generic fascism as a secular phenomenon and the idea of it as a 'political religion' (Gentile & Mallett 2000). As

Gentile and Mallett make evident, whilst Griffin endeavours to delineate between the transcendent belonging ‘in the nation’ offered by generic fascism, he is seldom fully clear cut about it. Griffin cannot avoid the language of not simply ‘myth’ but mysticism. He describes the individual fascist as being caught up by a, ‘feeling that alchemically converted all pessimism and cultural despair into a manic sense of purpose and optimism’ (Griffin 1995: 3). In order to capture the quicksilver elusiveness of fascism’s appeal he uses the language of the metaphysical whilst dismissing the idea of fascism’s metaphysical content. More recently, his work shows a growing acceptance of this approach and he recognizes the possibility of communal sacralization. Writing about terrorism, he applies Berger’s use of *nomos* to describe the perceived destiny of a people united under a shared ‘sacred canopy’.

The ultimate roots of fanaticism ... lie not just in material exigencies but overwhelmingly in the species-defining capacity to create a set of mythic beliefs that furnish a sense of identity and purpose—a *nomos*—and then to defend or assert that *nomos* to the death for reasons that extend far beyond the realm of practical considerations. (Griffin 2015: 379)

The futural nation building necessitated by the palingenegetic ultranationalism is predicated on a utopianism that, as Griffin notes, it will never fulfil. But the utopianism he describes is not derived from a quasi-scientific philosophy as in dialectical materialism but from a trope of rebirth, of predestination. It is thus millenarian. Thus, these fanatical beliefs rely on a mystical conception of the collective. This is valuable as it makes evident the link between apocalypticism, communal identities, and political violence. The revolutionary extreme right must transform the social in

order to pave the way for its apocalyptic virtual nation to be made real. Opposed to democratic methods it will use political violence to achieve its millennial ends. Crucially, it also underlines the importance of prophetic rhetoric to the maintenance of a future shared by the nation's 'folk'. Here, then, the realization of the apocalyptic virtual nation and extreme nationalist politics can be considered as a quasi-religious project of extreme right attendant to but in opposition to the legal and political entity that constitutes 'the nation-state'. Thus, extreme right ethnonationalists are in a position to bring into being 'their' nation in contradistinction to the multicultural and polyvocal liberal democracies in which they live. It is a virtual, vernacular and sacralized nation that exists beyond the borders of the central 'official' state, outside of history and awaiting the millennial catastrophe through which it can be realized. It can thus be understood as the sacred destiny of the ethnonational project; it is the 'final destination, total victory' that Brenton Tarrant exhorted his fellow travellers on the extreme right to 'keep marching forward' towards.

Writing about the sacred nation, Anthony D. Smith describes how ethno-nationalism is productive of a particular relationship between 'the people' and their self-styled 'sacred homeland'. It is the transcendent qualities—diverse and varied between individuals and communities—that are contained, protected, bounded by the sacred canopy. And it is within these elusive but lived understandings of the special, sacred (*pace* Durkheim) spaces and times of the nation that the potential for violent extremism is generated. The commingling of conspiracism and millennialism described by Barkun as improvisational millennialism combine with the sacral nation to form narratives of national eschatologies. This is especially the case with notional or virtual nations, imagined communities without territory or state institutions to affirm their existence (the

'lads' that Tarrant addressed, the vague 'indigenous Europeans' referred to by Breivik). These precarious national assemblages are typically drawn from futurally orientated reactionary positions in which nations, communities, or cultures will undergo some kind of renaissance or rebirth; the rebirth suggested by palingenetic ultranationalism that Griffin puts at the heart of the fascist project. So it is with the networks of white nationalists and supremacists who make up the extreme right. Despite their increasing exposure they remain marginal and more suited to small scale protests, autonomous actions, concerted interventions in social media, and the violent 'lone wolf' attacks that they hope will catalyse the millennial catastrophe. It is through this lens that the identitarian paranoid apocalypticism of individuals and groups like National Action, Identity Evropa, Brenton Tarrant, Nordic Resistance Movement, Dylann Roof, can be understood.

The late twentieth century French far right has been highly influential among far right groupuscules over the past half century. The *nouvelle droite*, organized around the ideas of Alain de Benoist, have drawn on Marxist Gramscian analysis to place an emphasis on the importance of cultural hegemony in winning over and converting potential supporters (Griffin 2000; Bar-on 2008). De Benoist's efforts to transform culture and consensus in the France of the 1960s and 70s were limited in the effects but his ideas have had subsequent influence across the far right (Spektorowski 2016; Macklin 2005). They are useful here in that they help demonstrate the search for a trans-territorial cultural fascism that unifies previously rigorously narrow nationalisms into a pan-European ethno-nationalist project. It is here that Smith is valuable in his argument that the production of a 'new' traditionalism was necessary to historical ethno-nationalist projects,



Nationalists were interested not in inquiring into ‘their’ past for its own sake, but in the reappropriation of a mythology of the territorialized past of ‘their people’. Throughout, the basic process was one of vernacular mobilization of a passive *ethnie*, and the politicization of its cultural heritage through the cultivation of its poetic spaces and the commemoration of its golden ages [this] meant, first of all, identifying a sacred territory that belonged to a particular community, and that was thereby sanctified by the association. (Smith 1991: 127)

This chapter seeks to draw attention to the manner in which the translocal ‘nation’ implicit in post-*nouvelle droite* far right thought and cultural practice is implicated in expressions of apocalyptic and conspiracist narratives. It is the mythic nation that is appealed to in white supremacist apocalyptic virtual nations—just out of reach but comprehensible in their proximity—and invocations of idealized, virtual pasts. The extremist British Movement website, for example, combines idealized pastoral images and pan-Nordic imagery with David Lane’s apocalyptic mottos. The Britain appealed to there is an assemblage of Germanic and Nordic traditions interwoven with an Edenic past; yet to be realized until Lane’s 14 words are fulfilled. It exemplifies the apocalyptic virtual nation described here. In the absence of a physical territory that can be sacralised, the virtual nation offers a motile and contingent aggregate of imagined territories that are capable of sustaining the unbounded demands of multiple iterations of the ‘white nation’.

Zygmunt Bauman (2001) suggested that in the face of the precarity of self-identity in a globalized world, as the old guarantors of collective identity become undone, the strongest temptation is, ‘to pretend that it is the similarity of individual fears that “makes a community” so one can

make a company out of solitude' (Bauman 2001: 128). He makes clear the importance of the invention of a collective culture that sacralises the boundaries of that community: '[O]stensibly shared, "communal" identities are by-products of feverish boundary-drawing. It is only after the border-posts have been dug in that the myths of their antiquity are spun and the fresh, cultural/political origins of identity are carefully covered up by genesis stories'.

What Bauman does not identify is the necessity of a mythic future in which the freshly minted collective identities will not only persist but be realized. The past may give these communities presence but the future gives them purpose. Brenton Tarrant, Anders Breivik, Dylann Roof, and other extreme right ethnonationalist terrorists all sought to speak for, and to, an ill-defined community through their manifestos; Similarly, David Lane was a violent terrorist who sought to situate his actions in a wider system of thought reflecting the will of a people, such as it was. They responded to the indeterminate fluidity of late modernity with a violent rejection of what they perceived to be a conspiracy against the apocalyptic virtual national destinies with which they identified.

The fascist *nouvelle droite* shifted the terrain of their struggle to the field of culture and sought hegemonic penetration; the discourse shared across continents by Lane, Breivik, Roof, Tarrant, and so forth point to the success of the *nouvelle droite* and also to the tragedy of the failure to leave that discourse in the gutter of history. That this discourse has, until recently, been stigmatized and rejected has meant its capacity for absorbing further irrationalities and deepening its conspiracist tendency has resultingly heightened the stakes for, and violent irrationality of, its adherents.

White genocide and the great replacement are narratives that commingle the fear of cultural change,

immutable national identities, conspiracies and ever more apocalyptic outcomes. They are attempts to project fantasized national pasts into a future in which their phoenix nations rise once again. Griffin is clear that such ethnnonationalist fantasies of rebirth are key components of the fascist minimum he identifies. It is possible to see in the conspiracy theories that narrate a diminution and eradication of European culture (as it is understood in these monocultural caricatures) an unsuccessful attempt to grapple with emerging transnational realities. Not unlike apocalyptic fundamentalists such as ISIS or the Westboro Baptists, white nationalist extremists are desperate to impose a naively static, doctrinally determined model of cultural belonging in an age of local-global cultural motility. Shorn of territories and anti-statist, the temporality of quasi-religious affiliations to cosmological millennial, conspiracist dramas of virtual national destinies provide homelands in time to white nationalists. The future predicated in millennial dreams of resistance against the replacement and genocide conspiracies is the one retreat that appears available to them.

The spasmodic outbursts of violence against a more integrated world will pass but only if the threat posed by these paranoid and simplistic understandings of culture and belonging are successfully countered. To do so, a simple truth must be grasped: millennialism and conspiracy theories are interwoven with appeals to faith, to transcendent forms, and eschatological temporalities. By drawing on them, white nationalist extremism is as much structurally informed by faith as it is any kind of rationalist politics and needs to be treated accordingly. It is only in developing strategies that undo the disconnection from the spatial realities of global-local transformation that the apocalyptic time of such extremism can be averted.

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### Notes

1. <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1150381395078000643>
2. 'Unfixed' in the sense that many historical pagan beliefs are relatively unknown and in their modern forms are contested and subject to ongoing revision. Ronald Hutton's (2010) 'Writing the History of Witchcraft: A Personal View' is instructive on this point.

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# EXTREMISM AS IMMANENCE\* AND PROCESS

The Trump Transmutation



*Roland Kapferer and Bruce Kapferer*

Extremism is a concept that is broadly negative or pejorative in meaning or sense. Applied to political action it is that which breaks or goes beyond accepted or defined limits. Extremism is unruly. It is action that is in some way or another conceived to be excessive, exclusive, overriding, doctrinaire, intolerant. Extremist politics are typically founded on ideological closure that admits no authority outside itself. It is dictatorial and uncompromising. So much so that there is no legitimate outside. Extremist groups tend to regard those who are not members to be potential antagonists, to be swept aside or else to be converted. There is a strong affinity between much political extremism and religious dogmatism, fundamentalism, and messianism. Extremist politics, in much opinion, is given to authoritarianism and totalitarianism. There is a tension to violence in extremism towards anything that confines, limits or resists it.

The foregoing are common typifications of extremism, rather than definitions. We say this to underline the concept as highly relative, very much dependent on position and perspective within processes and structures of social and political relations.

\* This chapter includes links to relevant media clips throughout. Though available in the ebook edition only, we have included full URLs along with the notes for reader reference. These have been underlined in the print edition.

These attitudes directed toward extremism (which is not to deny their factuality in experience throughout history) operate ideologically, often to legitimate oppressive action and/or to disguise, hide, the extreme potential (even extreme foundations) of orders and processes that do not recognize their own extremism.

A feature of extremism is that it often elicits extreme reaction or response. Thus, state orders all too frequently crack down on what they conceive as threatening to its control and have labelled extremist. Indeed, extremist activity legitimates the on-going and increasing authoritarian actions against it. The reaction against extremism is itself extreme and this refracts the foundation of the state in a violence that is excited by the extremism that contests its authority.

Our concern in this chapter is with the circumstances for the emergence of what is recognized to be extremism as well as that of a more hidden unrecognized kind that shares some of the properties. More especially, we address the role of such extremism in effecting socio-political transformations or transmutations. The strong implication here is that extremism, or what is defined and perceived to be extremism, is a cause as well as an effect.

Our argument focusses on the years of the presidency of Donald Trump, himself filling the extremist bill in the opinion of many in appearance and demeanour, and especially on the events following his election defeat, the invasion of the Capitol followed by President Joseph Biden's accession. The happening at the Capitol gave vent to extremism in the negative vision of the concept but it and subsequent events, particularly, reveal a more hidden kind of extremism that Trump can be seen to mediate.

The happenings<sup>1</sup> forming around Trump are a dynamic in and of themselves. They express the chaos of transition of the moment but they are also and at the same



time forces in the transformation and transmutations of capitalism and its effects in world history: perhaps, with the complications of the COVID-19 pandemic, virtually an axial moment, a switch or turning-point of crisis.<sup>2</sup>

This involves some re-consideration of what is becoming the master narrative concerning Trump, with ideological implications of its own. Trump's extremism is presented as a spectre of a fascist past rather than a foretaste, a mediation into, the potential of an authoritarian totalitarian future, a less evident extremism perhaps, involving major transmutations in capitalism.

### **An Extremist Situation: Night of the World, Pandemonium at the Capitol**

The events at the Capitol, that have evoked so much outrage, occurred on the ritualistic day of the confirmation of the new president's victory. The confirmation is the closing rite in what can be conceived as the liminal (Turner 1969) transitional period conventional in the American democratic cycle.<sup>3</sup> Such a liminal space is a relative retreat and suspension of the state political order as the presidency is renewed or changed. [This is often a festive time](#)<sup>a</sup> given to all kinds of political excess when the people vent their potency in the selection of those who are to rule them (Kapferer 2016). Trump encouraged and intensified the potential chaos of liminality at its peak when, ideally, it should subside and political order be fully restored. He aimed to disrupt this critical moment and to maintain his uncertain presence as the Lord of Misrule, if not necessarily to effect a coup. Named as 'God's chaos candidate' by some evangelicals who supported him, Trump promoted, even if unwittingly, a moment of extreme chaos that was all the more

intense for the liminal moment of its occurrence when the participants themselves blew out of control.

In the nightmare of the event, newscasts presented visions of a fascist future (imagined as a continuation of the past) filled with fascist and Nazi images and other commonly associated symbols. There was a strong sense of dialectical collapse along the lines of Hegel's 'Night of the World', disconnected flashes of the demonic when forces in opposition dissipate against each other and lose their meaning. The representatives of the nation cowered under their desks fitting gas masks while those who would challenge them in festive mood and drunk with brief power put their feet up on desks aping their masters and carried off the mementos and spoils of their invasion. Exuberant chants of 'this is our house' echoed down the corridors of power.

Shades of the past paraded in the present, foremost among them that of the enduring trauma of the rise of Nazi Germany. What Sinclair Lewis had warned in *It Can't Happen Here*—a Hitler-esque rise to power at the centre of the democratic world—anticipated by all sides from the early days of Trump's apotheosis, seemed to be actually materializing. This accounts for the excitement on the steps of the Capitol—'this is America 2021 y'all!!' Videos taken inside the Capitol show a slow moving disorganized and scattered crowd of people roaming through the building enjoying themselves, taking photographs posing beside paintings like tourists on a holiday. Voices can be heard warning not to 'break anything, respect our house'. They were claiming their 'anarchic title' as Jacques Ranciere might observe The people flooding into the centre of power at the Capitol were, in fact, expressing the violent, confusing and anarchic egalitarian energy—the unpredictable force of the demos—that lies at the foundation of all democracy (Ranciere 2014).<sup>4</sup>

Arlie Hochschild captured the millenarian, messianic Nuremberg feel of Trump's campaign rallies when researching *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (Hochschild 2016), her excellent ethnography of the white far right and their sympathizers in Louisiana, America's poorest state and a Donald Trump heartland. Hochschild recounts at a lecture to the [Rosa Luxembourg Foundation in Berlin a scene](#),<sup>b</sup> reminiscent of the opening frames of Leni Riefenstahl's *The Triumph of the Will*, when Trump's plane, 'Trump Force One', appears through the clouds and, as if from heaven it descends 'down, down, down' to the waiting crowd electrified in expectation of the saviour's endlessly repeated sermon of redemption of the deep resentment that they felt for having been pushed aside from the promise of the American Dream.

But here is the point: The immediate reaction to the storming of the Capitol gave further confirmation to the real and present danger of Trump's fascist threat fuelled in the rumblings of class war which Trump has inflamed and exploited. It is a liberal fear, mainly of the Democrats but including some Republicans, who are the chief targets of Trump's attacks. His demonization of elite liberal value (marked by accusations of moral perversities aimed at unmasking the claims to virtue) is at one with his condemnation of the liberalism of federal political and social economic policies that he presents as contributing to the abjection of mainly white American working class poor and to be seen in the rapidly increasing power of global corporations, policies of economic globalization, the privileging of minorities, refugees, recent immigrants, etc. It might be remembered at this point that the violence of the Capitol invasion, the marked involvement of military veterans, the carrying of weapons, baseball bats, the reports of pipe bombs, that shocked so many, reflects the fact that all modern states are founded on violence.

This is particularly the case in the US where the US Constitution's Second Amendment protects the right to bear arms in defence of democratic rights.<sup>5</sup> In an important sense the violence of those invading the Capitol refracts back at the middle class and especially the ruling elite the very violence that underpins the structure of their rule. If liberal virtue was shocked by the events on January 6 it was also confronted with the violent paradox deep in its democratic heart (Palmer 2021). Thus, this paradox slips into paroxysm at this critical moment in American political history.

The transitional figure of Trump feeds on the prejudices of his intended constituencies and exploits an already ill-formed class awareness building on ready commitments and vulnerabilities—the well-rehearsed fascist and populist technique—creating indeed a false consciousness (there is no other way to say it) that is not only destructive but in the hands of the likes of Trump integral to intensifying the feelings of impotence and the miseries that give Trump his relative popularity. Slavoj Žižek says as much in what he describes as [‘Trump’s Greatest Treason’](#)<sup>c</sup> (Žižek 2021). His betrayal of the working class even as he represents them.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, ‘The Governator’, was quick to counter the white supremacist, macho, Proud Boy, Oath Keeper and Three Percenter elements highly visible in media newscasts with a [Conan the Barbarian Performance](#).<sup>6,d</sup> This was his take on the dominant brand of Make America Great Again. (Really, all those along the political spectrum participate in MAGA—*Democrat Party* badges and hats from the recent election read ‘Dump Trump Make America Great Again’). He focused on his own immigration away from his native Austria and its Nazi associations to the liberated American world of his success. For Schwarzenegger, the Capitol invasion and its

vandalism equated to Kristallnacht. Noam Chomsky likens the storming with Hitler's [Beer Hall Putsch of 1923](#)<sup>e</sup> observing that it effected a greater penetration to the heart of power than did Hitler's failed attempt. But Chomsky, with characteristic acuity, adds that the fascist danger lies in the anti-democratic class forces (including electoral and political manipulations on all sides) that provide the fertile ground for fascism.

At this point we take brief stock.

The Capitol invaders or rioters or protestors were a cross class assemblage but overridingly white. Their whiteness gave them a coherence, especially in an America where the politics of class refracts major divisions of race and colour affecting most specifically African Americans whose enslavement acts as a continual reminder of the basis of American democracy and capital in the subversion of the highest democratic and egalitarian ideals. Such a scandal is behind much of the outrage at the Capitol events and particularly in the context of ongoing Black Lives Matter activism. The participants in the Capitol were from diverse socio-economic backgrounds from the wealthy to the poor with multiple affiliations and other than those of the right-wing militias that provided the dominant images for the news media. Nonetheless, their whiteness indicated the cross-class force of colour in America as a major ongoing contradiction of the democratic ideal, a fascist potential. Trump exploited such racism, even as he denied it, and provided a point for its crystallization. But we suggest that the assemblage character of his following is also his weakness. While his fan of appeal extended beyond marginalized extremist groups the ties linking them were not strong and easily dissipate as a function of the conflicts and contradictions of class alone.

The QAnon Shaman, whose image went viral, embodies the character of the assemblage (and certainly the

fascist potential) and an internal tension to dissolution.<sup>7</sup> Indeed confronted by the reactive power of the state, a scapegoat, perhaps, for the evasive criminality of Trump at the edge of impeachment, the Shaman began to dissolve and fragment, pixilate, as Trump's so called movement may also fade.

QAnon Shaman's body was a plane of extremism. It expressed the full range of American extremism from the left-ist hippie folk rock pacifist but rebellious 60s, through the primitivist mysticism and religious cultism often fundamentalist in orientation of working class and middle-class America to the radical overtly macho and violent rightist groups. The Shaman manifests America as overall a plane of extremism in which Trump worked and which was subject to his magic in the context of the challenges and changes confronting capital in the context of American democratic ideology.

But the point must be taken further. New class formations are in the making right now and they are being driven in the explosive nature of technological revolution. This is something Marx himself was very much aware of and why he wrote more than 100 pages on the machine and the human in *Das Capital*. This is also the concern of Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man* (2002) and the continued focus of today's accelerationists such as the Deleuzian Nick Land (1993) and Nick Srnicek (2017) with his idea of platform capitalism.

### **Creative Destruction, the Transmutation in Capital and Corporate State Formation**

The Rise and Fall of Trump (not discounting the possibility that Humpty Dumpty<sup>8</sup> might come together again, which is the fear of the master narrative) may be understood as

expressing a transition between two moments of capital during which one formation morphs into another. Trump is the embodiment, instrument, and anguish of this transition, a tragic figure in a theatre of the absurd. Grand Guignol almost but in Gothic *American Horror Story* style. [The accession of Biden](#)<sup>f</sup> is the apotheosis of the new, in the hopes of most, he is a vehicle for healing the divisions in America that Trump brought to a head and are still very much present. But Biden's rise has ominous oppressive indications of its own.

The events Trump have all the hallmarks of the crisis and rupture of transformation or, better, *transmutation*. The millenarian spirit that Hochschild captures in her account is one born in the capitalist ideology of the American Dream; fortified in the religious fundamentalism of Trump's many followers that revitalizes their hopes in the Dream in the face of abject failure. The rallies and the impassioned actions of those invading the Capitol are filled with revitalizing energy. Such millenarian explosions, distinct in their own historical contexts, occur at many other points in global history. It was apparent at the dawn of capitalism in Europe, at later moments of crisis and redirection in capital up to the present—indeed at the inception of the Nazi horror, and at points of the disruptive expansion of capital in the western imperial/colonial thrust as in the Cargo movements of the Pacific (Cohn 1970; Lanternari 1960; Worsley 1970).

The rupture of transmutation in capital, the crisis that the Trumpian progress manifests, is an instance of what Marx and others have understood to be the creative/destruction dynamic of capital whereby it reproduces, renews, revitalizes its potency against contradictions and limitations to its profit motive that capital generates within itself as well as those thrown up against it in the very process of its own expansion and transformation.

The circumstances underpinning the current transmutation in capital relate to the revolutions in science and technology (those associated particularly with the digital age and advances in biotechnology) to a large extent driven by capital and motivated in profit. The rapid development of capital (and especially that of the still dominant, if declining, American form) was driven in the innovations in knowledge and technology (something that Marx and many others admired in America). What became known as the nation state (the dominant political form that nurtured capital) and the class orders that were generated in capital and necessary to it (not to mention the over-population and ecological disasters that grew in capital's wake) *also* constituted barriers and limitations to capital's growth.

The new technological revolutions are a response to the limitations on capital emergent within its own processes. Technological innovations enabled revolutions in production and consumption (creating new markets and increasing consumption, reducing the need for human labour and the resistances it brings with it, overcoming problems, and opening up novel lines, of distribution), forcing the distress of unemployment (especially among the erstwhile working class), creating impoverishment and uncertainties reaching into once affluent middle classes (as captured in the neologism, the precariat), shifting class alignments, redefining the nature and value of work, of the working day (the expansion of zero hours and its returning sense of a bygone era).

The current technological revolution is a key factor in the extraordinary growth in the monopolizing strength of corporations such as Google, Amazon and Tencent. The dot.com organizations (the flagships and spearheads of capitalist transformation with huge social transmutational effect) have wealth that dwarfs many states and they are



functioning in areas once controlled by the state (e.g. in the current race to colonize space). Indeed the corporate world has effectively invaded and [taken over the operation of nation-states](#)<sup>8</sup> (B Kapferer 2010; Kapferer and Gold 2018). This is most noteworthy in those state orders influenced by histories of liberal social democracy in Europe and Australia, for example, which tended to draw a sharp demarcation between public interest and private enterprise. The nation-state and its apparatuses of government and institutions for public benefit have been corporatized (so much so that in many cases government bureaucracies have not only had their activities outsourced to private companies but also have adopted managerial styles and a ruthlessness along the lines of some business models). The corporatization of the state has aligned it much more closely with dominant economic interests in the private (now also public) sectors than before and enables a bypassing of state regulation, even that which once sustained capitalist interest, but which became an impediment to capitalist expansion.

These changes have wrought socio-economic and political disruption and distress globally and most especially in the Western hemisphere. This is not merely collateral damage. The revolution in science and technology has been a key instrument in effecting social and political changes via destruction, for the regenerative expansion of capital. It is central to the re-imagination of capital in the opening of the twenty-first century.

This is particularly so in the United States, whose socio-political order is historically one of corporate state formation which accounts for its long-term global political economic domination. Some renewal in leftist thought (e.g. with Bernie Sanders) is an index of the depth of distress that is being experienced although the ideological and counteractive potency of the American Dream fuelled

especially in fundamentalist Christianity suppresses such potential contributing to the intensity and passion of the Trump phenomenon. The ideological distinction of the Trump event aside, its dynamic of populism is reflected throughout the globe.

One common feature of this is the rejection of the political systems associated with nation state orders and, to a marked extent the largely bipartite party systems vital in the discourses of control and policy in nation-states. Trumpism and other populist movements (in Europe notably) complain of the alienation of the state and its proponents from interests of the mass. The expansion of corporatization and the further hollowing out of the state, the corruption of its public responsibilities by corporate interests, is effectively what Trump was furthering in his presidency. It is a potent dimension of the Trump paradox and a major irony of the Capitol invasion that, for all the apparent fascist tendencies, it was the spirit of reclaiming democracy (admittedly of the freebooting kind) in an already highly corporatized establishment (subject to great corporate capitalist interest) that Trump's actions were directed to expanding. An important figure in this respect is the Silicon Valley venture capitalist Peter Thiel. The tech billionaire, early investor in Facebook and founder of PayPal, was an early Trump supporter and named a part of Trump's transition team in 2016. His book, [\*Zero to One\*](#),<sup>h</sup> based on his lecture courses at Stanford University, argues for a corporate-technocratic governance beyond older systems of government (Thiel 2015).

### **From Panopticon to Coronopticon**

COVID-19 has highlighted the social devastation of the destructive/creative dynamic of capitalism's transmutation. The class and associated ethnic inequities have

everywhere been shown up and probably intensified by a pandemic that is starting to equal, if not surpass, the depressing and devastating effect of two world wars. Like them, it is clearing ground for capitalist exploitative expansion—something like Naomi Klein’s disaster capitalism (Klein 2007). Under the shadow of the virus, labour demands are being rationalized, the cutting back of employment and its benefits legitimated, governments are pumping capital into the economies in a way that protects consumption in an environment where there is declining occupational opportunity and income. The idea of the Universal Basic Income is being seriously discussed which would offset some of the contradictions in a transformation of capitalism that is reducing the dependence on labour and endangering consumption through automation and digitalization. While the poor are getting poorer the rich are getting richer most notably those heading the revolutionary technologies of the digital age and biotechnology, the competitive race to secure viable vaccines against the virus being one example.

There is a strange synchronicity linking the pandemic with the dynamic of capitalism’s transmutational corporatization of the state. The virus reproduces and spreads in a not dissimilar dynamic. Indeed, COVID-19 in some ecological understandings is the product of the acceleration of globalization effected in those processes of capitalism’s transmutation associated with corporate expansion and the corporatization of the nation-state. As a crossover from animal to human bodies the virus is one manifestation of increased human population pressure on wild animal territory, the closer intermeshing of animal and human terrain. The scale of the pandemic is, of course, a direct consequence of the time–space contraction and intensity of the networked interconnections of globalization.

State surveillance has intensified as a by-product of combatting COVID-19 that is also its legitimation, with digitalization as the major surveillance instrument. The digital penetration into every nook and cranny of social life (see Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* [2019] or Netflix's [The Social Dilemma](#)<sup>i</sup>), is interwoven with the commodification of the social and personal for profit—economizing individuals calculating the costs and benefits of their social 'interactions' (the YouTube or Kuaishou 'influencer', the hype TED talker as Foucault's entrepreneurial self, cut, pasted, uploaded and remixed). The management of COVID-19, demanding social isolation and the disruption of ordinary social life, has exponentially increased the role of the digital as the primary mediator of the social and a commanding force in its very constitution. COVID-19 has been revealed as a kind of social particle accelerator. As such, and ever more exclusively so, the real of the social, is being re-imagined, re-engineered and re-mastered as a digital-social, a 'Digisoc' or 'Minisoc', constrained and produced within algorithmically preset parameters. Here is Peter Weir's film, [The Truman Show](#)<sup>j</sup> radically updated. And, as with Truman, the space of freedom is also and at the same time experienced as a space of unfreedom.<sup>9</sup> This manifests in the deep ambivalence many feel about the new technologies they daily live with and through. The digitized social is often presented as a new agora, a liberating 'space' in which new, progressive ideas and directions are enabled, operationalized and indeed optimized. The internet has become a site of multiple struggles in which class forces and new potentials for social difference and proliferating identity-claims are continually emerging. The freedom of the internet has provided exciting opportunities for many. Such freedom also and at the same time contributes to conspiracy on all sides. As has been made clear in the

two elections featuring Trump, the superpower of corporations like Google and Facebook threatens to install a domain of hyper-control. Digital walls and electronic fences are appearing everywhere in the age of the global ‘splinternet’.

### **A Digital Fascism—Towards the Machinic Materialization of Being**

An essay by Norman Simms and Thomas Klikauer on the new ‘digital fascism’ argues along similar lines to us—they claim that the internet makes a new form of fascism possible in an emerging and original socio-historical dispensation (Kilkauer & Simms 2021) They make the simple and important point that social media and online sociality is not itself socially created. We develop and extend: online sociality is truly a corporate zone.

Digi-sociality is a strange, uncanny new form of ‘sociality’ that is engineered through a still barely understood and technically complex process whereby huge masses of individuals are collected as ‘big data’, digitized and algorithmically ordered—dividualized—by software engineers building and designing mega-corporate platforms and new multi-media ‘environments’ or ‘spaces’ (for want of much better words).<sup>10</sup>

Unlike older forms of fascism and totalitarianism the re-formatting of human existence creates an open horizontal and de-hierarchicalized plane that is de-centralized and leaderless—it is a totally equalized and individuated plane or any-space-whatever in which truth is radically relativized—your truth, my truth, any-truth-whatever—and facts become fictions or fictions become facts and reality becomes indiscernible from fantasy—this is what Gilles Deleuze has called the crystalline ‘power of the

false' (Deleuze 2005) As we move into the new space-times of what may be called' a crystalline capitalism, we learn to live with and adjust our senses to the emerging digital domain. And the digital domain is the domain of fake news. The plat-forming of human lives flattens sociality, fragmenting individuals into individuals or 'bits' of individuals—byte sized chunks—organizes them into sets and groups them according to tastes and likes and clicks and then folds and refolds according to the needs of various corporate interests—human being as commercial data-set.

It is this radical datafication of the world that humans are currently learning to live with and adjust to. And it is this 'world' or nonworld or night of the world that provides the fertile ground for new mythologies that attempt to grasp it, control it and bring it to order. Truth collapses into lies and lies into truth. This is a context that is ripe for Klikauer and Simms' digital fascism and ripe for the era of conspiracy. On this flattened and individualised or personalised plane new theories and myths, each as good as any other, multiply and proliferate wildly. Trump operates on this plane. And he is as much a product or symptom of this as he is an expert player within it—he 'games' this system certainly but, equally, anybody can.

The hegemonic and totalizing potential for the ruling bodies of the corporatizing state who control the digital is as never before. This is so not just in the global scale of the network reach but in the heightened degree to which controlling bodies can form the ground of the social, radically remodel, engineer and design reality in accordance with dominant interests, and where motivated shut out that which threatens their order. The awareness of this has driven the fury of censorship and self-censorship on all sides—Trump's threatened TikTok ban becomes Twitter's actual Trump ban.

## **A Fascism of the Future: From 1984 into a Brave New World**

Trump and Trumpism are moments in the transitional, transmutational process of capitalism outlined above and of the formation of new social and political orders. Echoing the past they express its transmutation (and its agonies) rather than repeat it. Trump and Trumpism manifest the contradictions of such processes, agents and agencies for the transmutations in the social and political circumstances of life that are in train, themselves forces in the bringing forth of a future that, in some aspects, is already being lived.<sup>11</sup>

Trump himself can be described as an in-betweenener, a bridge into the new realities, both a force in their realization *and* a victim.

His manner and style, the brutal no holds barred amorality is that familiar from the captains of industry and robber barons of an earlier age, who built capitalist America and crushed working-class resistance by all means, more foul than fair. Trump maintains the style but in reverse redemptive mode. In his shape-shift he presents as supporter of the working classes not their nemesis as did his forerunners. However, his authoritarian business manner, of [The Apprentice's 'you're fired!'](#)<sup>k</sup> fame, matches well the managerialism of the present. He is an exemplar of contemporary venture capitalism and most especially of profit from non-industrial production (often anti production) gained from real estate, property transfer, asset stripping, and the expanding gaming and gambling industries (symptoms of the crises of transformation in capital) from which some of Trump's key supporters come.

Trump's reactionary anti-immigrant nationalism and Make America Great Again rhetoric not only appeals to the white right of his constituency but is an engagement

of past rhetoric to support new political and economic realities. Trump's economic war with China stressed re-industrialization but it was also concerned with counteracting China's technological ascendancy, especially in the realm of the digital, a major contradiction born of the current globalizing transmutation in capitalism involving transfers of innovatory knowledge.

Trump anticipated the risk to his presidential re-election and it manifested the dilemmas of his in-betweenness. His inaction with regard to the pandemic was consistent with the anti-Big Government policies of many Republicans and the American Right who are so much a part of QAnon conspiracies but also concerned to reduce government interference and modify regulation in capitalist process, a strong emphasis in current transitions and transformations of the state and of capital.

Trump's cry that the election was being stolen was excited in the circumstances of the pandemic. His [attack on postal votes](#)<sup>1</sup> related to the fact that the pandemic gave the postal vote a hitherto unprecedented role in the election's outcome by by-passing and neutralising the millenarian populist potency of his mass rallies already reduced in numbers by fear.<sup>12</sup> Trump sensed that the COVID-19-inspired move to 'working from home' and 'voting from home' would challenge, fence in and fence out his base of support.

Trump has always taken advantage of the digital age, his use of Twitter and Facebook the marked feature of his style of rule. His practices looked forward to the politics of the future ever increasingly bounded and conditioned in societies of the image. Following the events at the Capitol, Trump's own Custer's last stand to allay his fate, his cyberspace and internet accounts were switched off. He has been cancelled by the new digitally authoritarian corporate powers (who arguably benefitted the most from



the Trump era and profited greatly under pandemic conditions<sup>13</sup>) who are behind the growing new society of the image, in which he was a past-master and within which he had [in the main established his identity](#)<sup>m</sup> (R Kapferer 2016).

The overriding image of the Capitol invasion and carried across most networks is that of the occupation of the heart of American democracy by those who would threaten its ideals. The media have concentrated on what was the dominating presence of the extremist macho white American far right violently parading symbols of a racist past combined with clear references to the not-so-distant memories of fascism and Nazism. There were others there more moderate in opinion and representative of other class fractions, if still mostly white, whose presence does not reduce the fear of fascism, possibly as in Nazi Germany when what seemed to be small groups of extremists hijacked power (and the events of the Capitol evokes such memory) [to unleash the horrors that followed](#)<sup>n</sup> (Palmer 2021). Something similar could be said for what happened in Russia leading to Stalinism. These were the worlds of George Orwell's *1984*, in which some of the major ideals of the time flipped in their tragic negation. Such events were very much emergent in realities of the nation-state, its imperialist wars and the class forces of that particular historical moment in the history of capitalism and the formations of its social and political orders. There is no statement here that this could not happen again.

What we are saying is this: a different authoritarian and oppressive possibility may be taking shape—not of the fascist past but of the future. This is a future that Trump was mediating but which may be coming into realization, despite the great hope to the contrary, in the accession of President Biden. Perhaps this prospect can be

seen as more akin to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* born in the current transmutations of capital (and its agonies of class) and in the circumstances of the radical technological revolutions of the digital era, involving the apotheosis of the corporatisation of the state, [the corporate state emerging out of the ruins of the nation-state](#).<sup>9</sup>

Aldous Huxley depicted a world centred on production and efficiency, a bio technologically conditioned global system of perfect rational, optimized order. The class conflicts of the past are overcome here; everyone accepts their predetermined place. It is a post-human reality in which the foundation of human beings in their biology and passions is transcended. It is a somatised, artificially intelligent world of the image and promiscuity. Indeed, the American Dream. Those who do not fit or who resist are fenced out. Time and space are being reconfigured, incurring around the individual and 'personalised'.

Biden's inauguration for all its upbeat ceremonial spirit had some intimation of such a future, taking into full account the security constraints of its moment: to protect against the murderous unchecked rampage of the virus and the threat of the attack of right wing militias. The stress on this, it may be noted, had an ideological function to distance what was about to come into being from, for example, the definitely more visceral world of Trump and thoroughly evident in the invasion of the Capitol—what Biden in his inauguration speech called an 'uncivil war'. The scene of the perfectly scripted inauguration was virtually devoid of people. Apart from the dignitaries and all-important celebrities, the highly selected order of the society of the corporate-state. Where the general populace would normally crowd, was an emptiness filled with flags and protected by troops, more than those that were stationed in Afghanistan. Those who might disrupt, Hilary Clinton's 'deplorables' and Aldous Huxley's

‘resistant savages’, were fenced out. It was a totalizing and constructed digital media image presenting a reality of control, harmony, and absolute surveillance.

We claim that something like Trump and the events surrounding him would have happened regardless of the specific phenomena we have focussed on here. The events Trump are a moment, perhaps among the most intense, in the transitional transmutation of the history of capitalism and the socio-economic and political orders which build and change around it. The apparent chaos indicates a major axial moment in world history—a chaos driven in the emergence of a cybernetic techno-capitalist apparatus on a global scale. (See footnote 2 and 3) What might be augured in the Biden accession is already taking vastly different shape in China and elsewhere around the globe. New and diverse formations of totalitarian authoritarianism are emerging. The Trump phenomenon is crucial for an understanding of some of the potentials of a future that we are all very much within and that an overconcentration on the parallels with the past may too easily obscure.

### **Afterthought**

#### **Towards Further Considerations on Extremism**

We have written of the events Trump as a whole, and especially the closing scenes of his drama, as a situation of extremism. The underlying idea is that such extremist situations or extended times of extremism (as in the four years of Trump’s presidency) and often characterized by agonized conflict, can be expected at times of crisis, rupture, marked especially by social and economic disruption and expanding class distress. This may be all the more so at periods in world history of radical civilizational shift involving the collapse of overarching systems of order and

the emergence of new ones (see Loperfido, Introduction; see footnote 2 this volume). There are indications that the current historical moment is one such period: characterized by a major transmutation in capitalism in the context of extraordinary revolutions in science and technology that may be penetrating into the very being of human being. The consequent seismic shocks for political and social orders are the stage for extremism.

We sound a note of caution.

Our argument presents extremism as being a phenomenon associated with the breakdown and transformation of the orders and patterns of social life and the conditions of existence. We have highlighted extremism as not merely an expression of such processes but as an agent force in them. The emphasis is upon extremism as being about social and political life at its limits and at its points of turning. The extreme is born and comes into its own at such moments. This is when extremism can be at its most potent and given the circumstances and its objectives overcome all that is around it. This was the fear of Trump and the energy behind the fascist cries. There was much cause for such fear.

The perspective we advance runs close to various functionalist approaches, especially of the organismic kind, from which we aim to depart but whose insights cannot be too easily dismissed. The discussions on extremism tend to focus upon it as a deviant or pathological phenomenon: extremism as ultimate contradiction whereby it manifests as radical negation in the dehumanization of social processes and values, the ideals especially, of that which is its ground. This is the point of both Orwell, for the present past, and Huxley, for the present future. Their centring of destructive extremism in dominant orders rather than something at the margins is their major contribution.

The approach we take aims to go further beyond that functionalism caught in a dualist order/disorder dynamic. Discussions of extremism tend to place it on the disorder side and largely at the margins or peripheries of social existence. We stress extremism whether perceived as extreme (in which the negative is usually asserted) or not so perceived to be integral to the dynamic of social and political processes rather than a phenomenon marginal to them. At the start of this essay we indicated that extremism was not only difficult to define but a highly relative concept, most definitions better grasped as typifications, reflecting theoretical persuasions and cultural orientations.

Following the above line of thinking, we see the cultural field of the US as given to extremism, even though it is not necessarily recognized as such. The world of the US can be conceived, as we indicated earlier in this article, to be a plane of immanence (Deleuze & Guattari 1980) for the emergence of extremism of all kinds.

The concept of the plane of immanence is used to focus attention on the synergic interaction between the ideology of American democracy (see De Tocqueville 2002) that can be described as egalitarian individualism on the one hand, and capitalism and the diversity of its practices on the other. We stress that these are not to be conceived as separate or static, unchanging. In the historical formation of the US they were intertwined from the word go, in dynamic changing evolution. Their dynamic is such that extreme forms and practices are constantly being thrown up across the plane of immanence that is the continual and diversifying cultural field of America, implied in the concept of American exceptionalism and in which extremism plays as much a positive role as it may be negative.

What we indicate is that a new plateau of extremism is being reached on America's plane of immanence both

in ideology (egalitarian individualism of American democracy) and in the capitalist practices associated with it.

Thus, in the context of America's technologically regenerated capitalism, (itself motivated in the creative energy of American individualism), individualism is gaining greater intensity, perhaps even more fractionalizing and fragmenting than hitherto.

Broadly America might be described as a celebration of the extreme, a dimension of its bizarre fascination to those outside America (but also inside). For example, Louis Theroux's many television series. Perhaps a generative field of expanding differentiation, involving a continual individuating explosive domain of virtually cultic profusion (typically centred around charismatic personalities and social media influencers) evident in religious and political action. The reductionism in action and in thought that are dimensions of egalitarian individualism and of capitalism (especially in synergy) encourage a particular fundamentalizing energy typically associated with extremism that contributes to its cultic quality and dynamic of exclusionary competitiveness.

Individuals are increasingly broken up and isolated within various bubbles or single information 'pods' (see, for example, the recent proposal to 'fix the internet' by its one of its creators, Tim Berners-Lee (Lohr 2021)) and algorithmically distributed or combining in private Facebook groups or in invitation-only clubhouse meeting rooms and linking up or networking peripatetically. The LinkedIn corporate network model has become the structure of daily social existence. Such a network society is an extremist society reflecting a transmutation in the very understanding of what constitutes an individual. The free individual as the supreme American value is transmogrifying and being reimagined as a continuous range of mutant possibilities, potentials and powers—an

empowered and continuously self-making, self-creating individual always in transition. The online system enables a situation in which humans can constantly create and then abandon new ‘selves’, slipping in and out of digital skins. America is conceived more than ever as always at the limit and on the frontier, an Exceptional and fugitive order. This has long been celebrated in Westerns and Science Fiction. But now the techno-capitalist machine weaponizes the individual and institutes the individual as a multiplicity—a sheaf of many selves engaged with its own security and futurity. ‘I am large, I contain multitudes’, says Walt Whitman the early poet of American individualism. Liberty is conceived as multiplicity. There is no essential essence but a flickering set of images that refracts the screens and metastable networked existences people anxiously live today.

Thus, America is a society of extremes, of excess—excess wealth, poverty, health and sickness, consumption, sexuality, bodies . . . Extremism in America is every day and everywhere and possible at all times; a land of ongoing and pulsing extremist potentials. This is central to its extreme creative and destructive power. The key inventions of the military-corporate complex, the internet and the networks it makes possible are acting as intensifiers and multipliers of an ever expanding and increasingly wild individualism—silicon-valley mega-corporations currently engaged in a rapid endo-colonization of American subjects. Here an American Romanticism is reinvigorated and remythologized in the Marvel Universe and the Netflix image (the development of binge-watching as a form of techno-bulimia) and on social media platforms and achieves a specifically technical and infinitely reproducible form. The rupturing and fragmenting of social worlds as a result of the institution of platform virtual digital

sociality unleashes and generates a plane of extremism in America.

The dynamism of the extreme is America, it is the name of the game as it were, with extraordinary positive and negative effects. When Biden speaks of an uncivil war and that democracy must be fought for, these are in all senses appropriate to a cultural reality that gives the extreme and an orientation to the limits or beyond them central position and value in the continually unfolding scheme of things. Extremism is at the heart of America and permeates almost every part or mode of existence. It is a continual focus of debate.

Extremism, or what may in different register be recognized to be extreme, is present in all societies. It is integral in some way or another in the dynamic of their process—there is always an extremist tendency or potential in any social order. The distinction is in the way the extreme is recognized and the value that is attached to it. Indeed, extremism as a problematic issue is a dimension of our own positioning in European and North American history.

The general position we are suggesting is that extremism is more than that which is recognized as such and not to be limited to that which is ultimately destructive of human existence, the extreme as ultimate contradiction. Extremism in this sense is the potential of all or most orders, a dynamic in their formation and deformation, inherent in their ordering as in their disordering. In our understanding, extremism must be opened up and not limited to its highly negative, fascist potentials despite the importance of recognizing these. Extremism operates as a plane of pluri-potentiality in all social orders. It is the very energy and volcanic power of the emergent social process. We begin and end at this gateway moment—on the absolute horizon of human possibility.



The fascist authoritarian potential is in the movement against immanence that, slips out of immanence, transcendentalizes and lifts out of the plane itself. This is what a state does. A state rises up out of immanence and establishes itself as the overarching hegemonic, authoritarian and totalizing form. At certain moments, as with the Trumpian situation, immanence is no longer entirely within and becomes ‘immanent to’ a transcendence. This is the religious tendency and now what has become the economic tendency with giant American corporations such as Google, Amazon or Microsoft, full of fascist potential. Over the last century, the economic has come into a fully determining position and, as we have been discussing, this is most especially the case with the corporate state. It may be that this is the tendency in America over the *longue durée* and this may be what we will see with the presidency of Biden-Harris—a corporatizing process that received significant impetus throughout the Trump situation. On the other hand, things may take a rather different turn and the proliferating fragmentation and individualist fissure occurring in the United States—the cultic emphasis on the extreme individual and the continual movement of immanence—may prevent a fascist state and render it impossible. This is an open question.

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## Notes

1. The revelry in the Capitol might be conceived as a happening in the sense of the art happening -' a term initially coined by Allan Kaprow in the late 1950s in reference to the artist Jackson Pollock's 'action-painting' and becoming famous in the radical countercultural events of swingin' 60s. Happenings were usually performance events with an a-logical diverse character that abandoned the structure of story and plot etc. and emphasized chance and incident. The idea was for artists to resist the structure and order of the art market and many developed a resistance to the confinement of the system. Connected to Dada and other movements this was an extremist art pushing against the limitations of gallerist order. The Burning Man festival, attended by many of the elite and Silicon Valley entrepreneurs is often given as a contemporary example of a happening. And, as Burning Man shows, a change can be traced from the early 60s happenings into a corporatized and controlled activity. What we see in the Capitol riots is certainly a radical resistance to ordinary political process but this time on the part of the right. Anti-systemic and revolutionary violence has been appropriated by extreme right groups and abandoned by a Left that has lost its way—there is an interesting comparison to be made with the more left-wing oriented Occupy Now movement which was in many respects much more pacified and contained and internal to the constraints of the system. The same might be said of the brand of left-wing criticism offered by Bernie Sanders and the facilitating, useful role he plays in the general orientation of the Democrat party. Abstract Expressionism—the key invention of American artists—soon became a form of corporate art extremely expensive and hung in the lobbies of Wall Street head offices.

2. We refer here, of course, to the work of Karl Jaspers and his famous concept of the Axial Age. Jaspers claimed that a key moment in human existence or an ‘axis of history’ occurred around 500 BC which is part of a spiritual process lasting between 800 BC and 200 BC (Jaspers 1953). ‘Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short we may style this the “Axial Period”’ (1953:1). Jaspers proposes that in this period a striking parallel occurs across many regions of the world new ways of thinking—a grand ‘spiritualisation’—emerge in China, India, Persia and the Greco-Roman world. For the first time human beings appear to themselves as specifically human and take cognizance of themselves in relation to a whole and lift themselves up to Being as a whole (there are obvious connections here to the ontological thinking of Martin Heidegger). At this axial point in history, human beings break out of their self-imposed and self-contained closed limitations and begin to ‘modify’ humanity. Humans now become uncertain of their position and open up to new possibilities and new potentials for themselves. This is the beginning of speculative thinking which is also conceived by Jaspers as ‘an age of simultaneous destruction and creation’. (1953:5). It is a violent period. This is a grand time that begins the questioning of human activity and the imposition of new meanings upon such activity. Specifically, for our purposes and in the context of this volume on extremism, Jaspers understood the Axial Period as the breakthrough of principles which up until that time had been operating only at the limit of humanity and in ‘borderline situations’. We are suggesting that what crystallizes around Trump but also around many other events in the world occurring today is the beginning of a new axis in world history and one that profoundly transmutes the key categories central to Jaspers’ existentialist vision of humanity.
3. The pioneering work of Victor Turner on the concept of the liminal in his *The Ritual Process* (New York, 1969) is essential. But, for our purposes and more specifically, it is perhaps better to use the concept of the liminoid which Turner himself developed as a way to re-think the liminal in the context of post-industrial systems (Turner 1974). Developing his idea of the liminal into the liminoid he insists on the anti-structural elements and the independence of liminoidal moments that are spaces of radical creativity. According to Turner, the liminoid

is a much more individual form and less about obligatory community practice, more about individual innovation and creation. For Turner, the concept of the liminoid is his response to the condition of emerging large-scale post-industrial systems concomitant with an increase in wild subversive behaviour—what had been previously in the small-scale situation a ‘subversive flicker’ in ‘the service of normativeness’ now becomes something quite else and ever-expanding. What he calls relatively late social processes—such as revolution or insurrection or new art movements with their emphasis on ‘feeling’ and originality—invert the original relation between the normative and the liminal in the small-scale society situation. In western post-industrial societies social criticism that had been pre-industrially liminal now becomes situationally central and is no longer a matter of a brief interface between fixed structures. Turner suggests that this move to the liminoid may help us think better about global systems and think about them in a holistic way. This, he says, is to move away from van Gennep’s ‘primary sense’ of liminal phases and re-think the liminal in the context of a totalizing social historical shift. In a recent article Genevieve Bell (2021) makes reference to Turner and van Gennep on liminality as a means of understanding the COVID-19 pandemic ‘anthropologically’. She makes a facile use of the concept simply using it to happily chat about passages through periods of state-imposed lockdowns. This is a kind of reactionary move that sucks all of the analytical force out of Turner’s concept and certainly misses its generative and creative sense. In another article for MIT Technology Review, ‘We Need Mass Surveillance to Fight Covid 19 But it Doesn’t Have to be Creepy’ Bell admits the potentials for a Bentham-like digital panopticon developing as a result of public health battle with the virus but makes the case for a Singapore inspired model of data collection that will allow a ‘trade-off’ between old models of privacy and a ‘new social contract’ negotiated in the digital age—a negotiation in which we will have to accept a ‘re-evaluation’ of traditional notions of privacy. Such negotiation is a central platform of her 3A (Autonomy, Agency and Assurance) research institute based at the ANU in Canberra, Australia. Mass surveillance must be stripped of the notions of punishment and moralization previously associated with it, cleaned up and re-made for successful public

application. Far from anthropology as critique Bell represents a corporate-anthropology totally complicit with the corporate-state transmutations we are discussing here.

4. In *Hatred of Democracy* Jacques Ranciere argues that democracy in essence acts as a supplement to the natural order of things and the titles people ordinarily possess. To the two great entitlements to govern—the right to govern by birth and the right to govern through power and wealth—Ranciere adds the supplementary title or what he calls the anarchic title. This is, for him, the essence of democracy ‘this is what of all things democracy means’(46). The right to govern is based in a fundamental egalitarian equality and the paradox of democracy is that no-one has a legitimate right to govern—ultimately there is no real legitimate governor and all governments are in the end illegitimate. Those who govern must always be reminded of their ultimate illegitimacy. Thus the inegalitarian nature of a democracy is always grounded in the egalitarian. Following this line of thinking it would be possible to say that the political leaders at the Capitol on January 6 were exposed to the violent and terrifying anarchy of the people that is at the base of their power.
5. Max Weber classically defines the state to be founded on the monopolization of violence. This is broadly the circumstance of the USA except the Founding Fathers were aware of what can be called Rousseau’s paradox, the capacity of the state to contradict the democratic rights of citizens in society. Elaine Scarry in *Thermonuclear Monarchy* (2014) argues that the 2nd Amendment of the US Constitution was introduced to enable the citizenry to ensure their democratic rights against the overpowering potential of the state. Scarry discusses the fact that the state now has overpowering potency with its independent control of nuclear armaments giving a single nuclear submarine the ability to exact global destruction of a virtually unimaginable kind. In her argument the 2nd Amendment is virtually pointless against the current devastating capacity of the state. The people have little ability to contend the power of the state democratically which those invading the Capitol in effect were demonstrating.
6. In a fascinating video he released after the events at the Capitol, Schwarzenegger ironically re-affirms the figure of the macho white violent male he is attempting to denounce! This is a good

example of the way in which extreme authoritarian elements of the emerging American corporate state combine with and supplement the liberal-democratic, 'intersectional' notions that are also a fundamental aspect of the corporate-state.

7. Jacob Chansley, the QAnon Shaman, embodies the very idea of the assemblage and the core notion of the plane of immanence—his body and costume is a postmodern hybrid of multiple directions, a constellation that articulates heterogeneous elements: he wore American flag face-paint, a fur hat made up of coyote skins and bison horns and displayed a bare torso covered in various Norse tattoos and runic letters—a large Mjolnir or Thor's Hammer and an image of the Norse tree Yggdrasil. Above these was a Valknot, a symbol possibly related to Odin and fallen warriors at the extreme point crossing into Valhalla but now deterritorialized by white supremacists and referred to by the Anti-Defamation League as a 'hate symbol'. Chansley proudly offered his body up to the assembled media, screaming and bellowing his celebration of America 'land of the free home of the brave!'. This is a body as a dynamic system or as Deleuze and Guattari might say a body that goes to the limit, that is deterritorializing and reterritorializing, in flow and whose component parts are not fixed but selected according to exterior relations. This is an extreme body—the new American individual multiplied and in extremis. In the aftermath of the Capitol events Chansley increased his infamy when he refused to eat prison food because of his delicate physical constitution—he refused to eat for seven days until he was provided with proper organic food. This was the subject of many memes and many commented on the irony of his claiming constitutional rights after attempting to impede the constitutional recognition of the president.
8. Trump made an official state visit to the United Kingdom on 13 July, 2018. He was greeted in central London by tens of thousands of protestors and a now famous 6 metre wide caricature blimp depicting Trump as a baby wearing a nappy. Along with the 'trump baby,' protestors installed a 16ft high Trump robot sitting on a golden toilet sending tweets. Protestors wore hats and t-shirts emblazoned by Trump as Humpty Dumpty. The American actor John Lithgow has released a poem entitled "[Trumpty Dumpty wanted a crown](#)"<sup>P</sup> that perfectly captured the liberal fear of what they felt would be Trump's post-constitutional and aristocratic power grab.

9. *The Truman Show* (1998), a film directed by Peter Weir tells the story of Truman Burbank an ordinary man living in a small town who discovers he is actually participating in a giant Big Brother style reality TV show—*The Truman Show*—and surrounded by a world of cameras and 24-hour surveillance. His life is a television image. Human life is fully mediated and controlled at even the most intimate level by a giant corporation who sit outside in the sky manipulating and tweaking every moment of Truman's existence. The film is prescient. In a sense human beings living their social relationships via social media have all become Truman regularly tweaked and nudged by anonymous powers combing them for information—in an increasingly claustrophobic digital network plugged into Google Home or guided by Amazon Echo and surrounded by police cameras and facial recognition technologies the coils of the digital snake of control squeeze ever tighter (Deleuze 1992). As many on Facebook or the other digital platforms are finding today, Truman recognizes his apparent freedom to be total unfreedom—highly controlled. In his final desperate attempt to escape from his home, which he now realizes is his prison, he battles his corporate masters who create storms and hurl lightning bolts like Zeus. Ultimately, he triumphs and manages to leave through a stage exit door located on the horizon of his giant movie set world. Perhaps today the ever-increasing power of digital networks and a rapidly developing 'Google Earth' makes such escape much less likely. Weber's iron cage becomes a virtual data glove or a silicon universe.
10. It is possible that there has been too much focus on the notion of 'spaces' and 'worlds' as metaphors for understanding what is happening in the current convergence of human and machine. When the internet was first developing the dominant metaphors were spatial—web-sites, cyber-space, the information super-highway we meet in internet-rooms or town-halls. This radically new situation could only be made sense of using previous experiences. This was how the internet was made 'user-friendly'. The same can be said about the idea of digital 'worlds'. But just as the cinema was first limited by the theatre as a means of understanding it—strange new things called movies were shown as if they were theatrical performances or movie-theatres—more recent developments in technology seem to be leaning on previous systems to help people make sense of them. Perhaps the

internet is not a space at all or at least may not be fully attended to if understood as a place or a space? Software developers and computer engineers who design platforms and apps are designing augmented sense organs and perception is being augmented or transmuted by new technologies. And when perception is augmented and stimulated in these strange new ways certain shifts in human relations must occur. The internet is merged and entangled with hyper-stimulated nervous systems and bloodshot retinas and may well be re-structuring basic human orientations.

11. John Lanchester (2019) writes—in an insightful essay we discovered after completing our own—of the ‘overlapping warnings’ in the dystopic visions of both Orwell and Huxley in relation to the Trump presidency. He concludes that we exist today in a strange mix of Huxley’s soma-like anti-depressants and sexual promiscuity combined with Orwell’s post-sexual celibacy, never-ending war and increasingly authoritarian political leaders. In a sense the different presidencies push out to greater extremes. If the Obama legacy was Donald Trump’s anti-presidency then Trump’s legacy is the Biden-Harris ‘Community. Identity. Stability’ which appears to be a return to the normalcy that many crave but promises, more, a hyper-normalization ([see Adam Curtis<sup>9</sup>](#)).
12. There were 65.6 million postal votes cast in the 2020 election. Many more than ever before. Overall, 159, 690, 457 people voted. So only 94, 083, 951 voted non-virtually. Only 30 million more than voted by post. The overall number of people eligible to vote is 257, 605, 088 million. Of course, a substantial number of eligible voters who didn’t vote at all—94,083,951 million people who could have voted didn’t. Many states are starting to limit voting to only postal votes—Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah and Washington no longer have any other means of voting except by post. Clearly there will be a move over the next few years to entirely virtual systems. There is an effort to move states toward postal voting despite the fact that the National Vote at Home Institute recently found that 32 states are missing major policies, infrastructure and best practice that will ensure secure mail ballot. Fifteen states cannot even verify voter addresses before they are sent out. Seventeen states do not have a voter verification system. And 30 states do not have options to fix problems in voter signatures and often voters have no way to fix signature mismatch.



13. A pandemic of profit: in the 2021 financial reports on tech company profits Apple went beyond all analysts' expectations reporting a record revenue and a net profit of \$28.8bn. Sales rose in all regions, most of all in China. Apple's quarterly sales exceeded \$100bn for the first time. Microsoft reported record sales. Facebook also reported record quarterly revenues and Tesla recorded its first ever profit of \$721m on news of Biden's election. Amazon of course still maintains the biggest annual revenues. See *The Economist* 30 January 2021.

## Links

- a. <https://www.focaalblog.com/2016/08/18/bruce-kapferer-brexit-and-remain-a-pox-on-all-their-houses/>
- b. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LtJDvH42Bug>
- c. <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/512165-slavoj-zizek-trump-treason-populism/>
- d. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6pjGiSxYRY>
- e. <https://truthout.org/articles/chomsky-coup-attempt-hit-closer-to-centers-of-power-than-hitlers-1923-putsch/>
- f. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2c\\_RrjCnXE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2c_RrjCnXE)
- g. <https://arena.org.au/informit/a-nail-in-the-coffin/>
- h. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFZrL1RiuVI>
- i. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uaaC57tcci0>
- j. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dlnmQbPGuls><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dlnmQbPGuls>
- k. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crmvHJpCkFM>
- l. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLkkEwrTh4I>
- m. <https://arena.org.au/trump-as-singularity-by-roland-kapferer/>
- n. <https://socialistproject.ca/2021/02/01-06-21-the-insurrection-that-wasnt/>
- o. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233647908\\_The\\_Aporia\\_of\\_Power\\_Crisis\\_and\\_the\\_Emergence\\_of\\_the\\_Corporate\\_State](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/233647908_The_Aporia_of_Power_Crisis_and_the_Emergence_of_the_Corporate_State)
- p. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5D0KDM8eM6c>
- q. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thLgkQBFTPw>

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