RETREAT TO THE FUTURE

The Role of Apocalyptic Thought in Current Ethnonationalist Extremism

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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, paradisal 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'.[1] 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[2] 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 palingenetic 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 con-tradistinction 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 real-ized. 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 partic-ular 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 millen-nialism described by Barkun as improvisational millen-nialism 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 heri-
> tage 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 asso-
> ciation. (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 narra-
tives. 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 Move-
ment website, for example, combines idealized pastoral
images and pan-Nordic imagery with David Lane's apoca-
lyptic mottos. The Britain appealed to there is an assem-
blage 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 ethnonationalist 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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