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# Red Pill: The Structure of Contemporary Apocalypse

Abstract: Taking apocalypse literally as "uncovering" this paper talks about contemporary apocalypse as a collection of narratives uncovering a range of conspiracies such as white genocide and the Great Replacement, the New World Order, incels and feminism, and the COVID hoax. These cohere into a movement often referred to as Alt-Right where a feature of practice is to uncover types of thinking and forms of 'truth' that are supposedly suppressed, such as race science. The lead metaphor for this generation of conspiracy thinking is the "red pill" metaphor from the film *The Matrix*. This metaphor—ingestion of a sacrament—also ties the movement to religion and the traditional context of apocalypse. Addressing this dominant reading of apocalypse the paper goes on to explain how these conspiracies are responses to ontological precarity and the perceived collapse of a world. The paper uses the work of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Lacan to show how challenges to the dominant social structure—challenges based in gender, "race", sexuality and conceptions of white privilege—undermine a sense of a "world", causing anxiety and violence as individuals and groups seek to secure themselves through aggressive forms of self-expansion in the face of supposedly annihilating threats.

Keywords: Alt-Right, anxiety, world, Heidegger, Žižek

## Red Pill: The Structure of Contemporary Apocalypse

The last decade has seen a resurgence of far-right politics that draws together a range of affiliations including nationalism, ethno-nationalism, Christian (or religious) conservatism, and neo-fascism. What is

perhaps most concerning, however, is the way the aims and motivations of the far-right have started to dovetail with mainstream conservatism, where 'race', immigration, and the opposition to multiculturalism have played significant roles in the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum. We can also see the alignment in the way the media regularly deploys terms like 'cancel culture' and 'wokeism' to delegitimise calls for equality and social justice. In the US, this resurgence is most evident in the rise of the 'Alt-Right,' a name that emerged from a lecture delivered by paleo-conservative Paul Gottfried in 2008, entitled 'The Decline and Rise of the Alternative Right'. *AlternativeRight* was then used in 2010 by the neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, Gottfried's protégé, as the name for his website, before 'Alt-Right' became the accepted abbreviation. According to Mike Wendling (2018), paleo-conservatives oppose immigration and multiculturalism 'and are strict traditionalists when it comes to gender, ethnicity, race and social order' (17–18). In particular, it is the perceived naturalness of a racial order with white people at the top that is the central philosophy for those who adopt this affiliation. Along with the racism, Islamophobia and white supremacy, they also support a politics that is patriarchal, heteronormative, aristocratic, eugenic, libertarian and anti-social. Those who are allegiant, but do not explicitly stipulate the importance of white supremacy, are referred to as 'Alt-Lite' (Hawley 2019; Wendling 2018; Neiwert 2017), but for the reasons set out above, I prefer to use the more general term 'radical right' because of how the views of the Alt-Right/Lite have increasingly found their way from the margins into mainstream politics.

This resurgence has also taken the form of an awakening where people claim to be in possession of a revelation.[1] This revelation positions adherents as heroic defenders of the West, but I will argue it rather reveals the fragility at the core of the radical right's identification. Amongst the broader movement, this awakening is expressed in the metaphor of the 'red pill'. This is a reference to the scene in *The Matrix* where Morpheus offers Neo the chance to leave the constructed world in which he exists and see reality as it actually is. Offering him his open hand on which he has placed a blue pill and a red pill, Morpheus tells Neo: "You take the blue pill… the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill…you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes" (Wachowskis, 1999) Neo, of course, takes the red pill and wakes up to find himself in a cocoon where he is being used as a battery—his life force generates energy—for a world now run and completely controlled by machines.[2] To say that you have taken the 'red pill' or to declare oneself 'red-pilled' is therefore to announce a dual uncovering. The first is to be in possession of a new vision or way of see-

**1** Most recently, these revelatory politics have been seen in the disinformation claiming the COVID pandemic is either a fraud or was intentionally manufactured and is an attempt by a world government to control people. In response, users of social media take to the greatest tool of corporate and government micro-surveillance yet invented, the mobile phone, to tell others that the vaccination is a nefarious means to track and monitor an unthinking, soporific population.

**2** The curious thing about the adoption of the 'red pill' metaphor by a political movement that advocates traditional gender relations is that *The Matrix* was made by two trans women, and the film has been widely interpreted as a trans allegory. This was made even more evident in the fourth film in the franschise, *The Matrix Resurrections*, directed by Lana Wachowski, where the red pill leads to an explicit rejection of heteronormativity and the nuclear family.

ing and an array of supposedly esoteric or secret knowledge. Given that the literal meaning of apocalypse—*apokaluptein*—is to uncover or reveal, this form of politics is decidedly apocalyptic.

However, this is only one aspect of this apocalyptic culture. The second is closely linked to the more common understanding of apocalypse derived from the Book of Revelation, which tells of the end of the world. In the various tributaries that feed into the dark waters of the radical right, each one contains some element of a world-ending scenario. Even in the most recent COVID conspiracies that speak of an end to liberty and the death of freedom, those opposed to the vaccine have adopted a deeply anti-Semitic trope and likened it to the holocaust. They attire themselves in a Star of David as if the mild inconvenience they experience from governments trying to prevent a deadly disease is equivalent to the persecution and genocide experienced by Jewish people in the first half of the twentieth century. The religious overtones of this aspect of contemporary apocalypse are also evident in the metaphor of the 'red pill' which signifies both a sacrament and a communion, as well as a transition or transformation that are central to all sacred practices. To be 'red-pilled' is to share in a communal uncovering of dangerous—if not actually evil—forces that threaten the annihilation of worlds.

To understand this, and to explain the structure of contemporary apocalypse, this paper has three parts. The first looks at the political structure and describes the most dominant narrative of the red-pill apocalypse. While this alt-universe comprises a host of stories and theories, the issues of 'race' and gender provide the two primary pillars of this particular apocalypse. However, due to the limit on what can be adequately discussed here, this part of the paper focuses specifically on the politics of 'race' and ethnicity. The second part introduces the ontological structure of the red pill apocalypse. This is because while many of these apocalyptic narratives contain elements of physical collapse or decay, they are primarily concerned with the loss of a world conceived as a *way of life*. To understand the significance of losing such a world we will need to follow Martin Heidegger to consider this making and unmaking of the 'world'. This will also require some brief consideration of how Heidegger's own apocalyptic thought combined with his anti-Semitism lead to his greatest failing in identifying with National Socialism.[3] Finally, while part two will help us understand the general anxiety experienced by the red pill community, the third part on the psychological structure allows us to arrive at the particular core of this apocalyptic fantasy. Using the work of Jacques Lacan, the paper focuses on the nature of imaginary identification, especially identification with the supremacy, entitlement and supposed merit

**3** In volume 15 of the black notebooks, as part of a discussion of 'globalism,' Heidegger evokes a view of 'World-Judaism' very similar to the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory known as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. He writes: "World-Judaism, incited by the emigrants allowed out of Germany, cannot be held fast anywhere and, with all its developed power, does not need to participate anywhere in the activities of war, whereas all that remains to us is the sacrifice of the best blood of the best of our own people" (2017b, 208).

of the white man that is so threatened by progressive political advances. Ultimately, it will show that rather than being heroic, the red pill apocalypse is, to borrow a phrase from Maurice Blanchot, disappointing (1997, 101). It claims to be daring but manifests merely fragility and resentment.

## Political Structure

The politics of the radical right is dominated by a range of apocalyptic narratives and scenarios, variations of which appear every day on Conservative 'news' outlets such as Fox News, Newsmax, and TruNews. The examples are far too numerous to list but a couple from 2019 that epitomise the apocalyptic nature of this kind of politics—in both senses of uncovering and annihilating—will help elucidate the problem. In March 2019 on *The Laura Ingraham Podcast*, Dr. Paul Nathanson was asked to comment on the issue of trans rights. He noted how radical the goal of such a politics is, saying 'We're not talking about people who want to simply do a bit of reform here and there, add a new category. They want…they must, in fact, destroy whatever is in order to replace it with what they think should be.'[4] He concluded that the ultimate goal of trans activists is to 'use social engineering to create a new species' that will be part human, part machine. A little later in that year Pastor Rick Wiles on TruNews warned about the devastating consequences of veganism, in particular innovations such as vegan 'meat'. Claiming God to be 'an environmentalist' who wants everything just as he created it, Wiles concludes: 'He created this planet, he created the universe and he's watching these Luciferians destroy this planet, destroy the animal kingdom, destroy the plant kingdom, change human DNA. Why? They want to change human DNA so that you can't be born again. That's where they're going with this, to change the DNA of humans so it will be impossible for a human to be born again. They want to create a race of soulless creatures on this planet' (Mehta 2019).

There is, of course, nothing new in the apocalyptic ravings of Christian conservatives in the US. In fact, the culture as a whole remains deeply apocalyptic. Even the most dominant and mainstream narrative of American identity ascribes to a theological interpretation know as Millennialism. This has two versions. Post-Millennialism proposes that the US is the Kingdom of God and has a moral and spiritual obligation to extend that Kingdom throughout the globe. This is what is known as American 'manifest destiny,' and is ascribed to by liberals and conservatives alike. The other version, Pre-Millennialism, is primarily the domain of Christian conservatism and claims the Kingdom of God will only come after a final

**4** https://www.newsweek.com/laura-ingraham-podcast-trans-people-species-machine-paul-nathanson-1377906

and devastating confrontation with Satan after which the chosen will be redeemed following the second coming of Jesus (Melling 1999; Northcott 2004). Rather worryingly, this version sees destruction, calamity and violence as positive signs heralding the final conflagration and our salvation.

Although elements of this vision remain part of the structure of contemporary apocalypse the current version takes on a particularly racial configuration of nation where being 'red pilled' opens ones eyes to the dangers of democracy with its commitment to multiculturalism and racial equality. Central to the apocalypse of the radical right, then, is the narrative of 'white genocide'. This has been an important aspect of white supremacist apocalypse since the inception of the early movement, coming to a head in the white power movement of the 1980s who proposed migration to the Northwest of the US in search of a white homeland. At the time, in the words of Robert Miles, leader of the white power congregation, Mountain Church, they were seeking '"a sanctuary for our Folk … since we are an endangered species in America"' (Belew 2018, 162). Taking this sentiment even further, Order leader Bob Mathews wrote in the epigraph of James Coates's book *Armed and Dangerous: The Rise of the Survivalist Right*: '"We are the legions of the damned […]. The army of the already dead" (Belew 2018, 224). Here we can hear echoes of the 'one drop' mantra of 19th-century white supremacists who argued "any non-white ancestor fundamentally alters all lineal descendants for evermore" (Wendling 2018, 44).

In keeping with their bid to prevent any further contamination to either biology or culture they also believe "diversity is code for white genocide" (Wendling 2018, 78), a key point that has put them at odds with traditional conservatism due to its "hesitancy to engage directly with the issue of race […], which the Alt-Right consider existential" (Hawley 2019, 164). And by existential here they primarily mean the dissolution of a white *world* premised on white supremacy and 'European' values (with 'European' being another marker for a putative white civilization). However, traditional conservatism has become increasingly less reluctant to make race an issue, as was seen in Trump's 2016 victory and the rhetoric of the Brexit campaign, which was premised almost entirely on the negative effects of immigration and the wonders of Britain in the age of Empire. Although the Alt-Right affiliates are often not Christian (as many of the earlier movement were) or are anti-religion, the broader politics of the radical right has emerged from a post-Cold War world where the identification of Islamism as the new enemy has provided "a bridge issue with the evangelical right" (Belew 2018, 188).

Firmly established as a continuation of this early heritage, the contemporary variant has been encouraged by two relatively recent far-right publications that have come out of France: Guillaume Faye's *The Colonization of Europe* and Renaud Camus's more recent *The Great Replacement*. These two books have gained significant celebrity and have been central to the resurgence and mainstreaming of far-right thought. Although less extreme than the one-drop mantra of 19th century white supremacism, Camus' theory nevertheless evokes both cultural and biological replacement. In a lecture from 2010, he argued:

> Faced with the tight cohorts of the Great Replacement, we must assert ever more firmly our will to keep our culture, our language of course, our way of life and our way of being, our religion or what is left of it, our landscapes or, what remains of them, our laws, our mores, our habits, our cuisine, our freedoms. France has always been open to those who wished to join her out of love, admiration, a sincere desire to merge with her spirit and her mode of existence on earth. On the contrary, she must be closing down completely, and she should have done it a long time ago, to those who would pretend to reestablish on its soil the type of society they left behind. (2010, 27–28)

Although there is a sense here that Camus remains open in some way to migration—at least for those who agree to total assimilation—he nevertheless refers to migration as a form of "counter-colonization" (32) and that "in the face of the colonization underway there is no indigenous people anymore" (24). This idea of the death or erasure of an indigenous culture—while itself a myth—has been a powerful rallying cry for right wing populists in North America and across Europe.[5]

While the sources and causes of far-right resurgence are numerous, the event that breathed new life into these very old hatreds in the US was the election of Barack Obama. As David Neiwert has noted, "The gradual coalescence of the alternative-universe worldviews of conspiracists, Patriots, white supremacists, Tea Partiers, and nativists occurred after the election of the first black president, in 2008" (2017, 231). For Carol Anderson, his election represented "the ultimate advancement" of black America, "and thus the ultimate affront" (2017, 5) to assumptions of white supremacy. In the words of Don Black, a leading figure in the Alt-Right, "White people, for a long time, have thought of our government as being for us, and Obama is the best possible evidence that we've lost that" (Neiwert 2017, 90). In Anderson's excellent analysis in *White Rage*, this was the manifestation of white supremacy's greatest fear, and something it has been fighting

**5** This myth, at least in the UK, was seriously dented when DNA testing on the oldest skeleton ever to be found on the British Isles indicated his skin would have been very dark (McKie 2018).

against since slavery was abolished in the US in 1865. It is, of course, not a coincidence that this was the same year the Ku Klux Klan was founded as a reactionary attempt to reclaim what had supposedly been lost, and counter any challenge to a world based on white superiority.[6]

Almost 150 years later, while it skirted around such explicit racism, the Brexit campaign and decision by the UK to leave the EU was also based on the desire to recover what was said to have been lost — or actively erased — namely Britain's greatness. In this, a very specific interpretation of World War 2 and a particularly ethnic representation of nation took centre stage, one that had become its own cultural industry. As Paul Gilroy explains: "Revisiting the feeling of victory in war supplies the best evidence that Britain's endangered civilization is in progressive motion toward its historic completion" (2005, 88). He goes on to argue that the war has "totemic power" and carries "the status of an ethnic myth" that makes "it a privileged point of entry into national identity and self-understanding [and] reveals a desire to find a way back to the point where national culture [was] both comprehensible and habitable" (89). In this dominant interpretation of Britain and Britishness, immigrants "represent the involution of national culture [and] the perceived dangers of pluralism" (90). Encapsulating the ontological precarity I will outline in part 2, Gilroy claims that when "the history of the empire became a source of discomfort, shame, and perplexity, its complexities and ambiguities were readily set aside. Rather than work through those feelings, that unsettling history was diminished, denied, and then, if possible, actively forgotten" (90).

He continues by saying the "invitation to revise and reassess often triggers a chain of defensive argumentation that seeks firstly to minimize the extent of the empire, then to deny or justify its brutal character, and finally, to present the British themselves as the ultimate tragic victims of their extraordinary imperial successes" (94). The logic is that Britain brought civilization to other countries only for the inhabitants of those countries to return to Britain and destroy the very civilization the British had gifted them; and British citizens from former colonies and more recent migrants "carry all the ambivalence of empire with them. They project it into the unhappy consciousness of their fearful and anxious hosts" (100). Ultimately, Gilroy explains, this "melancholic pattern has become the mechanism that sustains the unstable edifice of increasingly brittle and empty national identity" (106).

This anxiety experienced in the unmaking of a (white) world is also discussed in Sivamohan Valluvan's book on race and nation in Britain. For him, the political orientation of conservatism and projects like Brexit is to



**6** According to Anderson (2017), the history of US domestic policy can be written as a series of attempts to undermine any and every advance made by people of colour. From the immediate overturning of the 1865 Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands, created by Congress to lease forty-acre plots of abandoned plantations to former slaves, to the Black Codes that required African Americans to "sign annual labor contracts with plantation, mill, or mine owners" (19) who could be charged with vagrancy or auctioned off if they refused, US courts and state legislatures did everything to reassert what they saw as the natural racial hierarchy. These Codes, that effectively prevented free movement or freed slaves was an attempt to interrupt "black flight", which, according to Anderson, "threatened much more than the economic foundation of a feudal society; African Americans' determination to achieve their full potential endangered the legalistic, biological, and philosophical tenets of a racially oppressive system" (54). In other words, "the whole culture of the white South was erected on the presumption of black inability" (54).

"look into the past for the promise of the future" (Valluvan 2019, 98). Here, the past is mediated by an image of "edifying and homogenous whiteness" (100). In this process, "Empire and the histories of the colonial order intrinsic to it become [...] non-negotiable objects of nationalist recall" (113) that provide a form of "solace" (113) in the face of a world that has slowly been unmade through the dual processes of imperial decline and immigration. As a reactionary attempt to recover something akin to an antediluvian age this project must also "readmit the validity of white supremacy's various propositions" (113). Ultimately, for Valluvan, a "pivot towards the Second World War circumvents the ghosts of colonial brutality that otherwise threaten to haunt Britain's past" (114). Not only then does World War 2 stand as a historical marker of previous British greatness, understood as Empire, the fact that this was a time that Britain fought Nazism enables the mythologists of this time to focus on the goodness of Britain and cast out these ghosts that haunt the national imagination. For Valluvan this is "a British monumentalisation of self as a moral authority" (115). As such, it should be clear how a project like Brexit protects adherents from the unmaking of their world.

## Ontological Structure

To understand the foreboding and doom-laden vision of the red pill apocalypse we need to have a sense of how the world and our place in it can feel so precarious. To do this, it is helpful to follow Heidegger's thinking. This is for a couple of reasons. The first is because he talks about the world as a 'referential totality' (1962, 99), that is, a set of meanings that organise, maintain, and legitimise our thoughts and actions; or that 'which constitutes significance' (160). Everything I do in my everyday activities while at work or at leisure *refers* to a collection of aims, purposes, goals, reasons, and rationales that warrant that behaviour and through which they makes sense. I will say more about this very shortly, but his analysis is helpful in the first instance because Heidegger understands the world as an interpretive project through which we make sense of ourselves and of the life we live. However, as an interpretive project our world is always susceptible to being questioned, challenged or rejected.

The second reason for using Heidegger's analysis is because he himself fell prey to the projecting fantasies of apocalypse and it is important to consider why this might be. His apocalyptic thinking was made eminently manifest in his interview with *Der Spiegel* in 1966 where he concluded that in the face of the crisis of technicity the "only possibility available to us is

that by thinking and poetizing we prepare a readiness for the appearance of a god" (1981, 57). In fact, his apocalyptic resignation was pronounced enough for him to add that "at best we can *awaken* a readiness to wait" (57, my italics). His fatal error was, of course, to have seen something like this stirring in National Socialism, so it is important to briefly consider this matter so that we don't repeat it. It could be proposed that Heidegger was so fearful of the nihilism he saw in the calculating instrumentality of modernity that he accidentally ended up supporting a movement that became the most crystallised version of it. However, his anti-Semitism clearly makes this untenable because of how clearly he connected this calculating instrumentality to Judaism. In volume 8 of the 'black notebooks' he writes: "One of the most concealed forms of the *gigantic* [a term Heidegger used for global technicity], and perhaps the oldest, is a tenacious facility in calculating, manipulating, and interfering; through this facility the worldlessness of Judaism receives its ground" (2017a, 76).[7] He went even further in volume 14 where he explains the entire conflict with England in terms of world-Judaism:

> Why are we recognizing so late that England in truth is, and can be, *without* the Western outlook? It is because we will only henceforth grasp that England started to institute the *modern* world, but that modernity in its essence is directed toward the unleashing of the machination of the entire globe. Even the thought of an agreement with England, in the sense of a division of the imperialistic 'franchises,' does not touch the essence of the historical process which England is now playing out to the end within Americanism and Bolshevism and thus at the same time within world-Judaism. The question of the role of *world-Judaism* is not a racial question, but a metaphysical one, a question that concerns the kind of human existence which in an *utterly unrestrained* way can undertake as a world-historical "task" the uprooting of all beings from being (2017b, 191).

The problem was that he believed American capitalism and Soviet communism were two versions of this calculating instrumentality that reduced being (and hence all beings) to an exploitable "standing reserve" (1977, 19). As a result, he believed they were occluding a more authentic way of being that, he argued, Germany was specifically tasked with revealing. For Heidegger, challenging this precursor to the globalism that remains the *bête noir* of the radical right was *the* task at hand. Connecting this nihilism to Judaism clearly contributed to his terrible decision, but other elements no doubt contributed. He took a fatalistic view of history as that

**7** This connection is repeated in volume 12 where Heidegger writes: "the occasional increase in the power of Judaism is grounded in the fact that Western metaphysics, especially in its modern evolution, offered the point of attachment for the expansion of an otherwise empty rationality and calculative capacity" (2017b, 37).

which is sent or destined. This is something specifically worked through in *The Principle of Reason* in relation to the concept of *Geschick* (1991, 61–63). As such, Heidegger continually spoke about the need to be *attentive* to an event suggestive of a new epoch. The problem was he mistook the event of National Socialism for something that it wasn't. However, as Slavoj Žižek (1999) has argued, this was not in spite of his philosophy but because of it. His rejection of the ontic in favour of the ontological, most famously worked out in *Being and Time* (1962, 31), made him *inattentive* to the actual politics. In Žižek's terms he could not see "the complicity [...] between the elevation above ontic concerns and the passionate 'ontic' Nazi political engagement" (1999, 14). So, anti-Semitism, Being as destining, and his disregard for the ontic all played their part, but we might also add Heidegger's focus on rootedness and dwelling, or his very specific and consistent circling of *polemos* (war, conflict, struggle, confrontation) understood as *Kampf* (2014) or *Auseinandersetzung* (1996) as the source of his failing.[8] Because Heidegger's affiliation with National Socialism makes his thought popular amongst the far-right it is beholden on us, if we are to use his work at all in this context, to highlight its faults, but as this is not an essay on Heidegger's Nazism these faults cannot be fully developed here.

Returning, then, to the first reason to consider Heidegger in this context, we need to ask how does he help us think through the precarity of the world? While I agree with Žižek that a sole focus on the ontological is a problem, ontological considerations do remain helpful if we start from, do not lose sight of, or are motivated primarily by the ontic, on which level the resurgence of far-right thought must be a major concern. Ordinarily, when philosophy asks ontological questions it is concerned with the nature of a being or *what* something is, but Heidegger referred to this as the 'ontic', reserving the term ontological for a consideration of Being itself, or *how* we are. When considering the nature of *Dasein* — a term he preferred instead of either human or subject in order to register the primacy of our being-[there]-in-the-world — he wrote that "*understanding Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein's Being*" (1962, 32).[9] In other words, Heidegger was interested in what he believed gave us a better sense of what is essential to humans, namely *how* we relate to the things around us and how, most importantly, they become meaningful.

The precarity of worlds was first introduced in Heidegger's lecture series from 1921–22, published under the title *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*. Here Heidegger describes the world as "the content aimed at in living, that which life holds to" (2001, 65). It was something he would continue in the following year in his lecture series on "factical

**8** It is worth noting that this shift in translation of the Greek *polemos* took place between the two lectures courses I have referred to here. The first held in 1934, the second in 1935. 1934 is the year Heidegger resigned the Rectorship of Freiburg, and this shift may be indicative of an attempt to distance his own thought from the rhetoric of National Socialism. One other significant biographical note here is that *polemos* was so important to Heidegger that he congratulated Carl Schmitt in 1933 for also putting the concept at the heart of his work.

**9** Heidegger goes on to explain the difference between the ontic and the ontological is this way: '"Being-ontological' is not yet tantamount to 'developing an ontology'. So if we should reserve the term 'ontology' for that theoretical inquiry which is explicitly devoted to the meaning of entities, then what we have had in mind in speaking of Dasein's 'Being-ontological' is to be designated as something 'pre-ontological'. It does not signify simply 'being-ontical', however, but rather 'being in such a way that one has an understanding of Being'" (1962, 32).

life" (1999, 12). The idea that *life* 'holds to' a *world* is important because while it suggests that life and world are to some extent stuck together it is more like a clinging to than a firm grasp. Hence, life and world are intimately related, but not as "two separate self-subsistent Objects" (65). This means that life and world are neither distinct nor identical but are mutually implictated in each other; life always refers to a world and this referentiality is always acutalised in life. The problem, however, is that life is never so simple. The world isn't always realised, or isn't realised in the way we had hoped or even expected; there is a tendency for the meaning we ascribe to slip away.

While the gap between life and world is what makes reflection possible it can also act as a fault line that threatens the world with collapse. Most of the time, the referential totality that is our *way* of life is reproduced in everyday rituals, both sacred and profane, that we have inherited and pass on. These rituals and the cultural liturgy that accompanies them tell us what is legitimate and proper, what does and does not belong. There is even a case for saying that this totality, this *way*, determines what does and does not exist; what we see and what we don't. The world is, then, a collection of concepts, values, and beliefs sustained by the language we use and the stories we regularly circulate. It should not be surprising, then, that the world appears more fragile or appears to slip away when these rituals are no longer performed and these stories no longer recounted.

In the lecture series from the summer of 1923, entitled *Ontology — The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, Heidegger addresses the meaning of the world as an explicit theme. He discusses it in relation to hermeneutics, traditionally understood as the scholarly interpretation of religious texts. For Heidegger, however, hermeneutics stands for our general way of being. He proposes we think of our lived experience as something "in need of interpretation and that to be in some state of having-been-interpreted belongs" to that experience (1999, 11). This being-interpretive is how we are in the world and is part of the distinctive, open character of our existence. In other words, hermeneutics is about interpreting the things and events around us, but, for Heidegger, we also speak "from out of interpretation" (14). There isn't some prior condition that is free from this hermeneutic relationship. It isn't a secondary phenomenon, but our very way of being amongst things in the first place. We therefore exist *in* and *as* interpretation, with the world that our life holds to being a particular instance of that interpretative relation. The world, then, is always given to us *as* this or *as* that. Returning to the earlier lecture course, he notes how objects are not "bare realities, [...] they do not [...] run around naked" (2001, 69). Objects and entities are always given to us as meaningful in some way and

we in turn engage with them under the knowledge they might be understood *as* something else or conceived in another way. This is, of course, the underlying condition of our politics.

The world is, then, a specific interpretation that directs life from inception and is always already familiar. This familiarity is worked out in one of the most famous passages of *Being and Time*, namely the section on the "handiness" (*Zuhandenheit*, *Händlichkeit*) of tools and equipment (1962, 99–106). Here, 'handiness' relates to things being immediately available, functioning and effective for the purposes assigned to them. What is important here, though—and this is crucial for understanding our relationship to the world—is that as long as these useful things work in line with their assignments and within the references that combine in any given task, the useful thing can be said to *withdraw* (99). In other words, the world drifts into the background of my experience and is not part of my conscious awareness. As long as the pen is full of ink, the nib is in good working order, and the paper is dry, I will not be especially conscious of the act of writing, nor of holding the pen. This withdrawal also applies to the world in general. For Heidegger, the moment things become objectively present is the moment where a problem has occurred or something has broken down (103, 106).

Consequently, as long as life is *working* for me, the world that directs it remains withdrawn despite continuing to direct my every move. In this withdrawal it takes on a sense of naturalness. It has the character of 'inconspicuous familiarity' (1962, 137). However, should any part of my world malfunction by being challenged as illegitimate, immoral or even out-of-date, what normally and unproblematically directs my thought and behaviour suddenly becomes an issue for me. The world itself becomes a problem. This might only cause a minor, temporary interruption, but it can be a profoundly disturbing experience. So, while the world is so familiar as to be unnoticeable, anything that makes it conspicuous threatens it with collapse (1962, 233) and places Dasein in "the existential mode of the *'not-at-home'*" (233).[10] This is crucial for understanding our ontological precarity. To be more precise about this, we need to return to another feature of Heidegger's analysis of tools, where our use of them is always situated within a set "assignments or references which are constitutive" (101) for any given task, and each task links with others in pursuit of a broader purpose.[11]

Most importantly for Heidegger, we quite literally *find ourselves* within this collection of aims, objectives and purposes. My world's guiding "what for" and "for-the-sake-of" (80) are therefore integral to my sense of self. In Heidegger's language this means Dasein can be understood as the

**10** Heidegger referred to this experience as one of "uncanniness" (1962, 233). In the later lecture course from 1942 published under the title *Hölderlin's Hymn—The Ister*, Heidegger returned to this theme of the uncanny to offer a specific account of how our ontological precarity turns violent. The existential mode of the 'not-at-home' can precipitate periods of the active violence Heidegger refers to as "predatory uncanniness" (1996, 90), which "is an extreme derivative and essential consequence of a concealed uncanniness that is grounded in unhomeliness" (90). For a more detailed discussion, see Curtis (2007).

**11** In Heidegger's language, all assignments eventually lead back to the primary "what-for" or "the for-the-sake-of-which from which every what-for is ultimately derived" (1962, 80).

"dependency of being referred" (81). In other words, our sense of self is wholly *dependent* upon the chain of references that combine to organise, arrange and give meaning to our life. To reiterate, in holding to a world I am always already outside of myself, sustained by the cultural rites, norms and codes, values, beliefs and meanings that I in turn commit to reproducing. This also means that there is *no closed interiority to which we might retreat at times of crisis*, which means *there is no immunity or safe haven from the fate of the world*. Although life feels robust, we effectively reside on top of an abyss. Having said that, one of our core ideological strategies is to posit such an entity or closed interiority in an attempt to run from the world and its contingencies, but I will return to that in part three.

Given this dependency, it is hardly surprising that these references need to be regularly repeated and their boundaries constantly policed. The communal liturgy therefore seems to *substantiate* or make real the values that guide and define us. As long as we continue to tell the particular set of stories—about 'race', nation, gender, sex—that define us, the definition seems to have a greater reality and takes on an incontrovertible naturalness. The world withdraws. Without the regular ritualised performance, the world begins to break down. It doesn't disappear but is there 'obtrusively' (1962, 234), manifesting as a problem. What a consideration of the ontological affords us here, then, is an understanding that if the references making up a world—references we are dependent upon—are challenged (let us say the references that preserve the dominance of whiteness, patriarchy, heterosexuality, and Christianity), the world can slip away, or feel like it is coming to an end. This produces a generalised yet profound sense of anxiety that can in turn prompt violence against the entity perceived to be responsible for the destruction of the world.

## Psychological Structure

While Heidegger's ontological analysis offers us a general theory of how the unmaking of a world and the loss of a home can cause anxiety-induced violence, I have chosen to close with a psychological account because I believe it gives us the best way to understand a more specific source of the red pill apocalypse and the radical right's fragile fantasy of supremacy. It is also possible to argue—although there is not room to fully develop this here—that Heidegger's work is imprecise on this specific issue because of his inadequate treatment of subjectivity. Even where being-in-the world is (and must be) taken as the "primary datum" (Heidegger 1962, 78), thereby dissolving any distinction between subject and object, we

do still posit some crucial aspect of subjectivity as the core of our being. While there is no pure interiority that isn't already directed in some way, one of our core ideological strategies—Žižek would say fantasies—is to posit such an entity in an attempt to run from the world and its contingencies. Heidegger cannot help us here, *and his god certainly can't save us*; in fact the positing of such a god and Heidegger's belief he had some privileged access to it or could *awaken* a readiness for its appearance is at the root of the problem. Hence, I believe a psychological or specifically psychoanalytic account will help understand this residual subjectivity and explain what happens when others fail to repeat or reproduce the stories that make up our world, as is happening in the progressive challenges to the world of the radical right. To do this, I will very briefly consider our ontological precarity in relation to the work of Jacques Lacan before turning to Slavoj Žižek's interpretation.

While Lacan himself radically critiqued the Cartesian split between subject and object, he nevertheless provided us with a philosophy of the subject that is particularly fruitful. To explain this it is necessary to briefly set out the organization of desire through the Lacanian tripartite schema of the Real, Imaginary, and the Symbolic orders (2006, 38). Initially it can be said that what Lacan calls the Real is the order of non-differentiation that Sigmund Freud referred to as primary narcissism. We are in the Real only prior to the emergence of the ego and later the subject, but this schema, while having a chronological component is not reducible to a temporal progression where each stage is the overcoming of the other. Instead, this pre-subjective state of non-differentiation continues to traumatically haunt the fully differentiated subject. In terms of the development of this subject, the first moment of self-consciousness takes place in the Imaginary Order with the formation of the ego. Here, the child, in what Lacan called the mirror phase (2006, 75), sees itself as the Other, that is, sees itself in the idealized image of another (a parent, specifically the mother for Lacan) which it jubilantly affirms as itself (76). However, given that the child's experience of its body is "fragmented" (78), this introjected other is a desired, complete, and autonomous form the child does not possess. The ego is thus coupled with an otherness that Lacan later named the *objet petit a* (2018, 103), which becomes the cause of my desire and the source of both paranoia and the violent outbursts against another perceived to be more satisfied. This appearance of the Other within the self remains an incurable antagonism or a perpetual source of "ontological decompletion" (Eyers 2012, 17) within the subject.

Importantly for the argument here, this conception of the mirror stage in subjective development was adapted from Alexandre Kojève's (1980)

interpretation of Hegel's master and slave dialectic. Very briefly, Kojève understood the subject in terms of negativity and the historical progress of humanity as a movement of becoming (234). For Kojève, this was also conceived in terms of desire. Not the desire for objects but the desire for recognition from another, recognition that gives value and certainty to what a person has become. In other words, "human reality is nothing but the fact of the recognition of the one man by another man" (41). The vulnerability of this relation is evident from the fact that in desiring recognition from another the subject is placed outside of itself in a relation of dependency only to be returned to itself through the process of recognition. Without the required recognition the subject can only 'return' to itself by destroying the other who is refusing to accommodate it. As we saw in part 2, this is central to Heidegger's analysis where the world must also return Dasein to itself. This imbrication of subject and object lead Lacan to claim "it should be noted that this experience sets us at odds with any philosophy directly stemming from the *cogito*" (Lacan 2006, 75). The particular and important twist that Lacan added was to propose that the mirror stage is actually a process of misrecognition that ensures the subject is forever removed from itself, always vulnerable, always homeless, and that characterises the ego's "defensive structures" (80). It is, then, through Lacanian psychoanalysis that the illusion of any sort of completion, security or salvation can be understood. It also explains the religious impulses of redemption as well as the proclivity for world-ending scenarios that articulate the permanent precarity of a subject always dependent on an 'other' for their deliverance. Again, we ought to be mindful here of Heidegger and his god in the face of world-destroying machination.

For Lacan, then, the foundation of self-consciousness is the immediate alienation of the subject from itself, and this remains the condition that haunts its future. The contradiction that exists between the image of the unified body, sometimes referred to as the Gestalt, and the experience of the fragmentary, dependent body in which the subject actually resides is the source of a permanent tension; even paranoia. Ultimately the perception and introjection of the Gestalt situates the agency of the ego "in a fictional direction" (2006, 76). Hence, the subject is cut in the mirror stage, severed from any adequation with itself, and it is this cut that has such a profound effect on the subject's future actions and is the key to understanding its fragility. Spurred on by the spectre of the fragmented body and the threat of annihilation that continually haunts the subject's phantasy of unity, the subject may strike out, or seek to negate whatever refuses to affirm it. Lacan concludes his paper on 'Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis' by warning us "It is this touching victim, this innocent escapee

[…], whom we take in when he comes to us; it is this being of nothingness for whom, in our daily task, we clear anew the path to his meaning in a discreet fraternity—a fraternity to which we never measure up" (2006, 101).

The original fracturing of the subject is masked by entry into the Symbolic. This is the entry into language where subjectivity is secured—given a place and a name—via the mimetic attachment to numerous signifiers 'filling up', although ultimately never fully satisfying the desiring ego. The Symbolic is thus the placing of a subject within a world that masks the trauma of the Real and the misrecognition of the Imaginary. This is another point where we might highlight a lack of criticality in Heidegger who believed that particular languages, in particular Greek and German, gave us (and him especially) access to the concealment of Being, and hence overcame the trauma of the Real (Butler 2014, 113).

In masking the trauma of the Real and the misrecognition of the Imaginary, the 'reality' offered by the Symbolic realm is better understood in terms of fantasy, which has a dual purpose. As something that coordinates the desire of the subject, it covers over the inherent void at the centre of each subject's desire and transforms the desire *for* the Other into more legitimate desires. In this instance, entry into the symbolic also means our desire is the desire *of* the Other, or it is the Other that tells us what to desire. This is also the ideological and intersubjective aspect of fantasy that helps to guard against the return of the Real that always threatens to undermine this carefully coordinated 'reality'. With regard to this, Žižek concludes that "in the opposition between dream and reality, fantasy is on the side of reality" (2006, 57). Fantasy's function, then, is to overcome this disjunctive moment. It seeks to guarantee symbolic authority by attempting to secure semiotic closure. The symbolic order fills up the subject by inscribing it within a seemingly endless series of exchangeable signifiers. The only way to escape this bad infinity is "to ascribe to one signifier the function of representing the subject (the place of inscription) for all the others […] in this way, the proper Master-signifier is produced" (Žižek 2002, 23). In terms of the red pill apocalypse that privileges racial superiority, it is not difficult to understand how whiteness figures here as the master signifier and what happens if the master signifier is challenged.

But fantasy not only protects our world by directing desire through the coordinates of the master discourse, any perceived failings of the master discourse, that is, grievances regarding failed promises, are projected outwards toward what Žižek (2005) calls the "spectral apparition". Within the coordinates of the red pill apocalypse such spectral apparitions are primarily people of colour and women (especially feminists), but these

also include a range of others: 'libtards', 'cucks', socialists, environmentalists, scientists, and various evil big Others: ZOG, the New World Order, Globalism, and Internationalists. According to Žižek, then, such spectral apparitions emerge because 'reality' can only ever present itself "via its incomplete-failed symbolization [...]: the spectre gives body to that which escapes (the symbolically structured) reality" (2005, 262).

As long as the subject is faced with what Michael Shapiro (1995) calls an "imitative other" who offers fraternity, all is well. On the other hand, spectral apparitions as *non-imitative* others destabilise the subject, opening up its "original fracturing" (Lacan 2006, 100) and are perceived as a threat. This is clearly relevant to Heidegger's analysis of the world where imitative others are required to maintain the referential totality that maintains our sense of self. Linking the screen of the mirror to the screens of our media it is also evident that to maintain the Imaginary identification, these screens must reflect back the identity the subject has assumed. When that identity also includes the assumption of 'natural' superiority it is clear how the failure to see oneself represented as such in the products of popular culture can lead to a crisis. A central component, then, of the red pill apocalypse is this sense of crisis brought on by those who don't reinforce the primary fantasy of white male superiority and universality.

However, to fully understand this and the dynamics of the red pill apocalypse we need to acknowledge that alongside the master signifier on the side of the object there needs to be a subjective correlate. For Žižek, "there must always be some 'little piece of the real', totally contingent but nonetheless perceived by the subject as a confirmation, as the support of its belief in its own omnipotence" (2005, 30). We find this in late Lacan where the focus shifts to the object that the subject itself 'is', to the *agalma*, a term adopted from Plato's *Symposium* by Lacan in the 1960–1961 seminar that he uses to refer to the secret treasure, which guarantees a minimum of phantasmatic consistency to the subject's being. That is to say, what Lacan also refers to as the *objet petit a*, is "something in me more than myself" and on account of which I perceive myself as "worthy of the other's desire" (Žižek 1997, 8). In other words, it is that which I fantasize the Other sees in me. The *objet petit a* is also that element of the Real that couples itself to the ego in the moment of misrecognition, where the ego sees itself as an idealised other. This, again, is why fantasy is so important because it "fills out the void of [the subject's] 'origins' by means of a narration" (2002, 211). Narrative tells of something lost in the past that is to be regained in the future, or indeed in some present messianic moment (MAGA, Brexit, and even Heidegger's god). This is a perfect encapsulation of both the mourning of a lost status and its future

redemption that is central to the red pill apocalypse, but it also veils the impossibility of gaining something that only emerges as lost.

## Conclusion

For the radical right there has been an erosion of their world to the point where they feel it has ended. The meanings, values and references upon which they depend are seemingly vanishing into thin air if not being actively evaporated by hostile agents conspiring against their way of life. The anxiety produced by this opening up of the gap between life and world has triggered a hostile attempt to reconstruct it. The recent resurgence of the radical right under the banner of an apocalypse is nothing but a reaction to their perceived loss of status and a rear guard action against every progressive movement they blame for losing their way. Heidegger helps us understand this process because of his critique of Cartesian dualism that draws out the absolute dependency of Dasein on its world. However, to get to the kernel of this apocalypse, and offer the chance to explain why it is ultimately so disappointing, it was necessary to say more about the split between the biological (life) and the ontological (world). For this I suggested a detour through the psychological or psychoanalytical, because it is only here that we can critique the unworkable division between subject and object and still have a conception of the 'subject' that helps us understand why the challenge to a way of life generates such passion and can manifest so personally.

At the crux of the matter, and something I have written about in a little more detail elsewhere (Curtis 2021) is the fantasy of *merit* that coordinates and structures the 'reality' of the radical right, which we can only pursue with the assistance of Lacan. At issue is the fact that those who ascribe to the red pill apocalypse are a collection of people who believe some inherent superiority merits their social status and yet all these spectral apparitions keep interrupting their enjoyment and satisfaction by telling them their success or achievement is the result of some accident of birth. According to this oppositional narrative they are where they are only because of privilege, or what Alison Bailey called "unearned assets" (1998, 107). The sleight of hand played by the fantasy of meritocracy, then, is the belief that we have attained social status or economic success *based on our own very special and personal talent or hard work*; and it is here that we arrive at the most sacred part of our identity: Lacan's *object petit a*.

We build our sense of self from a world of references that includes our taste in music, choice of football team, diet, national and regional pride,

religious faith, job status and area of work, income, place of residence, hobbies, and places travelled, but in all of this there is some sense of contingency. What grounds or anchors us, what is absolute, is that whoever I am and whatever I have achieved it is because I have earned it. It is an internalised, ideal image of the special person we think we are and that we think the Other desires. Deep inside us, then, is this little statue, a shiny, perfect, sacred object set on a pedestal in our little Temple of Holy Talent, and talk of privilege rather than merit, social advantage rather than just deserts, threatens to break down the doors of the temple and smash that little statue to pieces. As Jean-Paul Sartre eloquently argued in *Anti-Semite and Jew*, for the white supremacist "there is nothing I have to do to merit my superiority, and neither can I lose it. It is given once and for all. It is a thing" (1976, 18). Those who challenge white supremacy have taken away this 'thing' and the racists want it back. A note of caution though; the fact that the red pill apocalypse is so disappointing does not mean it is not dangerous.

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