



NEW HEROES

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Ten years ago I wrote a book titled *Heroes*, published by Verso in 2015.

My heroes in that book were those people (especially young people) who are currently named mass murderers because they shoot at random human targets, usually in places like supermarkets, concert halls, churches, and schools.

I wrote my book under the impression of the crime committed by James Holmes in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado: during a screening of the Batman movie *The Dark Knight Rises*, the young man, dressed as Batman, pulled out two automatic guns and killed twelve people who were watching the movie. Many believed for a moment that the commotion was part of the show.

In the book I summarized the personal stories (and the imaginations) of people like Seung-Hui Cho, Pekka-Eric Auvinen, and other boys who were famous for killing innocent bystanders.

Things have evolved in the meantime. Mass murders were exceptional events back then. Now this kind of activity has spread, and mass shootings have become a common fact of life.

Some episodes are so shocking that for two or three days politicians and pundits sprinkle their heads with ashes and promise to establish new rules, and to pass restrictive laws. But it's only crocodile tears. The spread of weapons continues unabated.

What was interesting for me in the subject of mass shooters was their prophetic aura: they were a forewarning and the presentiment of a coming mutation. Like angels, they were offering signs at the border of the Western psychosphere, in the duplicitous zone between reality and the infosphere.

In his last book, *Bloodbath Nation*, Paul Auster outlines the deep-rooted penchant for lethality that defines the American way of life, and identifies the cult of weapons as a direct cause of this phenomenon. Obviously I agree with his analysis and his criticism of the widespread diffusion of lethal weapons in American society. However, the main reason why I am interested in mass shootings is different: my focus is not on weapons, but on the mind.

I think that the mass shooter is the most extreme example of the ongoing mutation of human psychology after decades of the neoliberal promotion of aggressive values, and after decades of the digital reformatting of the psycho-neurological system.

The generation that has been formatted by the linguistic automaton is undergoing a mutation that is transforming the relationship between perception, conception, and execution. This generation, which learned more words from machines than from their mother's voice, is developing a mental configuration that cannot be explained by the old conceptual tools: the relationship between mental elaboration and carrying out an action has been disturbed and transformed, as a consequence of the (infinite) acceleration of the infosphere and the consequent saturation of attention.

Because of instantaneity and virtualization, the relationship between conception and execution has changed so profoundly that the behavior of those who grew up in the last three decades is more and more inexplicable to psychological science and psychoanalytic therapy.

Recently, the *Oxford English Dictionary* proclaimed "brain rot" the most popular word of 2024. In second place was "Romantasy," a literary genre in which tenderness and affection (which have disappeared from real life) are only fantasy. In third place was "demure," a synonym of "reserved," "shy," and perhaps "solitary." These three words are the best psychopathological diagnosis for a generation that has learned life as fiction, or as terror.

I think that this new behavior should not be read as psychopathology but rather as a mutation. More and more psychiatrists are diagnosing children with ADHD. Attention deficit disorders, they say, are disturbing children's minds and disrupting the normal process of education. I think this diagnosis is bullshit: it is completely useless and misleading to pathologize the condition in which the connected brain finds itself.

The behavior that psychiatrists and educators define as pathology is simply and understandably a desperate attempt to adapt one's mental rhythm to the infospheric rhythm.

Try to imagine being in front of a screen on which a film is projected. The projectionist accelerates the pace of the frames—ten thousand times, then one hundred thousand times. You can no longer understand the meaning of the flow of color that appears before your eyes. Are you the one who has become stupid, or has the projectionist played a cruel joke on you?

Dementia is systemic, not pathological: it has been spreading since the acceleration of neural stimulus began to produce effects of panic and depression. And it has gradually made sequential, critical, rational, or even just reasonable thinking impossible.

For this reason, dementia must be the main object of our theoretical, analytical, and political attention, even if I don't think there is a possibility of remedying it. The rhythm of the infosphere cannot be slowed down in any way because the human brain is now dependent on it and cannot tolerate a reduction in the intensity of neuro-stimulus. In any case it is already too late: dementia has already produced its world.

On one side, we have the senile dementia of the old generation, terrified by exhaustion and decline. On the other side, we have the dementia of a generation bombarded by the enormous shitstorms that have been converging on the world scene for a couple of decades.

What may look like manifestations of a return of Hitler's Nazism is the disclosure of a demented yet perfectly logical and superefficient aggressiveness.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* named "brain rot" the word of the year because its use increased 230 percent from 2023. This expression thus corresponds to the self-perception of the contemporary population, especially the young.

The collapse of time for elaboration, both cognitive and emotional, is the collapse of ethical understanding, of compassion, and also of critical rationality.

Samantha @ ABUNDANT LIFE

Given my long-term interest in the demential effects of cognitive mutation, it's easy to understand why two recent episodes have attracted my attention.

The first was the shooting of the UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson by the young Luigi Mangione in the middle of New York.

The second is the shooting at Abundant Life Christian School in Madison, Wisconsin. Natalie Rupnow, a fifteen-year-old girl who went by "Samantha," committed suicide after killing a teacher and a student and wounding six others.

The actions of Samantha (a random shooting ending in suicide) are more similar to the phenomenology that I studied in my book, so I want first to say something about this event and its implications.

School shootings have steadily increased in number, from eighteen school shootings in 2008 to eighty-two in 2023. In 2024 there were at least eighty-three school shootings in the United States.

When I was writing my book back in 2014, I was persuaded that these kinds of murderous actions can be performed by very different kinds of young people: white or black, rich or poor—but only males. I linked the aggressive extroversion of anxiety with virility.

Samantha has broken my schema of interpretation. She is the first woman, after twenty-five years of male mass murderers.

Investigators who scrutinized the online life of Samantha dismissed the rumor that she was a transgender person.

We know very little about her. I've seen a photograph on Facebook showing her wearing a black T-shirt with the logo of a German band that was a favorite of one of the Columbine High School killers, who murdered thirteen people.

She was fan of Pekka-Eric Auvinen, an eighteen-year-old Finnish man who on November 7, 2007 killed seven students at Jokela School in the Finnish city of Tuusula, sixty kilometers north of Helsinki, after posting a photo of himself wearing a t-shirt with the words "Humanity is overrated."

President Joe Biden released a statement on the Abundant Life killings:

From Newtown to Uvalde, Parkland to Madison, to so many other shootings that don't receive attention—it is unacceptable that we are unable to protect our children from this scourge of gun violence. We cannot continue to accept it as normal. Every child deserves to feel safe in their classroom. Students across our country should be learning how to read and write—not having to learn how to duck and cover.

Such words ring hollow coming from Biden, as he oversees a genocide in which Palestinian children are killed daily. As for those (American) children that Biden declares he wants to protect, I watched an interview that a local TV station did with a ten-year-old girl who played a crucial role in the story of the Abundant Life massacre. The young girl called the police from her cellphone when she realized that something bad was going on in the next classroom. Traumatized? Not so much: the ten-year-old girl describes the scene without excessive emotion. She's smiling, and remembers that she heard the voice of a teacher shouting, "Help, help ..."

The young girl seems acquainted with the new reality. It forms part of the new normal in the age of extermination.

The Avenger

The age of extermination is multifaceted.

One face of it is the small minority which tends to transform itself into a conscious movement of suicidal exterminators. Another face is that of the avengers who aim to heal their own suffering by eliminating certain other individuals or social or racial groups. Luigi Mangione is part of this legion of avengers; they generally only go as far as voting for murderers, but in some rare extreme cases they take armed action.

Yes, my heart beats for him, like the hearts of many millions of others who detest neoliberal atrocity. I too hoped that Luigi Mangione would manage to escape arrest, before a McDonald's clerk, much poorer than he, called the police and had him arrested. His act has been hailed on social media, and many have identified with his hatred for the exploiters.

Should we say that his action (the elimination of a scoundrel who profits from the illness and misfortune of the unfortunate inhabitants of the

most miserable country in the world) was an episode of class struggle? Nonsense.

Class struggle was a serious thing in the Gothic times of modernity: it was the conscious effort of the exploited to free themselves from their exploiters—words that sound incomprehensible in the baroque era of spectacular hyper-violence.

Devoid of friendship and complicity, devoid of a collective project of emancipation, hatred is not class struggle: it is chaotic revenge against the fate of having been born in the ferocious age of liberal Nazism.

Exploitation, conscience, solidarity, shared projects—all of this has disappeared from the language of contemporary avengers. Pain, humiliation, and anger are individual feelings, and they remain individual even if shared by millions who go individually to vote for an Avenger in Chief.

This desire for revenge is on the rise because of our lonely relationship with the screen and with the electronic flow.

Mangione mixes the Bible, Pokémon, Ayn Rand, Peter Thiel, and Elon Musk. Nevertheless, he understands something essential, as revealed by his suggestion that those suffering from back problems like him should tell their doctor that the pain prevents them from working, rather than speaking of their intolerable suffering: “We live in a capitalist society and I have found that the medical industry responds with much more urgency to these words than when you describe unbearable pain.”

Mangione deviates from the figure of the mass shooter; he carefully chose his target and had quite clear “social” motivations. But his gesture must be viewed against the backdrop of a country that has just elected as president a man who embodies the desire for revenge. This desire for revenge does not have a single motivation but countless ones. And the avenging action is not directed in just one direction, but has many targets. We could say that Trumpism is a sort of revenge of all against all.

The political project that Trump has promised to implement has the characteristics of revenge, and this revenge has many targets: retribution against the Democrats who tried to hinder his triumph, but also—and above all—revenge against those who endanger the purity of the racist American dream. Trump and his followers have promised to take revenge against those who illegally occupy the American homeland: eleven

million undocumented immigrants. Many of them are working people, many are poorly paid to carry out difficult and dangerous jobs. They mix daily with the good white citizens. How will it end?

The promised “largest deportation of all time” will not be an administrative action, or an orderly police action. It does not seem technically possible to eliminate or seriously reduce the illegal population through legal action.

What will occur is the implementation of a self-fulfilling prophecy that will force millions of workers to hide, and will spread denunciation and fear. As a result, many migrants will prefer to leave. Many will decide to take justice into their own hands, on one side or the other.

The Ku Klux Klan is back, but now it is the most powerful agency in human history.

Two American Soldiers

As I’m finishing this article, during the first days of 2025, a veteran of the American army has been killed by police after murdering fourteen people with his car in the tourist epicenter of New Orleans.

The murderer carried an Isis flag, and although his name (Shamsud-Din Bahar Jabbar) sounds Arab he was born on American soil.

Another member of the US military, Matthew Livelsberger, a thirty-seven-year-old, highly decorated Green Beret, blew up a Tesla Cybertruck he rented in front of the Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas. He was inside the truck when it exploded.

Both Shamsud-Din Bahar Jabbar and Matthew Livelsberger had military backgrounds, and both served in Afghanistan.

Livelsberger was a supporter of Trump, according to sources.

Can we derive a coherent meaning from events like these?

I don’t know much about these new heroes, but their actions are a perfect introduction to an age of terror and dementia, and above all of chaos: the age of Trump.

These two new heroes have nothing to do with psychotic Samantha, or with Thomas Crooks, the young man who tried to kill Donald Trump. They also have little to do with the avenger Mangione. These are

all different blends of suffering, craziness, and impotent rage, different ideological deliriums. But such acts will proliferate in the coming months and years. American society will not be destroyed by this proliferation, however, because American society has always been based on violence, fear, and dementia. Yet something is rumbling beneath the surface; something new is emerging.

I call it chaotic war of all against all.

The chaotic demented war is one side of the coin.

The other side is the automation of linguistic behavior, existential paths, and expectations.

Chaos and the automaton develop and grow in a violent symbiotic relationship.

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