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Mythical Energies of the Far Right

If someone were to ask for a pedagogic example of the myth of palingenesis, ‘Make America Great Again’ would be an easy choice. Once upon a time, (white) America was great, probably greatest in the world, a nation with an innate greatness living out its destiny. Then a period of decay set in, thanks to the evil ones who captured the nation. Now America will become great again, almost born anew – not by regressing to the 1950s or 1910s, but by resuming the journey the evildoers cut short.¹ The myth of palingenesis never recommended a return of the same-old, same-old, a literal restoration of the Roman or Germanic order from one or two millennia ago; rather it pictured that past as a launching pad for a sparkling future. Looking back at the virtues and achievements of the Romans and Aryans helped reignite the nation for new great deeds, with the emphasis being precisely on the *new*, as in a new age, a New Man, a total renewal shaking off the slow death and taking to the skies: fascism had its eyes set on the future.² For all the crises that afflicted interwar Europe, fascism was thoroughly permeated by optimism about the enhancing forces of technology and a confident faith in industry (as we shall see in more detail below). Palingenesis was a myth in step with its times. It worked as the ‘mythical core’ of fascism, in the sense that it spoke to the gut feelings of

broad layers of people and inspired them to believe in the project of lifting the nation by extirpating its enemies.³

It may be that the myth of palingenesis will never go fully out of fashion. But it is now also joined by another myth, with a different conception of time and political tonality, of particular prominence in Europe. It encapsulates the ideas with which the far right moves deeper into a warming world. As related above, on the day after the Swedish election in 2018, Mattias Karlsson of the SD posted a picture of soldiers solemnly bowing to their great eighteenth-century king. He claimed that Sweden faced a time of tribulation, just as it had done

before in history. It has seemed hopeless many times. We have been occupied by alien states, foreign lords have oppressed the people, we have been under attack and stood alone against a united force of European superpowers and experienced overwhelming numerical inferiority. Yet we have always resisted

and defended ourselves and pushed the enemy back to where he came from, thanks to the supreme heroism of a patriotic guard, whose clothes were donned by the Sweden Democrats.⁴ Then as now, it is ‘victory or death’.

Clearly meant to galvanise disciples in their fight against today’s invaders, the message was mythical in another sense too: it had no relation to actual history. On any count, Sweden must be one of the countries in the world that has suffered *least* from occupation or incursion or the meddling of foreign states (unless one counts the colonisation of Sami territory in the north of present-day Sweden). The trials Karlsson described never happened. The fact that he invented a history of victimisation out of thin air, however, did not necessarily impair the efficiency of his communiqué. The myth in question has both an exceedingly tenuous link to past (and present) realities *and* an ability to speak to the gut feelings of people. It had been popular among leaders of the Sweden Democrats long before Karlsson’s post, such as when Ted Ekeröth explained that ‘Islam has been in permanent war with the rest of the world since the days of Muhammed’. A first invasion occurred in the 630s. A second was halted at Poitiers in 732. A third was repulsed in the Battle of Vienna in 1683 *and here we are again, fighting the same enemy*. Or, as an SD intellectual using the pseudonym Karl Martell, after the hero who struck down the Muslim armies at Poitiers, wrote in the party journal: this same old foe is now ‘invading our territories’

by means of ‘demographic warfare agents’.⁵ Only Martell has yet to strike this time.

This is *the myth of palindefence*. It says: we defended ourselves and our inestimable estate in the past; we were under siege but eventually rebuffed the enemy; we fought hard and gallantly for what will always be ours and *now we have to do it again*. Much like the myth of palingenesis, it deploys a certain vision of the past to stake out the present duties in the service of the nation. But where the former works in a *generative* mode and aims at a resplendent future, the latter operates in a *defensive* register and seeks to foment aggressive protection of existing traits and property. In palingenesis, a period of decadence has plagued the nation and must now come to an end. A new greatness will ensue, the inner energy of the nation reactivated. In palindefence, the existential threat has been encroaching on the nation since time immemorial, sometimes raiding the homeland, sometimes sulking around its borders, never entirely absent and now standing at our gates again. Only if we act with the energy of our forefathers will our way of life be saved for present and future generations.

The myth of palindefence became immensely popular in the early twenty-first-century European far right and the body of ideas that nourished it, such as Eurabia and the Great Replacement. Bat Ye’or did more than anyone to embellish the notion of Islam as a permanent war against the West. From the seventh until the late twentieth century, the leaders of Europe were wise and valorous enough to fight back, but then the fateful treachery of the Euro-Arab Dialogue supervened.⁶ For Mark Steyn, the Battle of Poitiers had been re-enacted with – so far – the opposite results: the Muslim armies had already reached the suburbs of Paris where they burned cars and the streets of Malmö where they blocked ambulances.⁷ In the years of the War on Terror, so crucial for the Islamophobia that subsequently seized swathes of Europe as an organised political force, this myth was enunciated by outlets in the Western mainstream.⁸ It was then sucked up by the fighters on the streets.

There arose the English *Defence* League, with offshoots across Europe, wielding symbols from the Crusades. The EDL vowed to ‘defend our land from 1,400 years of jihad’ and, addressing its Muslim enemies, to ‘contest your kind, as our forefathers did, relentlessly pursuing you in our quest to see all shari’a banished from our great democratic country’ (this evocation

of the Crusades being, of course, one of many points where the notion of ‘defence’ collapsed into its opposite).⁹ In France, Génération Identitaire emerged as the main direct-action group practising the ideas of the Great Replacement – ‘the Greenpeace of the right’, in the words of one of Alain de Benoist’s journals – and made headlines in 2018 when it sent a hundred activists to patrol the border in the mountains between France and Italy, marching in blue windbreakers with ‘DEFEND EUROPE’ written on the back, surveilling the woods with a helicopter and addressing potential immigrants with a giant banner: ‘Closed border. You will not make Europe your home. No way.’ But that wasn’t the group’s first newsworthy action. What marked the birth of the Génération was the occupation of a mosque in the city of Poitiers.¹⁰

The website ‘Gates of Vienna’, central to the counterjihad movement, adopted the following motto: ‘At the siege of Vienna in 1683 Islam seemed poised to overrun Christian Europe. We are in a new phase of a very old war.’¹¹ The parties of the far right could not get enough of such mottos. In the city of Vienna itself, the FPÖ arranged an opulent celebration of the 333rd anniversary of the end of the Ottoman siege under the slogan ‘Defending the Occident, then as now’.¹² It also produced a booklet retelling the battle in cartoons, complete with Muslim soldiers riding around with Christian babies impaled on their lances. Thankfully, early modern superhero Heinz-Christian Strache appears on the walls of Vienna, dressed in a blue knight’s gown, and teaches an enthusiastic blond boy how to ‘burn a Mustafa’ (that Mustafa, again).¹³

The Lega had a special fetish for the Battle of Lepanto. In October 1571, a fleet led by the Venetian Republic sailed across the Ionian Sea and trounced the Ottoman fleet in a titanic naval engagement that arrested further advances from the east into the Mediterranean. In October 2000, 429 years after that battle, Lega Nord leapt into the public eye when it descended on the small town of Lodi, where some workers of Moroccan, Senegalese and Albanian descent had filed an application for a place of worship. The Lega activists marched into the town with flags and banners copied from the Battle of Lepanto. Chanting ‘No to the Islamic invasion’, they reached the site of the proposed Islamic centre – not a mosque proper – and poured urine from pigs on the soil. The party continued its long march with the promise to once again throw Islam back to where it came from: the

other side of *mare nostrum*.¹⁴ On his way to power over the fate of fleeing people approaching the shores of Italy, Matteo Salvini repeatedly invoked ‘the spirit of Lepanto’.¹⁵

Vox styled its whole political project as a new *reconquista*. To kick off the election campaign that took it to parliament, the party congregated with flags at the cave and statue in Covadonga, the little corner of Asturias where the lengthy ‘reconquest’, culminating in the final expulsion of Moors and Jews from Spain, is supposed to have begun in 718 or 719. ‘Europe is what it is thanks to Spain – thanks to our contribution, ever since the Middle Ages, of stopping the spread and the expansion of Islam’, a Vox leader said on his way to the cave.¹⁶ The mythology of the *reconquista* also crossed the Atlantic to Brazil, where the far right rediscovered the European Middle Ages as its cradle. It nurtured a narrative of the white Brazilian nation as the extension of the liberation of the Iberian Peninsula from Islam. In one popular documentary called *The Last Crusade* from 2017, intellectuals of the Bolsonaro sphere – foremost among them Olavo de Carvalho – took a ‘dive into the remote origins’ of Brazil, namely the moment when Charles Martel halted the Muslim advance into Europe. From this moment, the Christians holding out in the kingdom of Asturias began to roll back the Moors, until, after seven gruelling centuries, they had ‘only the sea left to conquer’: and so Brazil was born. The function of this newfound medievalism was, of course, to specify the nation as white in origins – not indigenous, not African, by no means polymorphous.¹⁷

But it was in Eastern Europe that the myth of palindefence held the greatest sway. When the Fidesz government began erecting two rows of four-metre-high steel fence topped with barbed wire along Hungary’s borders with Serbia and Croatia in 2015, so as to close the route migrants had used to travel to Germany and Scandinavia in search of asylum, it conjured up a millennium of bittersweet memories. No one had withstood the onslaught of Muslim armies with greater stamina than Hungary. It had paid the highest price, but always kept its fortress solid and proud. Throughout the centuries when the Ottoman Empire pushed into Europe, the Hungarian nation had been the forward defence base, without getting the recognition it deserved from other Europeans, safe in their homes: and now it was the same story all over again.¹⁸ It was a narrative embedded in the deepest and broadest layers of Hungarian nationalist ideology. In polls

conducted in 1993 and 2000, nearly 75 per cent of respondents from all walks of life agreed with the statement that ‘for a thousand years, Hungary was the bulwark of the West, but we, even today, have never been thanked for this.’¹⁹ Fidesz and Viktor Orbán had a ready-made legend for the so-called refugee crisis, with the potential to reinforce their position as commanders of the fort: once again, Hungary had taken it upon itself to defend Europe from a Muslim invasion, and if some liberals in Brussels whimpered about the harsh methods, it was yet another sign of ingratitude.²⁰

The myth could be extended to other enemies, past and present. ‘We sent home the sultan with his army, the Habsburg Kaiser with his raiders and the Soviets with their comrades. Now we will send home Uncle George’, Orbán thundered to a hundred thousand supporters in Budapest before the election of 2018 – ‘Uncle George’ being, of course, Soros (a native of the country).²¹ At this point, the myth had a palpable if diffuse impact on people’s lives. It provided the ideological coating for a major section of the European wall that condemned migrants to hold out as best they could on the high waves of the Mediterranean, under the bombs falling over Aleppo or on the parched fields of drought-stricken Iran. But no matter how effective the Hungarian fences were in blocking the influx, with few if any migrants in sight, the Fidesz government in 2017 resolved to upgrade the construction with thermal sensors and electric shocks to anyone touching it.²² Measures like this turned Hungary into a utopia for much of the far right in Western Europe, a land attracting longing glances from *inter alia* Vox, which repeatedly cited it as the model for the Union. The Spanish party raised its knightly banners against ‘migratory invasion’, against Soros and his globalism and, of course, against Islam, all of which enemies were folded into the myth of centuries of defensive struggles uniting white Christians from Córdoba to Buda in a timeless bond.²³

Meanwhile, in Poland, the PiS drew on its own antique ideology of the nation as a *przedmurze* – bulwark – of Europe or, in the language of Catholicism, *antemurale Christianitatis*. It was constructed in the late Middle Ages and early modern era, when Polish kings and their diplomats worked tirelessly to elicit support from the Vatican and other allies in their wars against Turks and Tatars: fund us, arm us, because we are blocking the menace for the benefit of you all. Created by the top tiers of the feudal

Polish state, the idea of the *antemurale* trickled down to popular layers in the seventeenth century and ripened as a myth of national nobility during the nineteenth, when nationalists in partitioned Poland longed for their lost independence.²⁴ The heroism of Jan Sobieski, who arrived with his Polish cavalry at the gates of Vienna and lifted the Ottoman siege at the eleventh hour, was the finest moment in this history. With the approach of the so-called refugee crisis, the PiS knew exactly what national pride to summon. And yet both Hungary and Poland must so far be considered second runners in the game of palindefensive myth-making. It was another Eastern European country that claimed first place.

While hundreds of diplomats and delegates made their way to Rio de Janeiro to hammer out the UNFCCC in the early summer of 1992, the tanks of the Serbian army and the jeeps of the Chetniks rolled ever deeper into the green valleys of Bosnia. Among the towns that fell in these weeks was Foča. A typical Bosnian population centre, with some twenty thousand inhabitants identifiable as Muslims and roughly as many as Serbs, its fate was like that of any other place subjected to occupation. The Muslims were rounded up and detained. They had their valuables taken away from them. Their houses were methodically burnt to the ground, while fire brigades protected neighbouring Serbs from the flames; every mosque was blown up and bulldozed until only gravel remained. Commanders gave orders to ‘shoot Muslims’. Some three thousand of them – virtually all unarmed civilians – were killed in Foča alone. Special detention centres were set up for women. For months on end, Serbian nationalist soldiers entered those centres and raped the women in groups and told them they would never again give birth to Muslim babies. In January 1994, the town was rechristened ‘Srbinje’, literally ‘the place of the Serbs’; no traces of a Muslim presence then remained. In its investigation of the events in Foča, the Hague tribunal later observed that ‘the sole reason for this treatment of the civilians was their Muslim ethnicity’.²⁵ Why did the Serbian nationalists behave in this way? Or, rather, what did they *think* they were doing?

‘We defended Europe from Islam six hundred years ago’, said Radovan Karadžić, president of the Serbian nationalist entity known as Republika Srpska: ‘We are defending Europe again.’²⁶ During the prelude to the war, no theme loomed larger than the endurance of the Serbs on the cross where the Muslims had nailed them. More precisely, the Serbian nation entered eternity through the Battle of Kosovo Polje, or the Field of Blackbirds in

1389. There the troops from the remainders of the feudal Serbian empire met Ottoman forces and fought to the moment of bitter defeat. Legend has it that their leader, Prince Lazar, a Christ-like figure and nationalist martyr, was killed because a Muslim-loving Serbian Judas betrayed him.²⁷ In 1989, actually existing socialism, including the republic of Yugoslavia, fell apart: and it also happened to be the six hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje. Squeezing every drop of significance out of the occasion, Slobodan Milošević, heir apparent to the disintegrating bureaucratic apparatus in Belgrade, ordered the body of Prince Lazar exhumed from its shrine and carried by foot to monasteries, all the way down to the original battleground at the Field of Blackbirds. Venerated in macabre revival meetings, the holy relics inspired nationalist pledges such as the following: ‘We will do our utmost to crush their race and descendants so completely that history will not even remember them.’²⁸ In a long series of mass meetings leading up to the anniversary date, feelings of unjust victimisation, of Serbs as heroes daring to fight against hopeless odds but never receiving their due – until now – acquired the delirium of a racial frenzy. The bureaucracy in Belgrade swung behind it, as did Serbian television, press outlets and intellectuals, the ideological state apparatuses hanging on every word from Milošević and, like him, baying for blood.²⁹

The campaign culminated on the day of the battle, a hot 28 June 1989, when Milošević descended by helicopter at the Field of Blackbirds. Collapsing more than half a millennium into a single hyperintense moment of defence, Milošević told the crowd of between 1 and 2 million Serbs:

Six centuries later, now, we are being again engaged in battles and are facing battles. They are not armed battles, although such things cannot be excluded yet. However, regardless of what kind of battles they are, they cannot be won without resolve, bravery, and sacrifice, without the noble qualities that were present here in the field of Kosovo in the days past.³⁰

When battles did break out, the Serbian regiments streaming into Bosnian villages crowed over their palindefensive exploits; upon cleansing a settlement of Muslims, they received medals named after the heroes of 1389. In the first concentration camps Europe had known since the Second World War, guards bawled songs in praise of those heroes and forced their prisoners to join in.³¹ The late medieval bourdon laid the base for a shrill hysteria over Islamisation. Serbian nationalists incessantly bellowed reports of sharia laws, claims of Muslim backwardness, revelations of secret plans

to turn the continent into an Islamic state and projections of a Muslim demographic takeover, first in the Balkans and then the rest of Europe. The Muslims were spawning into power, which was why, to quote Mark Steyn, they had to be culled. Throughout the war, Karadžić and Milošević and the other commanders never tired of telling Western Europe that it too would be overrun, unless the Serbian troops on the ground were supported and emulated.³² The future of the continent was that of Bosnia.

And the climax came at Srebrenica, where a platoon under the command of Ratko Mladić in July 1995 netted tens of thousands of famished and desperate civilians who had fled to the enclave during earlier phases of cleansing. UN troops from the Netherlands had been assigned the protection of the ‘safe area’ but handed it over to the Serbian nationalists and assisted them in their work. The boys and men were placed on buses. They were thrown off at various sites around the town, blindfolded, pushed to the ground, executed and rolled over into mass graves. In some storehouses they were hacked to death with axes and crowbars, in others locked up in rooms where machine guns worked on the bodies for hours on end. More than eight thousand civilians were murdered in the worst massacre in Europe since the Second World War.³³ Twenty years later and counting, Bosnian Muslims still assembled in Srebrenica every July to bury the latest victims, identified through painstaking reconstruction of the disjointed corpses.

What did the Serbian nationalists think they were doing in Srebrenica? Just before marching into the enclave, on 28 June – the 606th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo – Ratko Mladić swore to restore the glory of the ‘Serbian chevaliers, who, although they had fallen in battle, stopped the great Arabic [!] flood that threatened to sink not only our nation but Europe as well’.³⁴ The war was of a purely defensive nature, imposed on the Serbs: ‘We were forced to create a bulwark to protect ourselves from Islamic expansion towards the West. Besides the enemies we are fighting in Bosnia, there is the entire Muslim world’, the butcher of Srebrenica spelled out his cosmology before getting to work.³⁵ His and his peers’ battles became a cause célèbre for much of the European far right, including parties such as the DF and the FPÖ.³⁶ One aspiring intellectual marvelled at the war of liberation and imbibed its gospel to the full. She called herself Bat Ye’or.³⁷

The myth of palindefence can do a great deal of political work. With its purported historical depth, it effectively separates two kinds of people: one bound by ancestry to the victims and heroes of the homeland, the other to the interlopers and usurpers from distant lands. The temporal collapse – 1389 is 1989, Poitiers is now – hypostatizes a transhistorical antagonism between collectives of human beings defined by their descent. It supplies the central illusion that ‘the generations which succeed one another over centuries on a reasonably stable territory’ have ‘handed down to each other an invariant substance’.³⁸ It constructs races. To the sons of Charles Martel or Prince Lazar, the myth has a rousing message: you are selected – nay, obliged – to assume our mantles and weed out the traitors and complete our work, with the beatification passing on to you at the end of the day. Nationalists can obviously take this hyperbole entirely seriously. Here they drink at their wells: ‘Perhaps we are no less brave than our forefathers’, Lega Nord pondered in a text on Lepanto, but only if ‘we learn to think of ourselves as members of a community. A true community, with roots and a history that have shaped us and make us love one another, because we recognise each other as similar to ourselves’ and the others in our towns and on our shores as similar to our foes from centuries ago.³⁹

The ideological trick here, of course – so typical for nationalist interpellation – is that the brave, authentic, self-identical people is presumed to exist independently of the myth, when in fact the myth is used to call it into being. If identification with the nation came naturally, by origin and birth, nationalists would never need to say anything at all (hence every exertion on their part is a performative contradiction). People could just as well identify with their neighbourhood or gender or dietary habits or pets or class, but nationalists interpellate them as – above every other loyalty – subjects of the nation, and only insofar as they respond to the call do they *become* subjects of a nation that they know and love and will defend against adversaries with all the requisite harshness.⁴⁰ By pumping up the volume of a battle story rarely heard in Yugoslav times, Milošević and the other leaders of Serbian nationalism constituted their separate people. They hailed the Serbs as righteous victims who refused to be victims anymore, vowed to give them their rightful share of the earth: and demanded the forfeiture of the others’ share.⁴¹

The contemporary European far right has discovered the interpellative power of the myth of palindefence. That myth clearly has an ability to play on some people's heartstrings and rally them to the cause; it can give their lives a heightened moral meaning.⁴² It is also always a myth in that second sense of inventing history, even when it – unlike Mattias Karlsson of the SD – deals in memories of actual occurrences. Historical evidence suggests that there were indeed battles at Poitiers, Kosovo Polje, Lepanto, Vienna. This is not the place for a thorough investigation of just how grossly the far right has distorted the record of what happened on those and other sites. Suffice it to say that, for a start, it was a tragedy for the people living north of Poitiers that the Muslims did not win that battle. As David Levering Lewis, the African American historian and biographer of W. E. B. Du Bois, shows in his *God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570–1215*, life in Dar al-Islam was vastly preferable to that under the Frankish and Saxon and Slav kings in every conceivable respect: equality, religious tolerance, education, peace and civility, material standards of living. In the year 800, in Lewis's assessment, Muslim Iberia was 'at least four centuries more advanced than Western Christendom'.⁴³ Continued expansion to the north of Poitiers would have thrown Europe half a millennium forward in social progress: for the unromantically minded, a counterfactual to mourn.

As for Vienna, the Polish cavalry that Sobieski brought to the gates was largely made up of Tatars. They were practising Sunni Muslims.⁴⁴ And so the distortions go, but they are of course utterly trivial to the far right itself, for which the whole point of the exercise is to energise *defence of the nation against its present enemies*. While seeking to create an ambience of animosities rooted in the very ancient past, the primacy of the present is here absolute, the hoary stories told to serve the agendas of the day. And here we can see how palindefence is a myth in step with our times. It is the perfect far-right turn-on in a conjuncture marked by '*gatedness* as the emerging social paradigm'. It speaks to the anxieties over borders. Better than the myth of palingenesis, it matches the mania of contemporary European politics: the phenomenon of immigration. It does not live on the optimism of the high modernist zeitgeist, but on the feeling that possessions built up over many years must now be safeguarded against various threats of diminishment.⁴⁵ It binds a history of victimhood to a sense of entitlement.

If palingenesis was a myth for the rising side of the curve of capitalist history, when this mode of production still had its best years ahead of it, its golden age and great acceleration, palindefence is one for a long downturn. That includes crises generated by fossil fuels. In a moment of acute mitigation or adaptation crisis, fantasies of national renaissance seem less likely to catch on than tales of a defensive mission; connected to particular memorialised battles or not, far-right politics would be more prone to defensive than to generative postures. If there is any climate-induced migration towards Europe, it will involve people identifiable as Muslims, because potential sending countries happen to have Muslim majorities; one could imagine how believers in the myth would read it. Palindefensive politics would seem a better fit for the plots of both *American War* and *The Wall*. But there could, again, be overlaps. The contemporary far right can segue between the myths with relative ease; the device ‘take our country back’ – used from Trump’s White House to 55 Tufton Street – combines the two. Victorious defence will presumably give the nation new life. Griffin, for one, thinks that ‘moments in history when an old order seems doomed to total annihilation still create the ideal climate for palingenetic myth’.⁴⁶

Now is there any reason to consider the palindefensive myth any less *fascist* in character? It seems *prima facie* hard to find one. Several factors point to the opposite conclusion. First, the two are homologous: palindefence is but another modality of the *ur*-myth of a unity between present generations and distant ancestors of an ethnically constituted nation. As with the romances of *romanità* or *Volksgemeinschaft*, perpetual invocations of bygone battles fix a white ultra-nation with a manifest essence and destiny. Palindefence has just the same capacity to cast the fascist death spell: you deserve to be killed because you are an enemy of this nation.

Second, elements of palindefensive myth-making were present already in classical fascism. Palingenesis functioned as its ‘mythical core’ in a very general sense. More particularly, the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism was the pulsing rage of Nazi fascism: the idea that the Jews were plotting and spreading Communism to realise their world rule. In his remarkable study *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism*, Paul Hanebrink dredges up a forgotten far-right discourse from the interwar period, which likened the advances of Judeo-Bolshevism from the east to the Muslim penetration centuries earlier. In the 1920s, central European ultranationalists

saw in the Jews and the Communists – one and the same gestalt – the ghosts from Poitiers and Vienna returning to take their revenge. The Polish army restaged the *antemurale Christianitatis* and plastered the country with posters of Leon Trotsky as a Jewish devil sending forth the Asian hordes of the Red Army; Hungarian would-be fascists equated revolutionaries with Ottomans; far-right Catholics in Austria used commemorations of the Battle of Vienna to turn their spears against the Jewish Marxists; French anti-Semitic writers perceived Jewish refugees in Budapest, who had fled from the Tsarist pogroms, as ‘the last onslaught of Asiatic peoples’, even more dangerous than the Muslims of yore.⁴⁷ Continuities can indeed exist in history.

With such mythical gobbets, Hitler cooked the soup for his crusade. In *Hitler's Crusade: Bolshevism, the Jews and the Myth of Conspiracy*, Lorna Waddington shows how the Nazis banged on about Germany as a shield defending not only the *Volk* but European civilisation as a whole. In the autumn of 1941, the Danish foreign minister recorded what Hitler had told him and other diplomats:

We have been fighting this tremendous battle against the constantly onrushing East for one and a half thousand years. Earlier there were the Huns, the Tartars and the Mongolians; today it was Bolshevism that had mobilized the whole of Asia against Europe. Germany, having borne the greatest blood burden in this struggle and again bearing it this time, was fighting for the whole of Europe. If Germany had not recovered and prepared herself for this great struggle, these Bolshevik-Asiatic hordes would have rolled across Europe like a wave.⁴⁸

Palindefensive elements in classical fascism have so far received little attention, but Hanebrink keenly observes their return in the early twenty-first century. The myth of a racial adversary once again coming to erase borders and debase the nation has returned: Judeo-Bolshevism now goes under the name of Islamisation. Where the Jew was demonised as an agent of subversion and erosion of national sovereignty, so is the Muslim today – without, as we shall see, supplanting the Jew.⁴⁹

Third, and perhaps most important, palindefence has been the principal myth for actual fascists resolving their problems with machine guns and pistols in the recent European past. Griffin believes, as we have seen, that Anders Breivik demonstrated the hopelessly isolated position of palingenetic politics today. That belief is based on a slipshod reading of the *ideas* – supposedly the forte of Griffin and other liberal scholars of fascism

– inside the mind of this conscious and wily living phenomenon.⁵⁰ Why did Breivik call his monster manifesto *2083*? Because 2083 will be the four hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Vienna. His entire worldview was steeped in the palindefensive mindset (and it presumably remains as such, as he sits in his cell). Likewise with the slaughtering of one hundred thousand Muslims in Bosnia: this was a genocide committed under the sign of palindefence. Paxton is entirely correct in suggesting that Serbian nationalism in the 1990s came close to the ‘functional equivalent’ of fascism-as-force – closer than any other in Europe since 1945, because it emerged in a deep crisis (the collapse of the Eastern bloc), during which leading sections of the dominant class threw themselves into ultranationalism so as to maintain power (Milošević on the trail to the Field of Blackbirds) and thereby, with considerable mass support, ushered in a regime of systematic violence against those identified as enemies of the nation.⁵¹ The exceptionality had, as Paxton notes, not the classical form of an end to electoral multi-party politics inside the Serbian entities. Instead it concentrated all its forces on the racialised others. In this respect too, the Bosnian genocide foreshadowed the trajectory of the European far right. The genocide for which (mainly) palingenetic anti-Semitism was responsible is common knowledge, but few remember that palindefensive Islamophobia has its own skeletons to account for; among the many differences, the former was one or two orders of magnitude larger and widely relegated palingenetic anti-Semitism to the rooms of a few boys and elderly men with dreams everyone else found sickening (at least for some time). Since Srebrenica, the politics of palindefensive Islamophobia has gained steadily greater traction in Europe.

The memory of the Bosnian genocide has been preserved by some people. On his long way to the social-democratic camp at Utøya, Anders Breivik stopped to sit at the feet of Serbian nationalist war criminals.⁵² When Brenton Tarrant drove his car to the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch, he listened to an anthem from the war called ‘Remove Kebab’. Lauding the hero Radovan Karadžić, the song was composed to heighten the morale of the Serbian nationalist forces; the original music video has paramilitaries singing in the hills and pictures of Muslim interns in concentration camps. In his manifesto, Tarrant called himself a ‘kebab removalist’, a term he also had inscribed on one of his guns. On another, he had written ‘Charles Martel’. Indeed, the propaganda material he posted was covered in

palindefensive references, to the Crusades, Vienna 1683 and the rest of the interminable story.⁵³ Scholars of genocide have not forgotten either. One of them, Alex Alvarez, who engages in his own modelling of worst-case scenarios in a hotter world, believes that Bosnia provides a prototype for the organised racist violence to come.⁵⁴

An amendment to the definition of fascism seems in order. As a set of ideas, fascism is palingenetic *or palindefensive* ultranationalism (or a combination thereof). As a real force, it is such politics coming to the fore in a conjuncture of deep crisis, and so on. It follows that if we can speak of fascist tendencies in the present, these very much include movements in the realm of ideas. It also follows that if we regard *fossil* fascism as a set of ideas, it must be an ultranationalism that somehow connects fossil fuels to palingenetic or palindefensive purposes. But why would it ever do that? We might ask why fossil fuels would be mobilised as a nationalist energy in the first place.

The Mythical Body of the Stock

Fossil fuels make up a stock of energy.⁵⁵ A cache of power buried under the ground, it is inherited from past photosynthesis, past climes and plants and slopes that have sunk into the subterranean bowels of a territory. Renewables, on the other hand – sun, wind, water, wave – belong to the flow of energy: a power that comes and goes, visits one spot and continues to another, shines and fades, blows and slackens, rushes and rests without petrifying in any particular precincts. So far in history, the stock has proven infinitely more congenial to the imaginaries of nationalism. It can be apprehended as *our* coal, *our* oil, *our* gas with no existing equivalent on the renewable spectrum. ‘Our sun’ is, of course, an oxymoron: the sun is the common property of the solar system. It cannot be appropriated by company or country. The light it emits seems to slip out of the hands of nations as soon as it strikes the surface, whether in the form of direct radiation or as moving wind and water; *qua* fuel, it cannot be part of a national corpus. Only its relics can. Nations blessed with fossil fuels have felt the stock within them, as an ultra-deep material inheritance to which the mystique of nationalism easily sticks. The stock will always be found under

the land within our borders, the flow may be for a passing moment but not the next one. The flow has a weak bond to the homeland; it is at home both nowhere and everywhere; it does not anywhere reside under any particular soil. Solar and wind are the Jew and the Muslim of energy.⁵⁶

Fugitive flow, autochthonous stock: this explains why none of the parties we have investigated – those that take nationalism towards its logical endpoints – promote the former as a source of pride. It explains why they at most show perfunctory acceptance of the flow and more often hate it, above all wind, a major segment of any decarbonised economy. In technical, physical principle, a nationalist programme for renewables would be possible in many countries. The US could rely on domestic renewable energy for 100 per cent of its needs and export associated manufactures – panels, turbines, troughs, storage systems – to the rest of the world, but no agenda for ‘energy dominance’ has been outlined on such a basis. Poland could have continued to rise to the top of wind power capacity. Germany has made strides in renewable energy generation and might well do more: and the AfD wants to shut down all of it. No far-right government, coalition or president has consecrated a wind farm or solar power plant as the pedestal of the national character the way Norway has named its oil and gas fields after native heroes. None has walked out into a field of turbines or arrays and proclaimed that this source of energy will last for one thousand years – it could last forever, of course, but it would have none of the rich corporeality nationalists smell in the stock. The only part of the flow that has been subjected to similar framing is waterpower, more particularly the mega-dams built across the world in the post-war decades, for rivers – fixtures of the land – have had a place in national mythology. The Nile, the Indus, the Yangtze were harnessed in projects of nationalist engineering and patriotic monumentality (in the very different context of postcolonial independence), but rivers have little left to contribute to the flow, particularly in Europe; water-power is a small piece of the fossil-free puzzle.⁵⁷

Outside of continent-size countries such as the US or Brazil, 100 per cent renewable energy will work best in internationally integrated grids. On a day when thick clouds cover Germany, the wind blows in Spain and the waves lap Norwegian shores. With cross-border grids pooling together flow resources from across borders, baseload and stable supplies can be guaranteed; for fairly small countries, a flow-based economy presupposes a

modicum of cosmopolitanism. Nationalist fervour throws a spanner in any work to connect the material base of one country with that of another – particularly if that other country is Muslim, with all the sun one could dream of but no self-evident white reliability.⁵⁸ Europe could by now have replaced a massive chunk of its fossil fuels with solar power imported from North Africa. Technologically feasible, such schemes have so far stumbled on – among other obstacles – the fear that the Muslim partners would use their deserts to blackmail Europe or let the infrastructure be blown up by terrorists.⁵⁹ The likes of Santiago Abascal and Alexander Gauland will not hasten implementation.

On the other hand, the far right in Western countries has cultivated a special veneration of one category of workers, namely those white men who extract black fuel – coal in particular, as in the US, Poland and Germany. In the eyes of Donald Trump, the PiS and the AfD, their work is imbued with an authenticity few other categories of workers can approximate: they haul up the inner body of the nation.⁶⁰ In both the US and Germany, the renewable energy sector employs several times more people than coal, but none of the grim glamour attaches to the former, too ethereal to count. Regenerative forces come from the ground. In the US and Poland, the Trump and PiS administrations have sutured palingenetic and palindefensive figures of thought to the stock, and we can expect more of this, particularly of the defensive kind: some people will want to preserve their fossil status.⁶¹ Some ultranationalists will try to defend or revive a way of life that really was – no fantasy here – built on the foundation of the stock.

It remains to be seen if nationalist imaginaries can become invested in the manufacturing of technology for the capture of sun and wind and wave or in the landscapes most suitable for it (straits, deserts). Until now, it would seem that among the many hurdles the transition faces is precisely *the mythical investment in the stock as the body of the nation*, upheld and amplified by the ascendant far right. Had nationalists found reason to love renewables – or had internationalists been more capable of setting the agenda – our world might not have been warming quite so rapidly.

Can the far right change its mind? The alloy appears to have entered language itself, at least English. The *Oxford Dictionary* gives two definitions of the term ‘extraction’: ‘the action of extracting something,

especially using effort or force’ and ‘the ethnic origin of someone’s family’, as in being of German extraction. Stock can mean several things, among them ‘a supply or quantity of something accumulated or available for future use’ and ‘a person’s ancestry or line of descent.’ Migration, on the other hand, is ‘movement of people to a new area or country in order to find work or better living conditions’ or just ‘movement from one part of something to another’. Either way, it flows. And no element is as quintessentially migratory as the wind. One is here reminded of Klaus Theweleit’s museum-sized psychoanalytic readings of the writings and images of the *Freikorps* and their proto-fascist pals in the early Weimar Republic. Fresh from the trenches, they dreaded the Bolshevik revolution as an incoming flood or an ocean moving past German borders; from the west, meanwhile, came the horrifying spectacle of non-white soldiers – the Moroccan, Senegalese, Indochinese troops stationed by the French victors – on national soil. Both represented a nauseating flow. Men of the far right feared losing themselves in these undulating surroundings – drowning in the flood – and grasped for ‘a rock amid the raging sea’. ‘Nothing is to be permitted to flow’, Theweleit diagnoses their craving for rigidity. ‘Death to all that flows.’⁶²

This explains, lastly, the structural proximity between primitive fossil capital and the far right. It does not, however, explain why nationalists in countries with no extraction can cherish fossil fuels as much as their producing brethren. Nor does it solve one remaining riddle: such fuels have oiled the wheels of globalisation. They and they alone have enabled the abstract space and time of borderless capital. With its integration in weather cycles and landscape forms, the flow could scarcely have fuelled the transcendence of natural boundaries in late capitalism and the release of industrial production from national states. One kind of cosmopolitanism is loaded with fossil fuels – namely *elite* cosmopolitanism, the plague someone like Gauland purported to combat: the rootless vagabonds move between their flats and restaurants on aeroplanes. When the popular Spanish singer Rosalía tweeted ‘Fuck Vox’ in November 2019, the party responded from its official Twitter account with a picture of her in an aeroplane and clarified: ‘Only millionaires with private planes like you can afford not to have a homeland’ – a paraphrasing of fascist philosopher Ramiro Ledesma Ramos, whom Santiago Abascal liked to quote.⁶³ Now if the far right hates this ‘globalism’, why does it not confront its energy, or at least associate it with evil rather than good? Or will it soon?

Myths of Plots and Hoaxes

The anti-climate politics of the far right draws additional force from a battery with a special capacity to light up people and keep them going for a long time: conspiracy theories. Such theories have been present since climate science first became contested. We are not here referring to primitive fossil capital pulling some strings to mangle the science and sabotage mitigation; that it has done so is not a theory, but a well-documented fact.⁶⁴ As we have seen, the initial attempts were undisguised, Exxon and the rest operating not behind the scenes but smack in the middle of them. The turn towards secrecy – as in anonymous funding – was a tactical reaction to the public outcry against the transparently self-interested denialism, which in turn triggered new rounds of embarrassing revelations. The history of the denialist ISA is one of perennial disclosures and readjustments. To the extent that it strove for seclusion, it was largely a failure. As such, it was no more of a conspiracy than the messaging of a Baptist church or a BBC show. That oil corporations lied for decades about climate change is no more mysterious than the Bush regime lying about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq; deception does exist in human history, as do, of course, plots to stab the Roman Caesar and fly aeroplanes into skyscrapers, not to speak of the more humdrum machinations of police informants, marketing strategists, political front groups, companies withholding knowledge of their latest products and any number of other agents that must pursue their goals at least partly in the dark.⁶⁵ Primitive fossil capital has also acted in the shadows, as an all-too-human entity, fallible and opposable, pushing its pedestrian class interests. But if someone would claim that ExxonMobil has operated a fleet of UFOs abducting critical climate scientists and returning them to earth as muted conservatives, or that the Heartland Institute has distributed a pizza ingredient that induces paralysis, either idea would indeed count as a conspiracy theory – but these are stories not yet written and sold, unlike those working in the opposite direction.

What sets a conspiracy theory apart, then, is the belief in ‘the existence of a vast, insidious, preternaturally effective international conspiratorial network designed to perpetrate acts of the most fiendish character’.⁶⁶ The network wills the destruction of all that is held dear. The power it wields is

demonic, boundless in malevolence and limitless in efficacy; the conspiracy has infiltrated every nook and cranny of social life and works single-mindedly, without pausing, erring or splitting, to bring on perdition. It appears behind events that might seem random to the untrained eye, but which form a tight pattern woven by the hidden hand.⁶⁷ The truth is out there, by definition concealed – the epistemic passion of every conspiracy theory, which makes for an odd relation to evidence. To take one recent example, when a fire erupted in the Notre Dame cathedral on 15 April 2019, conspiracy theorists rushed like moths to the flames, among them Glenn Beck, star of the American conservative airwaves, who instantly knew that this was a ‘World Trade Center moment’. But ‘if’, he added, ‘this was started by Islamists, I don’t think you will find out about it.’ ‘They’, meaning the French government, ‘will keep it quiet.’⁶⁸ So the absence of observable evidence for an Islamist conspiracy behind the Notre Dame fire would, for Beck, serve as so much confirmation of it. The conspiracy will erase all traces and leave invisibility as proof of its success. If anyone provides counter-vailing evidence, it is short-circuited into its opposite: if the French police were to present a reconstruction of the accidental fire, that would merely be a predicted *part* of the plot. All that gainsays the conspiracy can be attributed to it, if only the circles of complicity are widened to include media and academia and other channels of information. The theories seal themselves off and become immune to falsification or even buoyed by it, in a logic without equivalent in the realm of thought: these are ‘the only theories for which evidence *against* them is actually construed as evidence *in favour* of them’.⁶⁹ Believers will hold on, no matter how large amounts of data are thrown against them year after year. We can now begin to see why climate denial and the capitalist class fractions propagating it had to end up in this camp.

In a first phase of innocence, climate denial does not depend on a conspiracy theory. Consider Mo Brooks, a Republican congressman from Alabama, who in May 2018 asserted that sea level rise is caused not by any warming trend, but rather by the rocks that tumble into the oceans from the California coastline and the White Cliffs of Dover. Together with soil from the mouth of rivers, these rocks force ‘the sea level to rise, because now you have less space in the oceans, because the bottom is moving up’.⁷⁰ This American lawmaker could simply have been a little lost and lacking in

education, his belief formed independently, without any elaborate tale of a wicked conspiracy. But a problem arises when such a belief is confronted with counterproof. If there is an overwhelming scientific consensus about global warming, and if it cannot be accepted as the result of tens of thousands of researchers pouring their findings into a common pool of knowledge, how on earth can it be accounted for? The only way out for the orthodox denier not prepared to give up his view is to postulate a conspiracy. These scientists must be colluding in the fabrication of their data, and for this they must have an ulterior motive and very great resourcefulness. Denial may not have needed conspiracy theory in, say, the mid-1980s, but the more time has passed, depositing ever-rising mountains of evidence, the harder it has become for it to maintain credibility *without attaching itself to some conspiracy theory*.⁷¹

Hence deniers have put forth whole libraries worth of stories about climate scientists suppressing discussion, monopolising grants, perverting the peer-review process and brainwashing students all over the world. The IPCC, Fred Singer explained in a 2008 report from the Heartland Institute, gathers at ‘exotic locations’ to advance its ‘activist enterprise’ at a safe remove from peering eyes.⁷² Around this time, the tropes of the ‘hoax’ or the ‘scam’ or the ‘cover-up’ had become central in the denialist rhetoric; Inhofe’s *The Greatest Hoax* was a run-of-the-mill title. The idea resonated with a considerable segment of the American public, the share subscribing to statements such as ‘global warming is a hoax’ or ‘a myth concocted by scientists’ standing at around 40 per cent.⁷³ It obviously required a leap of faith to think that the women and men behind the satellites, observatories, laboratories, university administrations, editorial boards, research institutes, UN agencies and other units involved in the production of climate science could have been the silent, loyal members of a cabal – it would indeed have been ‘the greatest hoax ever perpetrated’. Out of all these uncounted thousands, should not someone have spilled the beans?⁷⁴

And then, in November 2009, just weeks before COP15 in Copenhagen, a dossier of one thousand emails hacked from climate scientists at the University of East Anglia was dumped on the internet and immediately hailed by denialists as the definitive proof that these scientists were indeed jiggering their data. *Investor’s Business Daily* claimed that the emails showed ‘attempts to conspire’ and judged the scientists ‘guilty of fraud’,

while in the *Telegraph*, James Delingpole declared that ‘the conspiracy behind the Anthropogenic Global Warming myth’ had been ‘quite deliciously exposed’.⁷⁵ He coined the term ‘Climategate’ for the event. So what dark secrets exactly did those emails divulge? No fewer than nine independent investigations in the US and the UK subsequently presented their inquiries: all exonerated the scientists of any wrongdoing.⁷⁶ But, for the believers, these investigations were, of course, a part of the plot. ‘Don’t believe the “independent” reviews’, counselled a *Wall Street Journal* column.⁷⁷ Long after the scientists had been cleared of any suspicion, denialists continued to dwell on ‘Climategate’ as their very best case, kept alive the rumour of crooked scientists and extracted maximum fortunes from the pseudo-event: ‘I think the scandal has made the opponents of energy-rationing legislation stronger and more confident’, said Myron Ebell of the Competitive Enterprise Institute.⁷⁸ A fable spun around an unsubstantiated core, a conspiracy theory can build up with anything that comes its way, as its adherents have taken leave of reality – perhaps the only way explicit denial can survive in a steadily warming world. Along this way, the denialist ISA also moved further and further to the right.

If a general need for conspiratorial thinking pushed denial towards the far right, there was also a more specific content that sped up that movement: the theory that the conspiracy was perpetrated *by the left*. Climate politics carries several birth-marks from the historical moment around 1989, when actually existing socialism collapsed and – an epic coincidence – the science of anthropogenic global warming matured. Conspiracy theories, of course, accept no coincidences. This one asserts that once the Soviet Union and its allies were gone, the communists, also referred to as the socialists, the Marxists or simply the left, abandoned the dead horse and invented climate change as their next bet to dominate the world. ‘Just as Marxism is giving way to markets, the political “greens” seem determined to put the world economy back into the red, using the greenhouse effect to stop unfettered market-based economic expansion’, explained *Forbes* in 1989.⁷⁹ The Rio summit fit the pattern perfectly. ‘The International Socialist Party, which is intent upon continuing to press countries into socialism, is now headed up by people within the United Nations’, reported one early denialist from the negotiations: ‘The radicals are in charge.’⁸⁰

This is the *left climate conspiracy theory*, or the ‘left climate theory’ for short. It is originally a child of 1989, a product of the conjuncture when the forces of the left crumbled worldwide. Magically converting historical weakness into near-demonic power, it suggests that the left pulled off the hoax of climate change in particular and environmentalism in general to make up for its losses. In their classic account of the origins of denial, *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway show how Fred Singer and other pioneers graduated from the most aggressively anti-communist circles of the late Cold War. With the left climate theory, they could extend their assignment into the post-communist era, keeping up the fight against an enemy with eternal life and – appearances to the contrary – undiminished ability to jeopardise capitalism.⁸¹ That fight became a defining mission of the denialist ISA.

Delusionary as this theory is, it has two features common to conspiracy theories: it turns the weak into the strong, and it contains a grain of truth. After the wall had fallen, some Marxists did look to the environment as their next best thing. One of them was Perry Anderson, who, in his typically Olympian survey of the post-1989 political landscape, ‘The Ends of History’, published in the year of Rio, acknowledged defeat. The Third International in ruins, the Second sterile, the national liberation movements exhausted – ‘none of the political currents that set out to challenge capitalism in this century has morale or compass today.’⁸² After this rigor mortis, could there be a second life for socialism? Anderson had glimpsed one chance: the ecological crisis, to which ‘market forces contain no solution’. The imperative of profit can only accelerate planetary spoliation, making the deduction from green to red hard to contest:

At this higher level, where the fate of the Earth itself will be decided, do not the classical arguments of socialism for intentional democratic control of the material conditions of life stage their comeback? If there is to be, as the most prescient analysts insist, an Environmental Revolution comparable in significance only to the Industrial and Agricultural Revolutions before it, how could it be other than consciously realized – that is, planned? What else are the targets already feebly set by various national governments and international agencies?⁸³

Not only planning but equality too would be a prerequisite for bringing the crisis under control. On what principle should ‘the emission of carbon’ be distributed among the peoples of the world, if not on equal entitlement?

‘The malignant appropriation of the world’s riches by a privileged minority, with which the destruction of its resources is now fatally interwoven, threatens any common solutions to the massive dangers now gathering momentum.’ As revolting as this logic was to the aficionados of the market – distracted from celebrating what should have been their final victory – it had greater weight than all the rubble from the Berlin Wall, and it has only gained weight since Anderson laid it down: every postponement of the ‘day of reckoning’ has intensified the contradiction between capital accumulation and the life-support systems of the earth.⁸⁴ Every additional gigatonne of carbon sent into the atmosphere has made half-measures less viable. Every moment of stalling mitigation has ensured that if it ever commences, it will have to exercise the highest degree of control over the material conditions of life – first of all, over the privileged minority wasting the resources on which all others depend, notably the carbon sink of the atmosphere.

If the left climate theory seemed plausible to certain segments around 1989, then, it might well become more convincing in more intense stages of the crisis. The development of climate politics seems to obey a law of polarisation: *the higher the temperatures, the more acute the antagonism* between a left that alone stands ready to pick up the instruments for alleviating the crisis and a right that, for that very reason, refuses to contemplate it. A recursive cycle has been rolling for some time. Every year of inaction necessitates more revolutionary action the next; every threat of such action – if only of a hypothetical, tautological character – strengthens the conviction that this is a plot by the left; every strengthening of that conviction drives the right farther to the right and indurates its heart, and so on.⁸⁵ But this cycle was set in motion just as the left experienced the most epochal sapping of its forces. The ecological crisis might, Anderson noted, elevate the interest in an alternative mode of production to the biosphere itself – but it is ‘accompanied by a reduction in the social capacities to fight for one’.⁸⁶ This peculiarity of the post-1989 predicament predisposes the right to fence ever more wildly: for it fights not a strong left, but the *ghost* of one.

Conspiracy theories can then go into a spin. One that made the rounds in the 2010s focused on the circumstance that Earth Day, celebrated worldwide every year on 22 April – in 2016 with the ratification of the Paris Agreement in 175 countries – happens to fall on Lenin’s birthday.

Moreover, the very first Earth Day, 22 April 1970, was also the centenary of Lenin's birth. 'Is Earth Day on Lenin's Birthday a Coincidence?' asked a missive from the Competitive Enterprise Institute on the occasion in 2015: 'no' was the natural answer.⁸⁷ It had a very deep meaning indeed. Another architect of the 'Climategate' narrative, Brian Sussman, a meteorologist-turned-conservative radio host in California, explained in 2019 why the left had smuggled its project of world domination into this particular date in the calendar:

Environmentalists have always admired Lenin. He was the first disciple of Karl Marx to capture control of a country, and the opening act of his seven-year reign commenced with the abolition of all private property – a Marxist priority. Despite overseeing a bloody civil war, a devastated economy and a citizenry without hope, Lenin made it a priority to implement his signature decree, 'On Land'. In it he declared all forests, waters, and minerals to be the exclusive property of the state, and he demanded these resources be protected.⁸⁸

Worries about climate change had the same terminus; hence the choice of 22 April.

Sussman presented an expanded version of the theory in his book *Eco-Tyranny: How the Left's Green Agenda Will Dismantle America*, published in 2012, at a time when Obama inspired a flurry of fresh theorising. The date of 22 April was selected back in 1970 because environmentalists acted on the mandate of Lenin and, further behind the curtain, Marx. Today they cannot stop talking about global warming. 'It's all a lie. There is no such planetary crisis. It's a concocted calamity churned out initially by Marx himself, and furthered by his modern devotees', among whom Sussman identified Rachel Carson, Paul Ehrlich, Indira Gandhi, the Rockefeller family, Al Gore (his father was friends with a Jewish-Russian businessman who ran eight drugstores from which he transferred the profits straight to the Bolshevik party), James Hansen and many others in an axis of evil that culminated, of course, in 'Barack Hussein Obama'.⁸⁹

Sussman's most original contribution – his denial of trend and attribution and carbon vitalism seriously shopworn by now – lay in deriving the conspiracy from Marx himself. The founding father of communism pored over the latest reports of environmental crises and then passed on a red-green plot against mankind to generations of co-conspirators, trained to 'bewilder and lie' for the cause.⁹⁰ The more common version of the theory said that climate was a *surrogate* for original Marxism – 'Karl Marx is

dead, they needed something else. CO₂ has taken the place of Marx', as the climate spokesman for the FrP said in 2012 – but Sussman rather construed it as the quiddity of the whole Marxian oeuvre, transmitted by direct line of descent.⁹¹ This achievement rendered him a column in *Forbes*, the billionaire magazine, much besotted with his work. There he vituperated Gore and Obama for forcing their communist agenda onto Americans and 'purposefully keeping the bulk of [our] resources – oil, natural gas, minerals, timber, water – out of our reach'. The way to fight eco-tyranny was to 'demand what is rightfully ours' and 'drill it, dam it, log it'.⁹² Out of such sentiments arose the 45th and first white president. Very similar sentiments invigorated another white president's quest to tear down the legacy of Lula and Dilma.

We must here recognise the exceptional status of climate conspiracy theories in the early twenty-first century. That period has so far been rather well endowed with such theories – about 9/11, vaccines, Pizzagate, Flat Earth, disappearing aeroplanes, extraterrestrial reptilians hijacking the earth and controlling it from underground catacombs, to mention a few – but none has come anywhere near the standing of those pertaining to climate.⁹³ *Forbes* and the *Wall Street Journal* have never cosied up to the idea that Mossad organised the attacks on World Trade Center. No president, American or otherwise, has made the murder of Princess Diana or the suspicion of genetically modified foods a plank of his programme. Climate conspiracy theories are unique in being ubiquitous and popular *and* refuted by an ever-growing body of science *and* anchored in dominant class fractions.⁹⁴ They present established scholarly models for understanding the phenomenon with an anomaly.

Conspiracy theorists are usually portrayed as outsiders and under-dogs. 'Higher levels of conspiracy thinking correlate with lower levels of education and lower levels of income', making these theories especially 'prevalent among members of low-status groups attempting to explain their status' – in short, ' "conspiracy theories are for losers." '⁹⁵ Vulnerable groups wish to accuse the mighty of evil and descry their handiwork. There is an influential Marxist version of this model, based on a quip from Fredric Jameson: 'Conspiracy, one is tempted to say, is *the poor man's cognitive mapping*.'⁹⁶ The man who preaches or believes in it is poor, in the sense of being economically disadvantaged and perhaps also pitiable, a little tragic

and nutty, with no access to a more realistic map of the world. Jameson developed his theory of cognitive mapping in the very same conjuncture of 1989, when the prospects for a socialist world had receded and capitalism ruled triumphant. In the resulting cultural condition, the poor man is bombarded with images from afar and signals from distant markets, his life overwhelmed by the power of transnational corporations inscrutable to him. He is like the first-time visitor to a mega-city, who cannot find his way around. But just as navigating a city requires some cognitive map – to feel properly at home, one needs a mental picture of how the neighbourhoods and streets are interlinked – so this life demands some representation of the ungraspable, overbearing totality. Socialism no longer supplies one. After its demise, the poor man is thus drawn to conspiracy theories, which centre not on capital – the city no longer represented – but on secret government laboratories, the British queen, a family of bankers, aliens or some other stand-ins. Conspiracy is ‘a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital’. It is the poor substitute for what used to be called class consciousness.⁹⁷

This model has its undeniable strengths, to which we shall return later, but it does not work in the case of the left climate theory. When *Forbes* informed its readers as a matter of routine in 2013 that climate science was the bogus product of ‘billions from government grants and neo-Marxist environmentalist largesse’ reserved for those ‘in favour of the politically correct theory’, this was not a poor man speaking loudly to himself on the sidewalk.⁹⁸ This was *the rich man’s cognitive mapping*. After 1989, the sharpest indictment ever put forth against the capitalist mode of production – it destroys the conditions for life as such – coincided with the sudden disappearance of the enemy that had always promoted an alternative mode, and some very rich men could only make sense of this terrain by updating their dog-eared map from a century or two of class struggle. It was, more precisely, the rich *white* man’s cognitive mapping. This conspiracy theory had scant appeal in the global South – unlike some theories starring CIA and Mossad, HIV and vaccines – until Bolsonaro came along. More precisely still, it was the cognitive mapping of the rich white man who did not dare trust in capitalist climate governance, for fear that if it were to make good on its promise to address the crisis, it would turn into something else. Naomi Klein has suggested that the men of the denialist ISA correctly understood what any mitigation would imply.⁹⁹ Their great folly, of course, was to throw themselves into a fallacy similar to *post hoc ergo propter hoc*:

mitigation might well take an anti-capitalist form, hence the need for it must be dreamed up by the left (much in the same way some believed that because the state of Israel reaped geopolitical advantages from 9/11, it must also have masterminded the attacks).

One might say that once the science had matured, climate change became a revolutionary problem without a revolutionary subject. In the years around 1989, the environmental movement did indeed, as we have seen, turn towards justice and the left (another grain of truth in the conspiracy theory). But it was not able to challenge capitalism with anything like the power once evinced by the Third International or the national liberation movements, or even the social-democratic parties of the Second International; a lame successor, it won no Vietnam War and built no equivalent of the welfare state. The brakes it managed to put on the destructive forces of capital were decidedly weaker and more marginal, which is why the tasks it set itself have only grown ever more urgent. It remains to be seen if the climate movement surging up in the late 2010s can develop into the revolutionary subject the situation cries out for. In its absence, the anti-revolutionary thrust of fearful rich white men must target *the problem as such*, leading (some of) them to bid farewell to science and reality. The left climate theory is a heavily degraded figure of the total logic of this conjuncture, as seen from high above.

It is otherwise with chemtrails. The theory that the white stripes from aeroplanes contain chemicals sprayed by mighty elites to poison or desensitise those below, or wreak havoc with their weather or simply govern them, can be read as an extremely degraded form of subaltern ecological class consciousness: someone up there makes us suffer by polluting the sky.¹⁰⁰ ‘Look up’ is the motto of the chemtrailers. ‘I never saw clouds like that as a kid. My gut and heart still tell me something’s going on’, one believer explained to the *Guardian* in 2017.¹⁰¹ Relatively popular as it has recently become, particularly in the US, where some 5 per cent of the public had been swayed by the late 2010s, the chemtrails theory has yet to receive support from *Forbes* or the equivalent and make it into the corridors of power. Continued deadlock over the climate – not to speak of actual stratospheric aerosol injection – might widen its support base. For now, we must conclude that the most politically significant conspiracy theories of our time have been *seeded from the top*, which calls for a rethinking of the social function of such theories; and indeed, recent

research, outside of Marxism, has begun to question the model of the accusatory loser. Far from expressing some ill-defined discomfort with the status quo, conspiracy theories ‘may actually bolster’ it, as they demonise – almost literally – those who want to do things differently. Mighty evil is at work, but it comes from outside and stands opposed to the system. These theories ‘defend the social system when its legitimacy is under threat. In this respect, they join the ranks of other system-justifying processes’, such as the belief that the poor get what they deserve or that women are by nature inferior.¹⁰²

Now there is one Marxist who fathomed this logic long ago, namely Theodor Adorno, writing about the

attitudes and opinions of all those who, for reasons of vested interests or psychological conditions, identify themselves with the existing setup. In order not to undermine their own pattern of identification, they unconsciously do not *want* to know too much and are ready to accept superficial or distorted information as long as it confirms the world in which they want to go on living.¹⁰³

Winners may be afraid of learning about the sources of their wins, and they have never had greater reason to fear – ‘knowing too much has assumed a subversive touch’ on the brink of climate catastrophe.¹⁰⁴ This is cognition for the man on top: I cannot believe that the prevailing order, which has given me all I own, is capable of producing this terror; it must be slander from those who wish me and others like me harm. Whether or not it comes with a yarn about Lenin’s birthday, climate denial has this base affective logic. A plenitude of data suggests that humankind in a warming world divides itself into left and right. Poll after poll, questionnaire after questionnaire, one psychological experiment after another has showed that people ideologically affiliated with the right, happy with free markets and private property, tend to dispute the existence of the problem – or if not, downplay its severity – whereas those on the left fret about it.¹⁰⁵ This polarity is not reduced at higher levels of education. To the contrary, it is accentuated, right-wing people showing *less* concern about global warming the better equipped they are to absorb the science. A highly educated man of the right excels in screening out information that would ‘license restrictions on commerce and industry’, which seems to suggest that teach-ins for the rich would be actively counterproductive.¹⁰⁶ They don’t want to know and they know how to avoid it.

If commitment to the prevailing order trumps everything else, however, it has more foundations than class. In a seminal article from 2011, two leading experts on the denialist ISA noticed that most of its figureheads – Singer, Inhofe, Beck – were not only conservative but *white men*. Did the same pattern apply to the US public at large? Indeed, 59 per cent of conservative white men denied attribution, compared to 31 of all other adults; 65 per cent of the former believed that the media exaggerates global warming as against 30 of the latter, and so on. Rich more than poor, men more than women, whites more than non-whites rallied to the denialist pole, which could only be explained by their loyalty to a status quo that had been serving them well.¹⁰⁷ These findings have likewise been replicated, including on a global scale: in the early twenty-first century (again, before Bolsonaro) climate denial was a rarity in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, which registered high and rising levels of concern.¹⁰⁸ Such levels correlated negatively with GDP. If it were up to the average woman in Mozambique rather than reader of *Forbes*, truth-recognition would come easily.

All that psychic investment in the capitalist mode of production did not have to express itself in conspiracy theories – it could stick with the tumbling rocks of Dover or just sheer dismissive indifference – but they represented its sharpest edge or most sensitive antenna. For those who stood to lose most from a break with business-as-usual and were aware of it, if only subliminally, conspiracy theories about climate were attractive. The law of polarisation redoubled it. So did the mountains of evidence, pushing those who had chosen this path further and further along until they entered the far right, the natural habitat for conspiracy theories, the destination marked out by the rich man's cognitive mapping – after some crossing point, the only island where the facts of a rapidly warming world could be rigidly ignored. The fourth phase of denial was a kind of homecoming. It coincided with the rise of what has been called 'post-truth'. In the most creditable scholarly analysis to date, Lee McIntyre defines this as a condition where truth has been eclipsed and rendered politically irrelevant. Appeals to affect override respect for facts.¹⁰⁹ Anyone, including aspirants to the highest offices, can flourish patent untruths without paying a price for it. Whence this wantonness?

Recapitulating the history of what we have called the denialist ISA, McIntyre argues that it was organised climate denial that sowed the seeds of

post-truth and made it *de rigueur* to subordinate the outer world to one's own private gut. Cognitive bias, confirmation bias, motivated reasoning and the other psychological mechanisms that rule this condition were pioneered by 'oil interests', from their first encounter with the naked truth about fossil fuels. Decades of efforts to wave that truth away corroded political culture so thoroughly that it ended up at 'risk of being estranged from reality itself'.¹¹⁰ Denial of this one problem could have such a far-reaching effect because it concerned the material base of capital accumulation, unlike, for instance, Darwinian evolution, which some on the American right also denied. Only resistance against this particular truth could radiate into the daily tweets of Trump and his copycats: if you can lie about climate, you can lie about anything – the signature procedure of the far right.¹¹¹ Hence the AfD combined its climate freakshows in the Bundestag with tirades against the 'systematic discrimination of men' and the 'islamicised federal state of Germany'.¹¹² If there is merit to this analysis, it implies that *by reacting to climate science with denial, fossil capital not only smothered mitigation but also midwifed the contemporary far right* or at least assisted in its intellectual legitimation. The fourth phase of denial would be a logical extension of the first.

In this phase, however, the genre of conspiracy theory underwent a metastasis. Classical practitioners were hung up on their own punctiliously assembled facts. Light in their eyes, they would produce documents proving that the World Trade Center must have come down through controlled demolition, or point to visual anomalies in the images from the moon demonstrating that NASA staged the landings in studios, or write treatises striking down on every glitch in the official account of some murder; detectives who would never stop sniffing, they based their cases on data, if only errant data. But in the 2010s, fewer of them seemed to care to. In *A Lot of People Are Saying: The New Conspiracism and the Assault on Democracy*, a piercing inquiry into the epistemology of the contemporary far right, Russell Muirhead and Nancy L. Rosenblum argue that conspiracy is now rather alleged by 'bare assertion'. The birtherists, for instance, composed nothing like the filmography and literature on 9/11 made by the truthers. They were content with asserting that Obama was born in Kenya, or even just alluding to the possibility. When Trump claimed that Obama had tapped his phones, or that the media concealed Islamist terrorist attacks, he didn't bother to adduce anything that looked like evidence. The 'new

conspiracism’ proceeds by blurting out the plot and the hoax and nothing more. It satisfies itself ‘with a free-floating allegation disconnected from anything observable in the world’, to which it ‘pays no fealty’; instead of converting counterproof into proof, it dispenses with the question of proof altogether.¹¹³ It is even more untethered from reality than classical conspiracy theory, of which it is a degraded figure.

How, then, does the new conspiracism establish credibility? Not by pseudoscientific validation, but by *repetition*, and more precisely virtual repetition: the veracity of a statement is measured in the number of likes, retweets, threads and views it generates. Trump was wont to back up his accusations with the high number of sympathisers who agreed with them – ‘a lot of people are saying’ X or Y, hence it is true. This epistemology is obviously the making of social media. With its inbuilt character limit, Twitter is a machine for bare assertion or, if you will, for the most stripped-down, contentless interpellation: ‘Hey, you there!’ and very little else. But not every Twitter user interpellates her followers with talk of fake news and treasons. Muirhead and Rosenblum observe that new conspiracism – unlike, or so they claim, classical conspiracy theory – is a monopoly of the right, circulated as a cheap identity card for the insiders of a threatened nation. It is performed by winners, presidents included.¹¹⁴ It is also the most recent mode of climate fabulation. Inhofe managed to write a whole book on *The Greatest Hoax* and Sussman added to the library, but in the fourth phase, ‘hoax’ could be sufficient attestation in itself.¹¹⁵ Far-right denial mostly took the form of the barest assertion – theory as meme – but it wasn’t any less potent for that. It enhanced the replicability. Global heating exerts selective pressure on denialists; finding refuge in conspiracy theory was a first adaptation to the mountains of evidence, but as the space for denial became further circumscribed, taking flight in new conspiracism offered another, possibly safer way to survival.

Some of this progressing degradation was put on display by the conspiracist-in-chief when he returned to the topic of wind power. He took aim at those proposing that

we have an economy based on wind. I never understood wind. I know wind mills very much. I’ve studied it better than anybody and it’s very expensive ... They manufacture tremendous – if you’re into this – tremendous fumes, gases, are spewing into the atmosphere. We have a world, right? So the world is tiny compared to the universe. So tremendous amounts of fumes and everything – you talk about the carbon footprint – fumes are spewing into the air

... And if you own a house within visions of some of these monsters, your house is worth 50 per cent of the price. They're noisy, they kill the birds. You want to see a bird graveyard, you go take a look, go under a wind mill someday, you'll see more birds than you've ever seen ever in your life [laughter and applause from the audience of young conservatives in Florida] ... You know what they don't tell you about wind mills? After ten years, they look like hell. They start to get tired, old,

and so on.¹¹⁶ Trump must have here broken some sort of sound barrier. He so completely inverted the matter at hand that his discourse became devoid of substantive content and approximated guttural noise, although listeners could make out that it maintained a thematic relation to climate and paraded absolute contempt for the problem. In a sense, denial had here completed the circle, through conspiracy theory and new conspiracism into pure burbling. Rising temperatures could not extinguish it, apparently, only drive it into new rounds of speciation. But none of the old genera died out. As Muirhead and Rosenblum suggest, the denialist ISA has rather been confirmed by the new climate conspiracism, as when the reader of a story receives a nod of recognition from a by-passer; together, they have kept the narrative alive.¹¹⁷ A similar dialectic could be discerned at another point where the far right liked to convene: the theory of Cultural Marxism.

The Myth of Cultural Marxism

A spectre is haunting the far right: something it calls 'Cultural Marxism'. What is this ghoulish figure? What dark, malevolent forces does it channel into the world, and through what mediums? According to the theory, once the Russian Revolution had failed to spread to Western Europe, Lukács and Gramsci understood that some ramparts had to be removed: things like Western culture and the Christian religion.¹¹⁸ The proletariat was too deeply identified with these to rise up. In the 1920s, a coterie of Marxist academics, who happened to be – a not incidental detail – of Jewish origin, headed by Adorno, Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, formed the Frankfurt School to begin the work of breaking the ramparts down. They mixed in a bit of Freudian theory to also dissolve the traditional family and normal sexuality. They sought to uplift women, blacks, gays and assorted other minorities; instead of open class conflict, they pursued identity politics and 'political correctness'. When the Frankfurt School relocated to the US after

Hitler's seizure of power, it found itself in just the right place – next to Hollywood and the campuses – to implode the sleeping giant from within. America would be made communist through the spread of homosexuality, feminism, sexual liberation, atheism, the mixing of races and the hedonistic counter-culture of the 1960s. John Lennon was privy to the plot. Indeed, according to one strand of the theory, Adorno himself wrote all of the Beatles' lyrics.¹¹⁹ But the central contention is that Marxism initiated a 'long march through the institutions', worming its way through schools, universities, government bureaucracies, media, film studios, the fine arts, slowly but surely, to the point where the West would come undone. Just as in the left climate theory, an epochal defeat of the left – not in 1989, but in the years after 1917 – is here transformed into a devious project of world domination.

Replete with pseudo-factual paraphernalia and laboriously connected dots, this is a most classical conspiracy theory. It issues from the oldest one – the world suffers under secretive Jewish power – and more directly from Judeo-Bolshevism and its subheading *Kulturbolschewismus*, *idée fixe* of fascists in interwar Europe.¹²⁰ The chief populariser of the later iteration was William S. Lind, a paleoconservative white man and military strategist, who brought the details up to date with the early millennium. On the right of the established American right, with his own weekly TV show, articles in the *Marine Corps Gazette* and encounters with Donald Trump, he could send Cultural Marxism into wider channels of circulation. At a conference for Holocaust deniers in 2002, he felt sufficiently at home to raise the curtain on the true identity of the Frankfurt School conspirators: 'These guys were all Jewish.'¹²¹ Then the theory took on a life of its own.

In the 2010s, Cultural Marxism approached the status of a metatheory of the far right, popping up high and low, as all-inclusive scoop or the barest tribalist assertion. Over at Breitbart, it was the revealed truth. Before his death, the founder of the site, Andrew Breitbart, described his discovery of it as 'my one great epiphany, my one a-ha moment where I said, "I got it – I see what exactly happened in this country."'¹²² A top aide of Trump wrote a long memo on how the Frankfurt School had created a deep state 'beholden to no one', a cruel 'god bestriding the earth', now busy handing over the West not to communism but to Islam.¹²³ The largest party in the Netherlands, as of the 2019 elections, had the theory as an intellectual

fundament. Thierry Baudet tweeted about it – no doubts or qualms: the whole cock-and-bull-story about the Frankfurt School drawing up its masterplans – with the regularity of a muscle twitch. The European Union and mass immigration ranked highest among the Marxist achievements.¹²⁴ Baudet here learned from Paul Cliteur – supervisor of his PhD thesis, law professor at Leiden, signatory to CLINTEL and top party intellectual – who in 2018 published an anthology with a white man forced to drink a chalice of poison on the cover and a title translating as *Cultural Marxism: A Spectre Is Haunting Europe*.¹²⁵ A spectre indeed. It had perverted European culture with an overdose of compassion for oppressed groups. Intersectionality was its latest invention, with worries about ecology bundled into it.¹²⁶

The most revered internet guru of the right, psychology professor and self-help bestseller Jordan Peterson, bought into the idea too. In November 2016, he posted on his Facebook site an article headlined ‘Cultural Marxism Is Destroying America’, the first sentence of which ran: ‘Yet again an American city is being torn apart by black rioters.’ The events in question were taking place in Charlotte, North Carolina, after the killing of a black man by a police officer, which could only be explained by all the usual suspects from Gramsci onwards having established a ‘fifth column’ to foment sedition.¹²⁷ A go-to theory for explaining any malaise, it worked well without evidentiary elaboration. But the far-right corners of the web overflowed with material for those who wished to learn more. Here one could find some two hundred thousand YouTube videos on the topic of Cultural Marxism.¹²⁸ At the grandiloquent pole, again, was Breivik, who began his manifesto with an excerpt from Lind, plagiarised him repeatedly and used the term ‘Cultural Marxism’ and its derivatives more than six hundred times (‘Frankfurt School’ eighty-eight times, ‘Adorno’ twenty-six, ‘Marcuse’ twenty-five).¹²⁹ If Breivik targeted a Marxist gathering, others could choose a Jewish one. The perpetrator of the Pittsburgh synagogue shootings in October 2018, in which eleven people were killed during Shabbat prayers – the worst attack on the Jewish community in US history – spent his ample screen time on Gab, a ‘free speech’ network where Cultural Marxism was a favourite talking point. There he posted pictures of Jews trying to press the African continent into the EU and organising the

caravans of Central American migrants to the US. When he stormed into the synagogue, he screamed: ‘All Jews must die.’¹³⁰

More genteel in their manners, the leaders of the Sweden Democrats had to deal with yet another storm of criticism after they had, for the second time, declared that Swedish Jews would always prioritize their religion over their country. Mattias Karlsson thought the storm was whipped up by ‘cosmopolitans’ and ‘Cultural Marxists’, and in the spring of 2019, he announced that he would step down from his post as the parliamentary leader of the SD to build a new think tank with the mission to ‘poke a stick into the Cultural-Marxist hornet’s nest’.¹³¹ Immonen and Halla-aho of the PS and the SS were fervent believers.¹³² But these parties could still only dream of the influence exerted by their brothers in Brazil. The theory of Cultural Marxism became a pillar of the Bolsonaro government. Jair, his sons and foreign minister Araújo had their own internet guru in Olavo de Carvalho, another disgruntled white man, who, from his desk in Virginia, spoke to the nation through a thousand screens. A pipe dangling from his mouth, with an air of enviable erudition, he looked deep into the eyes of his followers and revealed to them the secrets of the Cultural Marxist plot to control Brazil. The theory was here adapted to the vitriolic demonisation of Lula’s and Dilma’s Workers’ Party. During its years in power, de Carvalho beamed his profound explanations of communist depravity into the hearts of true white and Christian men and women. He had a background as an astrologist. He would not accept evidence of heliocentrism. At the centre of Cultural Marxism was the artifice of climate change, and oh, Adorno wrote all the Beatles’ lyrics.¹³³

In the fourth most populous nation on earth, Olavo de Carvalho attained an oracular, Rasputin-like status few intellectuals in the world came close to: Bolsonaro gave his victory speech on the election night with a book by the man in front of him. Araújo and other ministers appear to have been picked directly by de Carvalho.¹³⁴ The former credited him with having single-handedly broken the ‘psycho-political control system’ of Cultural Marxism, as maintained by Lula and Dilma – ‘nothing short of a miracle’.¹³⁵ Here the anti-communism of the military dictatorship was revived but, unlike in the 1960s and ’70s, without anything like communism on the horizon, giving it a strangely psychedelic quality. It was anti-

communism on mushrooms, a degraded figure of the class struggles of the twentieth century after they had fizzled out into the crisis of the biosphere.

Protean in the extreme, Cultural Marxism can swim back and forth between classical theory and new conspiracism. It does not have to come with the full package of fantasies. Not everyone who uses the term will also retell the Frankfurt story or know about William S. Lind, just as belief in 'Islamisation' does not require knowledge of Bat Ye'or and her elucubrations. Evasiveness can be a protective layer.¹³⁶ Baudet and Peterson maintained an air of smartness potentially vitiated by the claim that Adorno wrote all the lyrics to the Beatles' songs. Men like them could vacate the theory of narrative content and turn it into a series of formal equivalences: Cultural Marxism *is* Political Correctness *is* Multiculturalism *is* Feminism *is* Communism, all promoted by the same left which – the irreducibly conspiratorial core – controls cultural life. With its capacious accommodation of everything the far right dislikes, the theory is permeable, open to cross-fertilisation with George Soros and Eurabia and the Great Replacement. Eclecticism can ensure reproduction. But Cultural Marxism also works as a tightly packed prism, through which negative developments are rendered as epiphenomena of a single force pulling the levers of history in the wrong direction.¹³⁷ It has been called an 'instrument of intersectional hate', turned against Black Lives Matter, abortion laws, Pope Francis, Hollywood films with a trace of an anti-capitalist message (*Elysium*) or multiracial casts (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens*) – all of this and much more, at one point or another, pressed through the prism.¹³⁸

And pressed was also, of course, the climate. The left climate theory was a product of 1989, but conjointly with Cultural Marxism, it was relaunched in a more pungent form in the 2010s. The natural step for someone like James Delingpole, the man who gave the world 'Climategate', was to transition from the *Telegraph* and *Forbes* to Breitbart, where he became an anti-climate correspondent, telling his readers that the 'scare' had been invented to 'destroy Western liberal civilisation' as part of a war started by 'the Cultural Marxists of the 1930s Frankfurt School'.¹³⁹ The take of the green nationalists would be that Cultural Marxism has arrogated ecology to itself and must be kicked out of it.¹⁴⁰ Much more common was a monobloc fury against both, so that someone who believed in the theory would typically also deny climate change – Jordan Peterson

being another case – and denialist parties feel confirmed in their desire to revive forgotten languages.¹⁴¹ The AfD denounced the Greens as ‘crypto-communist decomposers of the fatherland’.¹⁴² Into the halls of COP25 in Madrid in late 2019, Vox sent a small delegation to ‘keep a close eye on the extreme left’, which supposedly ran the summit as a religious service issuing new edicts for ‘how we should live, what we can eat and which industries can prosper’.¹⁴³ But the truly novel element in the late 2010s was the emergence of a climate movement as a real political force, if not yet quite a revolutionary subject. It prodded conspiracy theorists to exercise their cells again. From early 2019, they focused on the person of Greta Thunberg.

If Thunberg’s homeland came late to the school strikes, only joining in big numbers in the autumn of 2019, it was quicker to produce food for the thought of her enemies. After she had returned from the Extinction Rebellion actions that shut down parts of London in the spring, Jimmie Åkesson told Swedish media that ‘she doesn’t do this on her own. This’, referring to the strikes, ‘is not a campaign she has initiated spontaneously. It is obvious if you follow social media that this is not something that has spread out of sheer coincidence – it is staged.’¹⁴⁴ If you follow social media: supporters of the SD had a good idea about whom precisely to suspect. A few weeks later, a report spread through the middle ranks of the party that Greta Thunberg was on the payroll of George Soros and chaperoned by an agent with a suitably Jewish-sounding surname. From south to north, party chapters disseminated the theory – meme, rather – on Twitter and Facebook.¹⁴⁵ Their leaders refrained from making the Jewish connection in public statements, but stepped up the attacks on Thunberg and felt emboldened in their denial. ‘You will see that this is all a great climate hoax,’ Björn Söder commented on the world’s most famous Swede, by now speaking for the party consistently polling as the country’s largest.¹⁴⁶ It readied for government rule, in alliance with the two main conservative parties. (Soon after the election in 2018, Antonia Ax:son Johnson of *Axess* broke the *cordon sanitaire* by arguing that normal bourgeois parties should accept the SD as a partner in power that would do no harm to Swedish business. The business daily agreed.¹⁴⁷ One year later, this was indeed the new political bloc poised to take over, Sweden moving with the plates of the continent.)

Wherever the name of Greta Thunberg travelled, the right had to make sense of her and the movement she represented, and it worked with two versions of one theory: that she was a puppet on the string of Soros or of the Marxists. The *Spectator* considered her a ‘proxy’ for ‘those on the Left who seek to use climate alarmism to further their war on global capitalism’.¹⁴⁸ A Fox News pundit called her a ‘mentally ill child’ used as a stooge by ‘the international left’. When she tweeted that ‘the climate crisis is not just about the environment’, since ‘colonial, racist and patriarchal systems of oppression have created and fuelled it’, a sprightly James Delingpole had all his suspicions confirmed: ‘The teenage Climate Puppet has gone full Marxist.’¹⁴⁹ One could peruse articles with headlines such as ‘Marxists Hope to Take Over the World by Terrifying Children about Climate Change’.¹⁵⁰

On the other note, one AfD branch in Bavaria (of all provinces) created a montage with the face of Thunberg next to that of Soros and two devilish yellow eyes in the dark, under the headline ‘The Power behind It’.¹⁵¹ More widespread became a picture purporting to show a smiling Soros putting his arms around her. It was a doctored photo from her meeting with Al Gore. As she took the world stage, photo-shopped pictures of Thunberg became a free-floating conspiracist subgenre of its own: Thunberg as the tip of an iceberg made up of Soros; Thunberg crying in the arms of an ISIS soldier; Thunberg eating lunch on a train passing by starving children, this one shared by Eduardo Bolsonaro.¹⁵² (There was also a picture of Thunberg dressed in a t-shirt with the text ‘Antifascist All Stars’, proof that she was an antifa terrorist. That photo was authentic. Participating in rallies against Nazi marches in Sweden, Thunberg was a committed anti-fascist, although not a member of Antifascist Action.) The country where this theorising flied highest, however, was, true to form, Hungary.

The government of Viktor Orbán had not said much about the climate before spring 2019. But as the school strikes took off, it developed a keen interest in the issue: behold, Soros and the left have found a new stake on which to impale the Hungarian nation and leave it for refugees to consume.¹⁵³ From Fidesz media, there came a downpour of analysis of this *klimakommunizmus*. The strikers had been paid by Soros; when they marched in Budapest, their ranks were made up of ‘foreigners’; duped by the ‘fecal ideology’ of Bolshevism, these kids would have been better off

had they gone straight for the Kabbalah or the prayer to Mecca. The ‘climate hysteria’ itself had no scientific foundations.¹⁵⁴ But the novelty of 2019 was the shift in focus from science to movement, and the latter could also, in turn, be implicated in the *impacts* of climate breakdown. If this is a hoax perpetrated by enemies of the people, might they not be organising all these extreme weather events?

In 2019, one SD representative in Umeå, the largest city in Sweden’s north, submitted a series of theories about the wildfires that struck the country – not in the summer, but in the exceptionally hot and dry month of April. Linking them to Notre Dame, he tried out the theory that Islamists had lit the fires, or perhaps antifa terrorists. Eventually he settled on ‘a group of climate activists doing this to fan the flames of climate hysteria’, the climate movement being ‘a religious fanatical doomsday cult’.¹⁵⁵ Earlier, the grapevines of Swedish-Democratic social media had also spread the theory that the water shortages on Öland were in fact caused by asylum-seekers and, more specifically, Muslims who overconsumed water because they washed themselves five times per day before praying.¹⁵⁶ Trump claimed that the figure of three thousand Puerto Rican casualties from Hurricane Maria was confected by Democrats to make him look bad; the real number was in the range of ‘6 to 18’.¹⁵⁷ After the inferno in the Amazon, Jair Bolsonaro informed the world that it was Leonardo DiCaprio who had ignited it. The theory was that the American actor had paid NGOs to set the rainforest on fire and then take pictures to blacken the image of Brazil; asked for evidence, the president said that there could be ‘no written plan’, as ‘that’s not how it’s done’.¹⁵⁸ In a rather fascinating imaginative leap, Bolsonaro and Salles were also in the habit of referring to Brazilian environmentalism as ‘Shiite ecologist activism’ or ‘eco-Shiites’, as though it was Shia Islam that had descended on the nation to deny it the riches of the Amazon.¹⁵⁹ Insofar as the climate movement mobilises greater strength in the years ahead, we should expect more of this to come; with or without it, the impacts will continue to feed the far-right imagination.

One of the ironies here – more eerie than amusing – is that few thinkers have analysed the profile of this sludge with greater precision than the Jewish Marxist the contemporary far right loves to hate the most, namely Adorno. The more communism ‘is emptied of any specific content, the more it is being transformed into a receptacle for all kinds of hostile

projections, many of them on an infantile level somehow reminiscent of evil forces in comic strips’, he wrote in *The Authoritarian Personality*.¹⁶⁰ But the receptacle is arguably emptier today than in the 1940s. ‘The less it is able to exercise a Marxist dominance over the situation, the more the dominance of Marxism is made responsible for every misfortune’, noticed antifascist Richard Löwenthal – but that was in 1935.¹⁶¹ As the radioactive decay from the Russian Revolution proceeds, perhaps already past half-time, the fantasy of Marxist devilry rather appears to radiate brighter again. That paradox can be explained by the depth of revolutionary problems, for which the status quo cannot take responsibility and which do not yet have a matching subject: Marxism must be recruited as a revenant to fill the gap.¹⁶²

A break with reality is forced by this situation. ‘Fascist propaganda’, Adorno wrote in 1946, drawing from empirical studies of far-right demagogues on the US West Coast, ‘attacks bogies rather than real opponents, that is to say, it builds up an *imagery* of the Jew, or of the Communist, and tears it to pieces, without caring much how this imagery is related to reality.’ He observed an ‘amazing stereotypy’ among the agitators he listened to. In their radio talks, sidewalk speeches and pamphlets, they repeated a small number of clichés and worked up a monotonous innuendo – ‘for example, the agitator says “those dark forces, you know whom I mean”, and the audience at once understands that his remarks are directed against the Jews.’ The listeners are ‘getting the inside dope, taken into confidence, treated as of the elite who deserve to know the lurid mysteries hidden from outsiders’.¹⁶³ It can be a gratifying experience. Addictive, it locks the insiders into a ‘“closed system” of delusions’ that tend to ‘“run wild”, that is to say, make themselves completely independent from interaction with reality’.¹⁶⁴ The ticket into this loop is unconditional fidelity to an unsustainable status quo. Because the chaos cannot be comprehended as the product of the system itself, it must be projected onto an external enemy, whose elimination would restore order: the anti-Semite is fuelled by a ‘spiteful adherence to the existent’.¹⁶⁵ He subsumes initiatives to change under the general heading of foreignness. In reality, the hated outgroups are ‘objectively *weaker* than the groups whom they supposedly threaten’, but so it must be; had they been stronger, the haters would have the status quo in sight. From this point, there is little to rein them in. ‘As soon as prejudice in

any amount is allowed to enter a person's manifest ways of thinking, the scales weigh heavily in favour of an *ever-increasing expansion* of his prejudice.'¹⁶⁶ Of this expansion, if it continues unopposed, there will eventually be victims.

Two factors make the edges of the present conform closer to this profile than that of Adorno's own post-war years: the enormity of the crisis and the completeness of the capitalist victory over any socialist challenges (at a closer look, one and the same thing). Under their pressure, there develops that 'complex of "psychotic" thinking which appears to be a crucial characteristic of the fascist character'.¹⁶⁷ The orators Adorno studied in California were in the wrong place at the wrong time; the moment when they could approach real power had yet to come. He would have recognised a Baudet, an Åkesson, a de Carvalho. On the other hand, this might mean that we have less to do with post-truth or new conspiracism or any other neologism meant to keep up with the degradation than with that old *potential for fascism* that so worried Adorno.¹⁶⁸ And this is not, as we shall see, the last facet of our problems anticipated and illuminated with inimitable clarity by Adorno.

These, then, are some of the ideas with which the far right enters the rapidly warming world of the 2020s and beyond: palindefence and sometimes palingenesis; veneration of the stock and deprecation of the flow; the theories of the left climate conspiracy and Cultural Marxism. We have dwelt on these ideas at some length because they provide mythical energies to the far right, with which it, so to speak, crashes into this warming world. The danger of fossil fascism is the danger that such ideas become much more dominant. In this salmagundi, intellectual coherence is not the highest ideal, but nor are the component parts mutually exclusive. It is evidently possible to believe in all those things simultaneously, and they may well reinforce one another: we have to defend ourselves again; we must take what is ours out of the ground; the enemy is Marxist and Muslim and Jewish and here comes his next attack, and so on.¹⁶⁹ But it would be far too simplistic to say that such estrangement from reality serves only the interests of primitive fossil capital. The scandalous truth of climate breakdown throws much wider sets of privileges into question, notably those pertaining to whiteness.