Fear-Filled Apocalypses: The Far-Right's Use of Conspiracy Theories

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Conspiracy theories and apocalyptic beliefs are the *lingua franca* of the far-right. Their effect on and importance in on far-right discourse needs to be taken more seriously.

The past few years have seen a rapidly growing awareness of the resurgence of the far-right. Riding on the back of the populist phenomenon that has swept across Europe, Australasia, and the Americas, the far-right has gained increasing access to mainstream, global media outlets. In the wake of the tragic terrorist attack on the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, the BBC's flagship current affairs programme, *Newsnight*, featured the right wing extremist group Generation Identity. Despite the BBC's defence, that, "It is important we examine and challenge ideologies that drive hate crimes in a wider context," they faced widespread condemnation. Speaking on another BBC programme the Labour peer and shadow attorney general Shami Chakrabarti criticised the editorial decision that allowed a situation in which, "an extreme far-right voice was left essentially unchallenged."

Generation Identity are one of a number of groups who are associated with the alt-right. On their "FAQs" page, Generation Identity claim that their goals are not racist or extremist but are concerned only with the, "preservation of ethnocultural identity". They are ready to set the definition of that identity and declare, "we want our European identity to have the right to exist in one-hundred years' time and beyond" but seem reticent in the defining the boundaries of the Europe they speak of or which combination of cultural

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heritages and legacies they are mobilising in their understanding of European culture.

When speaking of the persistence of the European "ethnoculture", Generation Identity echo multiple strands of conspiracy theory and apocalyptic fear that circulate widely within far-right and alt-right circles. As such, they provide an example of the far-right's search for legitimacy whilst simultaneously circulating the poisonous and divisive ideas that have been cited in the manifestos of Anders Breivik, and more recently Brenton Tarrant. These ideas are also common points of reference in the forums and social media platforms produced and frequented across the far-right spectrum.

Conspiracy theories are frequently cast as the fantasies of the powerless or the consequence of individual failings but they need to be treated as something deeply embedded in political cultures rather than a facet of individual psychology. Their effect on and importance in far-right discourse needs to be taken more seriously.

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Historical precursors

Apocalyptic conspiracy theories are not new. Earlier examples of the blueprints for more modern conspiracy theories can be found in two texts written at the end of the Eighteenth Century: the Scottish physicist John Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments of Europe* (1797) and the French priest Abbé Barruel's *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (1797).

Written and published independently from each other, they both suggest the pernicious influence of the Bavarian Illuminati in the French Revolution,

controlling the unfolding of history from behind the scenes. They represent an attempt to come to terms with the seismic transformations in philosophy, political thought, the economy and in belief wrought by the Enlightenment and made manifest through the revolution. The articulation of these conspiracist fears caught the public imagination and the 'Illuminati scare' crossed the Atlantic. First declaimed from the pulpit of Jebediah Morse (father of Samuel), for two years New Englanders were warned in sermons and editorials to be wary of agents of the Illuminati working unseen among them.

These early conspiracies share key features with those that followed, features that continue to characterise current conspiracies including those that contribute to far-right beliefs. The underlying idea of a concealed minority group manipulating a society and its culture in order to bring an end to the values and institutions of the dominant group is a sustaining idea in many conspiracy theories. The Illuminati conspiracy theories of Barruel and Robison produced the model of a clandestine secret society dedicated to the overthrow of "traditional values" in host societies. Early in the twentieth century, this model was reframed as international and transhistorical in separate works by by two English women, Lady Queenborough and Nesta Webster. Moreover, both cast the Illuminati as stooges of a broader Jewish conspiracy. Complementing the then-recently translated *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the three texts together fuelled English language anti-Semitic conspiracy theories throughout the twentieth century; certainly evidenced in the use of the *Protocols* by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*.

Conspiracies: the great replacement and white genocide

Throughout the populist right, including the radical fringes and pseudo-respectable entryists, the following narrative is readily identifiable in their

general position: they argue that there is an implicit threat to European culture and identity, what Generation Identity refer to as "ethnoculture". This reproduces the central thrust of Renaud Camus' notion of *le grand remplacement*, or the 'great replacement'. In this, mass immigration from the developing world into the West and "the multicultural agenda" are characterised in combination as a "multiculturalist self-abolition ideology". This is brought about by an ill-defined trans-national elite of globalists that Camus has referred to as the "Davos-cracy", liberal modernists for whom people are infinitely exchangeable units unconnected from notions of "home" or culture.

Elsewhere, in a review of Douglas Murray's *The Strange Death of Europe: Immigration, Identity, Islam*, an anonymous writer for Generation Identity lauds Murray's thesis that Europe is "a continent committing suicide" through mass immigration. The language is apocalyptic and, as the political scientist Michael Barkun has repeatedly made clear, there is a sustained discursive convergence between apocalyptic beliefs and conspiracy theories. This convergence is evident in far-right ideologies. Barkun also draws attention to the manner in which both apocalyptic and paranoid components are reactive and eclectic, drawing on a wide-ranging milieu of sources that he characterises as '"improvisational millennialism" composed of "stigmatized knowledge". This idea is usefully suggestive of the mobility and contingent nature of conspiracy theories; that they are reactive and composed of often disparate elements from political, quasi-scientific and spiritual sources. Thus the reactive apocalyptic absolutism of conspiracy theory's "us" vs. "them" is continually re-imagined in new contexts by drawing on familiar tropes and themes from counter-rational and underground sources. For proponents of conspiracy theories, the marginal status of the knowledge they draw on reflects the self-sustaining perception of being representatives of an embattled and marginal people.

The great replacement conspiracy is distinct from the parallel conspiracy theory of white genocide but they share the same terms of reference and both are ideologically aligned with the so-called "14 words" of David Lane. These contain the same apocalyptic overtones: "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children". Lane was a member of the U.S. white supremacist terrorist group The Order/Brüder Schweigen that was active during the early 1980s. He died in jail in 2007. The group was well connected in white supremacist circles with links to the Aryan Nations and the National Alliance. Its founder, Robert Jay Mathews, was inspired by the post-apocalyptic race war fantasy novel *The Turner Diaries*, one of the sources that inspired the London nail bomber, David Copeland. Fantasies of dystopias and racial conspiracy theories abounded within these circles and the fourteen words of David Lane developed not *sui generis* but from an extant and extensive milieu of metapolitical paranoia.

Where the great replacement is an identifiably Islamaphobic screed, Lane's written works reveal an underlying fear-fantasy of a Jewish conspiracy that seeks the eradication of Lane's chosen people. In his autobiography he wrote, "the Zionist conspiracy above all things wants to exterminate the White Aryan race," (he used the term Zionist as interchangeably with other terms referring to Jewish identity). Nonetheless, the mechanism by which Lane's perceived conspiracy is to achieve its ends is the same as the current far-right's Islamaphobic conspiracy, he wrote in the 21st of his *88 Precepts*, "Forced integration is deliberate and malicious genocide, particularly for a People like the White race". These are fear-filled fantasies of racial "genocide" and "suicide". Brenton Tarrant made direct reference to both in his manifesto and in the slogans written on his weapons he referred to both Lane's and Camus' ideas.

The far-right's paranoid vernacular religion

David Lane's racist conspiracy theories circulate among the far-right alongside older conspiracy theories such as the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, referred to in *Mein Kampf* by Hitler. What is evident in Lane's writings is that he combines his conspiracism with an explicit religiosity, something he saw as necessary to his political ends. In an essay titled "Wotanism (Odinism)" he wrote, "a religion was a necessary and vital weapon in our struggle against genocide". He outlined a racially redefined version of Germanic pre-Christian paganism as a unifying mechanism for 'his people'. Lane rejected existing white supremacist religious expressions such as Christian Identity. But it should be noted that it and similar white supremacist religious formations circulate within the far-right and that the lure of their transgressive spiritualities are being used as a tool for spreading their "message" into wider cultural arenas.

Emilio Gentile wrote of the importance of understanding Italian fascism as a political religion and that the State became productive of a cult of nation replete with neo-traditional rituals. The observation is vital in developing strategies to counter the far-right. Current far-right activists are too inchoate and lacking in structural power to establish a sustainable and comprehensive cult around their ethnocultural "nation". But they do demonstrate a convergence of Barkun's improvisational millennialism and the concept "vernacular religion" Vernacular religion is a concept associated with Marion Bowman and serves to indicate the personalised appropriation of higher religious forms in people's daily lives; it is the meeting point of religion, folklore and identity. This brings us back to Generation Identity. Like Lane, they identify a cultural front in their conflict with wider social values. They term it *Reconquista* – referring to the reconquest of Moorish Spain and Portugal.

Religious identity is clearly a part of this; the website gives an emotive account of the felt response to a visit to a Mass held at Notre Dame and celebrates the value of Christianity to European tradition.

Conclusion

Conspiracy theories and apocalyptic beliefs are the *lingua franca* of the far-right. They articulate and justify the Manichean divide of their hate-filled of the world into a chosen "us" and a dangerous, subversive "them". Although unreasonable in their claims, they provide a warped logic to the politics of the far-right. Nonetheless, in their apocalyptic dimension – the revelation of the plot against "the people" – they provide an eschatological narrative to "the struggle": either the people will prevail and achieve a paradise for "the pure" or the conspiracy will succeed and eradicate them. They become articles of faith as much as ideologies.

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About the Author

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