

# Mythic Violence, Memes, and the Recursive Rhetorics of Resistance

Stuart J. Murray

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**Abstract** Under contemporary digital conditions, political myth operates through memes that collapse the temporal interval liberal deliberation requires. Reading the case of Luigi Mangione, I show how memetic speech acts convert resistance into spectacle, foreclosing the possibility of revolt. Drawing on theorists of myth, performativity, and revolt—from Sorel and Foucault to Barthes, Butler, and Fanon—I argue that authoritarian myths thrive on virality’s affective compression, while oppositional myths are metabolized as engagement before they can mobilize rupture. The Mangione phenomenon confronts liberal complicity: when systemic violence is normalized as order, refusing counter-violence may become yet another alibi for sanctioned death.

**Keywords** Digital rhetoric; liberalism; Luigi Mangione; memes; political myth

Once upon a time, political myths appeared to inform collective consciousness, binding subjects to histories, animating resistance and revolt. Local conflicts, past wrongs, and future hopes together fashioned not only myths of struggle and rebellion, but also myths of domination, entitlement, and supremacy—the myths that propel contemporary fascism, ultra-nationalism, and racialized violence. They’ve always been volatile, open-ended, and potentially generative, their power residing precisely in their capacity to slip between origin and projection, history and fantasy, narrative and affect. For Georges Sorel, writing over a hundred years ago in *Reflections on Violence*, revolutionary myths were “expressions of a will to act,” igniting “the activity, the sentiments and the ideas of the masses as they prepare themselves to enter on a decisive struggle.”<sup>1</sup> This was a story of agency, violence, and its rhetorical justifications, whether fabled or factual.

But myth today is not what it once was. Even if the purported content of myths hasn’t changed dramatically, the networks and media ecologies through which they now circulate have altered and accelerated their uptake and affective scope. We now inhabit what I call a meme-world. Memes and myths today, memes *as* myths, do not

simply arise “against” power; they are shaped by it, fed back into it, and often—though not inevitably—are absorbed as engagement, spectacle, and commodity.<sup>2</sup> They almost reverse Sorel’s formulation: They are less straightforward “expressions of a will” than the will of a coded expression.

This essay develops a rhetorical account of political myth under contemporary digital conditions. A myth is not merely a story but a symbolic text through which a community fashions meaning when faced with uncertainty or existential threat.<sup>3</sup> It mirrors the human psyche, tracing its fissures of hate, desire, hope, and the hunger for coherence when knowledge falters. Myths and their contemporary heirs—meme-myths—summon visions that suspend discursive logics and bind subjects affectively and imaginatively. They are speech acts that do work: They orient, console, conceal, legitimize, and mask power by shaping what futures seem possible and ultimately what forms of violence seem justifiable.

I therefore bracket (without denying) questions of computational image ontology, such as AI generation, indexicality, and probabilistic rendering.<sup>4</sup> Whether a meme is human-made, bot-amplified, or AI-composited doesn’t alter my argument’s center of gravity: the affective and rhetorical dynamics through which circulation tends to neutralize resistance. My aim isn’t techno-deterministic: “infrastructure” here names more than technology; it includes the rhetorical and psychic conditions that make circulation meaningful. Technical systems are conditions of possibility, not determining causes, and memes themselves are “technologies of the self” through which subjects act upon themselves and each other in a regime of power/knowledge.<sup>5</sup> Memetic orientations—hate, devotion, longing—supply the motor that keeps their circuits in motion.

Why, then, do myths of domination seem to flourish in our digital culture, while myths of resistance so often falter or are co-opted? Authoritarian myths circulate easily because they align with the affective and economic logics of the mediascape that sustains them: They thrive on simplicity, polarization, and spectacle; they feed engagement, monetize outrage, and amplify grievance in forms that are readily absorbed and remediated. Myths of resistance, by contrast, often strain against these architectures of virality. They may demand ethical and collective commitments, or chafe at the flattening of nuance into slogan or clickbait. In a meme-world governed by virality, these very qualities become vulnerabilities: Oppositional myths are often fractured, parodied, and commodified, their force consumed as mere content before they can hold sway. In other words, contemporary Left politics—with its emphasis on **discursive complexity, intersectional analysis, and institutional critique**—proves structurally ill-suited to

memetic messaging. What the digital moment reveals isn't the death of political protest and resistance so much as their affective exhaustion: Outrage and dissent are metabolized as fuel. It's this paradox — of contestation as reinforcement, of peace as violence — that forms the critical impasse I wish to address here. Despite the hegemony of the image, there is, I'll suggest, a growing crisis of political imagination — especially on the Left.

Crucially, my argument presumes a careful distinction between **resistance** and **revolt** (or rebellion). By **resistance**, following Judith Butler among others, I mean a diffuse, often affective or discursive contestation — persistent refusals, critiques, and disavowals that challenge dominant structures without necessarily seeking immediate political rupture. By contrast, I use **revolt** — following Georges Sorel, Michel Foucault, and Frantz Fanon — to indicate politically conscious and deliberately organized acts aimed explicitly at structural rupture, transformation, or revolutionary change. While resistance thus functions as a condition of possibility for revolt, generating critical and ethical openings, my concern is precisely that our media ecologies commodify and neutralize resistance. By saturating the very spaces and temporal intervals resistance requires for reflection or critique, the circuits of contemporary media threaten to foreclose meaningful revolt itself. The distinction, then, is critical: Can genuine revolt remain possible when resistance is relentlessly metabolized into spectacle?

Hence the difficult questions that motivate this essay: What becomes of resistance when the very tools we use to protest accelerate grievance into spectacle and uprising into marketable affect? When tacit complicity with our oppressors is more structural than volitional, what remains of the liberal-political subject — the “good citizen,” the “ethical bystander”? And what might it mean, moreover, to call for resistance and contemplate a violence we feel we cannot, or perhaps should not, fully endorse — and yet dare to imagine it anyway? We might be forced to conclude, with Walter Benjamin, that “every conceivable solution to human problems . . . remains impossible if violence is totally excluded in principle.”<sup>6</sup> Drawing on a brief genealogy of political myth, I probe myth's afterlife under digital conditions — conditions in which even the most radical gestures are susceptible to capture, recoding, and viral repetition. Digital myth, I contend, enacts less rupture than saturation: a suffocation of possibility under affective excess.

The case of Luigi Mangione represents a moment of ambiguity, a memetic punctum, that neither cleanly escapes capture nor fully submits to it. Mangione, whose alleged assassination of a corporate executive ignited a memetic firestorm, circulates at the threshold where mythic grievance becomes uncontainable, and where ethical violence shades into catastrophic rupture. He is not easily cast as either moral

exemplar or monster; his figure unsettles both categories. The virality of his image—mythified by memers, flirted with by liberals, refracted through a thousand unstable projections—exposes the deep affective ambivalence at the heart of our political moment. His meme-persona circulates as an index of saturation: the accumulation of a structural violence, moral fatigue, and barely suppressed rage that digital infrastructures cannot quite metabolize. Mangione forces a confrontation with the narratives we live by, the violence we accommodate, and the complicities we piously and reflexively disavow. Liberalism has long served as our alibi, shielding us from the implications of systemic harm with the comfort of procedural ideals and moral self-regard. But the firestorm surrounding Mangione suggests a liberal defensive posture that is increasingly untenable.

The critical analysis that follows unfolds as three intersecting **confrontations**—with infrastructure (material, rhetorical, and affective), with myth, and with the liberal subject. Part one, “*Political myth and digital infrastructures*,” traces a genealogy of political myth from its earlier articulations in Sorel, Carl Schmitt, Foucault, and Roger Griffin to its uptake in the rhetorical and performative theories of Roland Barthes, J. L. Austin, and Judith Butler. Myth, across this history, becomes less a narrative than a rhetorical infrastructure: neither quite *mythos* nor *logos*, it is increasingly recursive, memetic, and amplified through algorithmic logics. Part two, “*Luigi Mangione: Meme, myth, martyr*,” moves from theory to saturation, offering a case study for exploring the theoretical tensions that arise in part one. Mangione’s viral figure stages the moment when myth threatens to rupture containment—a memetic threshold that resists stabilization, oscillating between moral complicity and viral enchantment. Finally, part three, “*The liberal alibi*,” returns to the troubled figure of the liberal individual—that peaceable subject of rights and deliberative civility—not because this figure enacts violence directly, but because it functions as the alibi that makes structural violence appear exceptional, regrettable, or outside the norm. This figure grounds the liberal fantasy of moral autonomy and nonviolence, even as the systems that sustain that autonomy rely on sacrificial dispossession, abandonment, and death elsewhere. Here, I aim not merely to critique liberal self-regard, but to stage a reckoning with the deep complicity that liberal innocence belies. In my conclusion, I return to the problem of violence and rupture, drawing on Benjamin’s distinction between mythic and divine violence to diagnose the exhaustion of liberal ethics under digital conditions. When revolt becomes both infrastructurally pre-shaped and affectively overdetermined, the question is not simply how to theorize resistance but how to reckon with the possibility—and the peril—of counter-violence: the moment when ethos must become praxis, and care may have to become self-defense.

My imagined audience here is the moderate-to-progressive Left reader, myself included: someone who values—but who struggles with and against—liberal deliberative norms, particularly as our communicative ground has undergone a seismic shift. I write not from above, but from within that disorder and discomfort. This essay doesn't offer redemption or redress. At best, it offers an avowal—a naming, a dwelling within the ethical impasse we inhabit—and in which “I” cannot resist without also confronting the mythologies that sustain my own moral self-image. What follows is no roadmap, but a self-reflexive confrontation; a confrontation with the reflex-self.

### 1. Political myth and digital infrastructures

For Michel Foucault, political myth animates a counter-history—an insurgent discourse that binds contingent grievances to universalizing claims, past humiliations to future hopes. While it is commonly said that the victors write history, Foucault demonstrates how victors' narratives often clash with a diffuse, subversive, nimble, and sometimes more alluring “historico-political” discourse that arises from the vanquished themselves. In *Society Must Be Defended*, he argues that these myths channel “the confusion of violence, passions, hatreds, revenge, and the tissue of the minor circumstances that create defeats and victories.”<sup>7</sup> Counter-histories can be effective even though—or perhaps precisely because—they work “against the centralizing power-effects that are bound up with the institutionalization and work of any scientific discourse organized in a society such as ours.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, their transmission is not based on their truth-value but relies on “very traditional mythic forms,” including “the lost age of the great ancestors, the imminence of new times and millenary revenge, the coming of the new kingdom that will wipe out the defeats of old.”<sup>9</sup>

Myth doesn't function to explain the world; it incites it. Revolutions, Foucault writes, are “either an effect or a resumption of the historically primal state of war”—that is, they mark precisely the threshold where latent forms of resistance crystallize into organized revolt. For Foucault, this is not metaphorical war, but actual, racialized violence between those with “different institutions and different interests.”<sup>10</sup> In a later essay on the Iranian Revolution, “Useless to Revolt?,” he returns to the question of revolt to clarify its paradoxical temporality. Revolt, he writes, may be “irrational,” even “inexplicable,” but it names that moment of future possibility when “life can no longer be bought, when the authorities can no longer do anything.”<sup>11</sup> Notably, the temporality of revolt is ambiguous: it is both “‘outside history’ and in history, because everyone stakes his life, and his death.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, while a revolution is a dateable historical event, its manner of being lived—its life-in-death—transcends or breaks with and yet into history. Myth here functions not

as false consciousness but as performative conviction—as if the new world were already imminent, emergent. This “transcendence” resonates with religious themes: “promises of the afterlife, time’s renewal, anticipation of the savior or the empire of the last days, a reign of pure goodness”<sup>13</sup>—themes that can’t be dismissed as an “ideological cloak,” Foucault insists.

While Foucault locates myth in the “transcendence” of revolt, myths of “renewal” and “rebirth” animate authoritarianism in Roger Griffin’s *The Nature of Fascism*. Ultra-nationalism “always has recourse to some mythical component to create an artificial sense of common destiny and identity.”<sup>14</sup> In fascism, this is what he calls the movement’s core political myth:

The term “political myth” in this context does not refer merely to specific historical myths exploited to legitimate policies. . . . Rather, it denotes the irrational mainspring of all ideologies irrespective of their surface rationality or apparent “common sense.”<sup>15</sup>

This core is animated, Griffin argues, by a *palingenetic* impulse—“the myth of renewal, of rebirth.”<sup>16</sup> *Griffin’s work* remains indispensable for parsing these dynamics, not only on the authoritarian Right but across the spectrum of contemporary political imaginaries. MAGA’s sweeping eschatological promise of national resurrection, for example, bears a structural similarity to the revolutionary futurism of some climate activism. In both instances, looming catastrophe functions as an existential threat, a condition that calls for and justifies intervention. Palingenetic myth, then, isn’t inherently regressive or progressive; it’s a rhetorical architecture of affective mobilization.

If myths promise renewal and rebirth in an immanent future, more practically they also lend affective force to political distinctions—perhaps none more central than Carl Schmitt’s friend/enemy dyad, “us” versus “them.” Schmitt insists that this opposition isn’t merely strategic or rhetorical: It’s the metaphysical mainstay of the political. In other words, without the foundational distinction between friend and enemy, politics would dissolve into mere administration or spectacle. When this is the case, “What remains,” Schmitt contends, “is neither politics nor state, but culture, civilization, economics, morality, law, art, entertainment, etc.”<sup>17</sup> Leo Strauss’s commentary on this passage seizes on “entertainment,” claiming it as the key term in Schmitt’s series: “politics and the state are the only *guarantee* against the world’s becoming . . . a world of entertainment, a world of amusement, a world without *seriousness*.”<sup>18</sup> This, apparently, is what “opponents of the political” are seeking—in Schmitt’s terms, “a completely pacified globe, . . . a world without the distinction of friend and enemy and hence a world without politics.”<sup>19</sup> For Schmitt,

such a world might contain many very interesting antitheses and contrasts, competitions and intrigues of every kind, but there would not be a meaningful antithesis whereby men could be required to sacrifice life, authorized to shed blood, and kill other human beings.<sup>20</sup>

But it is precisely here that Schmitt's critique falters: He fails (or refuses) to see that liberalism already achieves its "pacification" not by abolishing the enemy or violence, but by making the friend/enemy distinction culturally ambient and masking bloodshed by – or perhaps *as* – entertainment, art, and industry.

Cynically, we might say that Schmitt's real complaint is that liberal violence remains *too* ambient and implicit, and that politics is (or ought to be) the domain of serious and explicit violence – the kind now seen championed by extremist "influencers" from the Mangione or MAGA camps. But what Schmitt laments as the death of politics has simply become its new form – and as unserious as it may seem in its meme-jokes, it is no less sacrificial and bloody. Today, war returns as "militainment";<sup>21</sup> sovereignty becomes branding; enmity becomes spectacle. In the memetic churn of liberal-democratic media, enemies are made and unmade at speed, and violence is no less serious for being sport. As America's decades-long dalliance with the Taliban demonstrates, yesterday's freedom fighter becomes today's terrorist becomes tomorrow's political ally, and so on – a rapidly shifting historical contingency structured by geopolitical convenience and profit. The friend/enemy distinction remains quasi-functional, but its application is no longer sovereign in Schmitt's sense; it's dispersed, recursive, and repeatedly recoded.

But, within a mythic mindset, the friend/enemy binary is meant to be accepted, not refuted. As Sorel observed in 1908, "a myth cannot be refuted since it is, at bottom, identical to the convictions of a group," expressed "in the language of movement."<sup>22</sup> Myth, in other words, doesn't persuade us rationally; it impels. And the friend/enemy dyad offers a grammar of political conviction and praxis. The "truth" of any foundational binary isn't discursive but affective, not argued but inhabited; it shifts with the political winds. What both Sorel and Schmitt suggest – and what Roland Barthes and others help us to formalize – is that myth operates as an affective structure of political propulsion, a performative force that mobilizes belief as if it were fact and action as if it were fated.

"Statistically, myth is on the right," Barthes dryly notes. "There, it is essential; well-fed, sleek, expansive, garrulous, it invents itself ceaselessly."<sup>23</sup> Myth's political valences (here metaphorized) aren't intrinsic to its purported content. "Myth," Barthes writes, "is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message."<sup>24</sup>

Its power lies in style, not substance—in the semiotic performance of clarity, certainty, and necessity. Barthes's reading resonates with J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts, insofar as both treat language as doing rather than merely describing. Austin distinguishes among locution (saying something), illocution (*doing* something *in* saying), and perlocution (*producing* effects *by* saying).<sup>25</sup> The illocutionary act—which *does* something—is socially, conventionally, or ritually guaranteed: If a wedding officiant says, "I now pronounce you married," in the right context this socio-legal act is accomplished in the pronouncement itself. But the speech act of perlocution—which *produces* effects—doesn't work in quite the same way: It is an unpredictable performative. For example, a slogan might persuade, shame, inspire, or radicalize—or it might not.

Arguably, it's in this unstable terrain of affective uptake and recirculation that myth dwells. It operates, in Barthes's words, as "a perpetual alibi: it is enough that its signifier has two sides for it always to have an 'elsewhere' at its disposal."<sup>26</sup> Political myths, whether liberal or illiberal, function precisely as that alibi. "The essential function of myth," Barthes continues, is "the naturalization of the concept," a process that allows us "to consume myth innocently."<sup>27</sup> Thus, when liberal discourse parades "humanitarian" war or universal rights as *faits accomplis*, we are witnessing what Barthes calls purification: "Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact."<sup>28</sup>

These effects—the unpredictable consequences arising not from what is said (locution) or even from the force of saying (illocution), but from *how* a speech act lands in the world—form the terrain of Butler's politics of resistance. Because perlocutions aren't underwritten by social conventions or rituals (as illocutions are), perlocutionary speech acts may—in time—be recast, parodied, reclaimed. It is here, in the perlocution's social and temporal interval, that Butler sees the hopeful possibility of a "restaging" or "resignification."<sup>29</sup> This is how Butler famously understands the uptake of "queer": once a slur that, through repetition across altered contexts, was resignified as a rallying cry. Butler's work here is shaped by Derrida's critique of Austin. For Derrida, every performative is iterable—it must be repeatable to function; however, its very repeatability exposes it to drift, mutation, and failure.<sup>30</sup> No speech act is fully sovereign; it always depends on the scene of address into which it is launched. For Butler, we might say that this structural vulnerability is precisely what makes resistance possible.

But, crucially, any restaging must assume a *temporality* that myth affectively and structurally suspends. As Sorel insisted, myths are not falsifiable propositions or predictive programs. Rather, they are affective condensations—"expressions of a will to act"<sup>31</sup>—that collapse historical time into the immediacy of movement. "Myths must be judged as a means of acting on the present," Sorel writes; "all discussion of the method of applying them as future history is devoid of sense."<sup>32</sup> They conjure what Sorel calls "*the framing of the future in some indeterminate time*"<sup>33</sup>—not a schedule of events, but a mood, a conviction that the future has already begun. Myths function, that is, in an affective *future-anterior* tense: They declare that *such-and-such will have been* the shape of our destiny, today. This temporality sutures an imagined future to a mythic past, animating the present as the moment of urgent exigency. It is precisely this collapsed time of present urgency—its refusal of contingency—that forecloses Butler's hopeful resignification. There is no temporal caesura, no space between speech and uptake.

**This mythic temporality is intensified through memetic circulation.** The meme doesn't merely illustrate myth; it performs its *time signature*—a felt rhythm of outrage, urgency, and devotion that collapses deliberation into repetition. By time signature I don't mean a computational tempo but an affective one: the micro-rhythms of refresh, alert, and recirculation through which attention is paced and belief folded back into repeatable forms that feel instantaneous. The point is not that code causes belief, but that digital infrastructures pattern the tempo through which myth is lived, turning revolt into recirculating spectacle. In his recent reflection on Trumpism, Alberto Toscano describes the collapsed temporality of authoritarian politics as "the time of fascism": not simply an ideology with historical form, but "its objectively subjective temporality, its immanent temporal features."<sup>34</sup> Fascism, he argues, "mobilises non-contemporaneity," fusing lost pasts, degraded presents, and imagined futures into a single mythic tempo. It produces coherence not by clarifying time but by dissolving it: Nostalgia bleeds into catastrophe, prophecy into command.

Thus, while political myth collapses temporality, it now does so at the speed of the memetic interface, the speed of light. The digital architectures through which speech acts circulate—platforms, feeds, metrics, algorithms—foreclose almost any remaining social and temporal gap on which contestation depends. The interface supplants the face-to-face; there is no time or place for rejoinder or civil debate. What Judith Butler called the perlocutionary "interval between instances of utterance"<sup>35</sup>—the caesura that made resignification possible—is flattened into immediacy. Post, repost, like, trend, monetize! Irony, parody, even rebellion—all are metabolized as engagement. Derrida's iterability

is reduced to algorithmic drift; Butler's hopeful caesura seals shut with every click. Speech acts no longer travel through interlocutors or deliberative publics; they ride the infrastructures of virality. Where the fiction of the liberal public sphere might once have promised communicative action — of interlocutors, of response or contestation — it yields to dystopian circuits of reflexive amplification.

Still, something lingers. While the memes are captured, the unrest that propels and accelerates them — which they imperfectly amplify — is neither fully contained nor pacified by the medium. This tension comes into focus in the case of Luigi Mangione. His image saturates the memetic ecosystem: Half-saint, half-specter, he is invoked by those who feel betrayed by death-dealing healthcare systems and billionaire oligarchs. His name trends, his face circulates, his myth mutates. But beneath the iterations lies something harder to metabolize: not a program, not a plan, but a righteous grievance, a rage, that will not be mollified. It's here, in the ambiguity of Mangione's invocation, in the spectacular remediation of his capture and looming trial, that we glimpse a limit, or perhaps a critical threshold, in the circulation of digital myth.

## 2. Luigi Mangione: Meme, myth, martyr

Luigi Mangione stands accused of killing UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, who was fatally shot outside a midtown Manhattan hotel on December 4, 2024. What followed was not simply a sensationalized news story, but a paradigmatic episode in the life-cycle of our memeworld: a singular violent act irrupting onto the stage of normalized structural injustice; its near-instantaneous uptake through memetic saturation; its transformation into myth, meme, and symbol. Such events typically induce affective dissonance — a small-scale dilemma for liberal legibility — only to be rapidly sutured by familiar platitudes about civility, legality, and individual pathology. But the Mangione phenomenon hasn't fully yielded to such containment. In what follows, I begin by situating this event within its broader discursive formation: a scene in which corporate cruelty is mythified as economic necessity and systemic violence is moralized as personal failure. To ask what it means that Mangione has become both meme and martyr, we must reflect on the conditions that made this figure resonate: Why did — or does — he provoke such volatile and contradictory uptake, and how has memetic circulation converted potential revolt into the spectacle of commodified resistance?

Every day we witness preventable death: patients denied life-saving treatment because they cannot afford it; insurers who delay, deny, and depose claims with bureaucratic indifference; families torn

apart by armed and masked ICE agents; hospitals bombed, racialized police violence, livestreamed; school shootings routinized and replaced by “thoughts and prayers.” Millions around the world die of diseases we know how to cure, of poverty amid obscene wealth, of climate catastrophes whose causes are no longer in question. Genocide, torture, and state-sanctioned terror persist—recorded, circulated, scrolled past. The lie is that violence is exceptional, anomalous, deplorable. Violence is everywhere. Naturalized, legalized, moralized. This of course doesn’t make it right, but when it begins to look like order it becomes harder to name it and to say with any certainty that it is wrong.

Meanwhile, we are exhorted to make moral judgments under conditions that systematically short-circuit judgment itself. In an age of mythic cruelty, memes operate as affective accelerants and triggers, demanding that we take sides in a perpetual war between “order” and “chaos,” between sanctioned and unsanctioned violence. Consider a meme circulated via official White House channels on the one-year anniversary of the failed apparent assassination attempt of Donald Trump in July 2024: Flanked by Secret Service agents, Trump’s eyes look determinedly into the future, his face bloodied, and his fist raised in victorious defiance. The caption proclaims: “I WAS SAVED BY GOD TO MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN” (13 July 2025).



Figure 1.

The meme mythifies survival as divine election, and Trump's mission as providential restoration. This isn't rational persuasion; it is incantation. In other memes, meanwhile, state violence is rendered aesthetic. Consider a meme featuring a skeletal figure—part angel of death, part gym bro—performing a deadlift beneath the caption: “MY BODY IS A MACHINE THAT TURNS ICE FUNDING INTO MASS DEPORTATIONS.” The image blends tropes of stoic self-discipline and lethal efficiency. By fusing death and fitness, it transforms deportation into a kind of righteous and necessary workout. The skeleton, stripped of flesh, is unencumbered by empathy: It enacts policy with affectless, machinic zeal. The meme's dark humor—too absurd to be official, yet circulated by the Department of Homeland Security—shields cruelty with irony, making violence legible as dedication. Much like the military cosplay common in far-right meme ecologies, this image collapses the distance between state policy and personal fantasy, repackaging bureaucratized death as personal virtue.

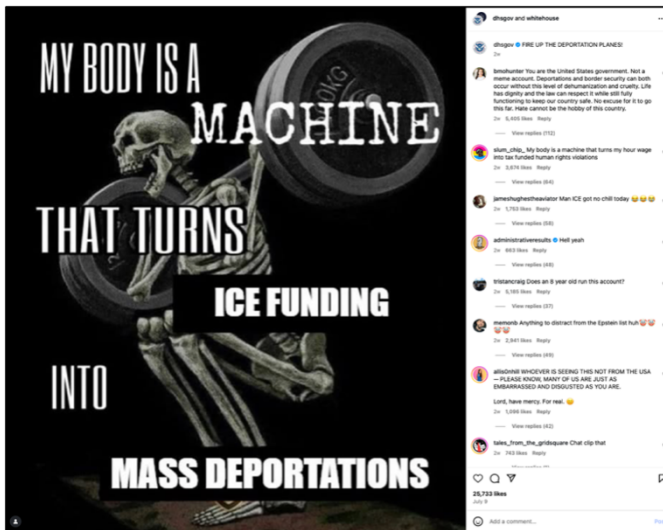


Figure 2.

Alongside the escalating darkness of memes like this one promising vengeance-as-justice, still others circulate that include “funny” videos of ICE agents loading human beings onto deportation planes, some grotesquely set to pop songs like “Ice Ice Baby” or “Hey, Hey, Goodbye.” One official DHS meme depicts a crying immigrant woman being dragged away, cartoonified for shareability. This isn't satire; it is swagger and shitposting. Violence becomes virtue when its agents are

coded as heroes, its victims as threats, dehumanized. These state-sanctioned memes participate in what theorists of the “Dark Enlightenment” call accelerationism: the belief that intensifying social and political crisis will hasten civilizational renewal.<sup>36</sup> The Trump administration’s meme-politics doesn’t simply stage a white ethno-nationalist imaginary; it seeks to accelerate the collapse and renewal that imaginary promises, converting apocalyptic anticipation into affective fuel. It is into this environment that Luigi Mangione enters the mythic field, compelling us to face the moment’s ambient cruelty, its daily contempt for human life. What do these memes demand of our empathy – or our rage? What do they allow us to feel, to do, or to disavow? And what does their virality reveal about the social and symbolic possibility for meaningful political response?

The memetic reception of Mangione erupted even before his arrest. By mid-December 2024, social media feeds were saturated with a “canonical” image of “St. Luigi,” stylized in the idiom of nineteenth-century Catholic holy cards: a glowing aureola, green-and-white vestments embroidered with florals, hands held in sacred gesture, and the flaming Sacred Heart emblazoned across his chest.



Figure 3.

The meme's provenance is uncertain—traced only to ephemeral accounts now deleted—but its semiotic clarity speaks for itself. Whether specific instances were human-made, bot-amplified, or AI-composited does not alter the analysis: Their rhetorical function emerges from recursivity. Indeed, authorial opacity is itself a feature of meme-world logistics, while circulation is driven by affective readiness—shareable orientations of grievance and devotion seeking a legible vessel. This meme doesn't aim at devotional piety so much as political palingenesis: The slain CEO is refigured as *tyrannus*, while Mangione inherits the iconography of a plague-era intercessor. Like medieval saints said to ward off pestilence, Mangione becomes a figure through whom systemic affliction is both named and rebuked. The image's half-saint, half-avenger aesthetic transmutes outrage at for-profit healthcare into a viral icon of righteous retaliation and vigilante justice.

The speed and scale of the meme's uptake underlines its affective charge: Within forty-eight hours, St. Luigi was circulating widely on TikTok and Instagram (among others), emblazoned on prayer candles, t-shirts, and digital avatars. Popular variants bore slogans like "Protect Us From Corruption" and "Patron Saint of Health Care Justice." What began as sardonic refusal to mourn a man seen as profiting from denied care slid quickly into something more fervent. The line between mockery and martyrdom blurred. By late December, Mangione was earnestly idolized as a folk hero by some, tapping into a cultural script of the righteous outlaw, so deeply embedded in the American imaginary. In one national poll, 41 percent of respondents aged 18–29 deemed Mangione's alleged act "somewhat acceptable" or "completely acceptable."<sup>37</sup> Rhetorically, the meme doesn't ask to be understood; it demands that we take sides. It reframes assassination not as crime but as communion—a kind of impious solidarity or self-defense. The figure of St. Luigi offers a symbolic agent of retribution for those denied justice, denied care, and denied recourse. In a system where lawful channels lead nowhere, the image supplies a fugitive language of sacred revolt.

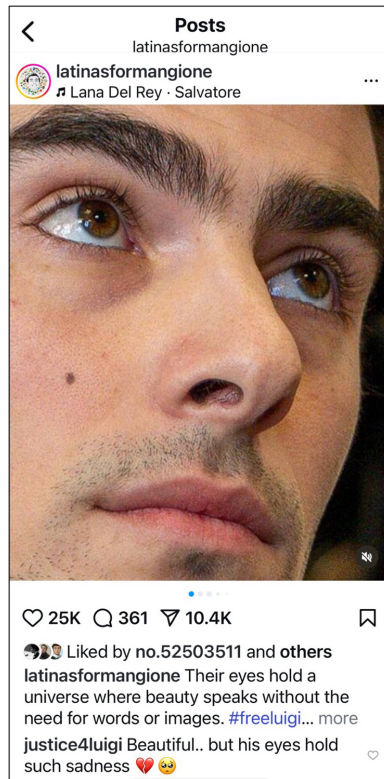


Figure 4.

This meme isolates a single frame from courtroom footage filmed during Mangione's arraignment. In the tightly cropped image, his head tilts upward, his eyelids heavy, pupils lifted in a blank, almost beatific gaze. The dreamy image flirts with sublimity. Is this serenity or psychosis? Detachment or eroticized devotion? Its visual ambiguity recalls Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* as easily as it conjures the vacant stare of a cultic killer. This instability is the meme's power: a surface onto which viewers project what they will. Its semiotic volatility has made it unusually resistant to containment. Authorities have struggled to cast Mangione as either monster or madman; however, the affective pull of the image disrupts the old scripts. Scholars like Ed Simon have noted the religious undertones saturating even official NYPD footage. During Mangione's choreographed perp-walk into the courtroom, Simon observes that if we replace Mangione's orange jumpsuit with robes and the officers' guns with spears, the scene mirrors classic depictions of Jesus taken by Roman soldiers.<sup>38</sup> The memes that draw

widely and repeatedly from these scenes collapse temporalities—past martyrdom, present spectacle, future vengeance—into a single charged tableau.

For the Right, this image frustrates law-and-order messaging by refusing to mark Mangione as obviously criminal. For the Left, who typically decry violence, it nonetheless complicates judgment, tugging at affective registers of empathy, fatigue, even awe. This isn't a case of deliberate aesthetic strategy, but of what the medium affords. Memetic infrastructures ensure that Mangione—and the meaning of violence—remains a floating signifier. As such, the image becomes not merely a commentary but a *site*: a point of recursive saturation, where clashing narratives about justice, revolt, and sacrifice are neither reconciled nor resolved, but intensified.

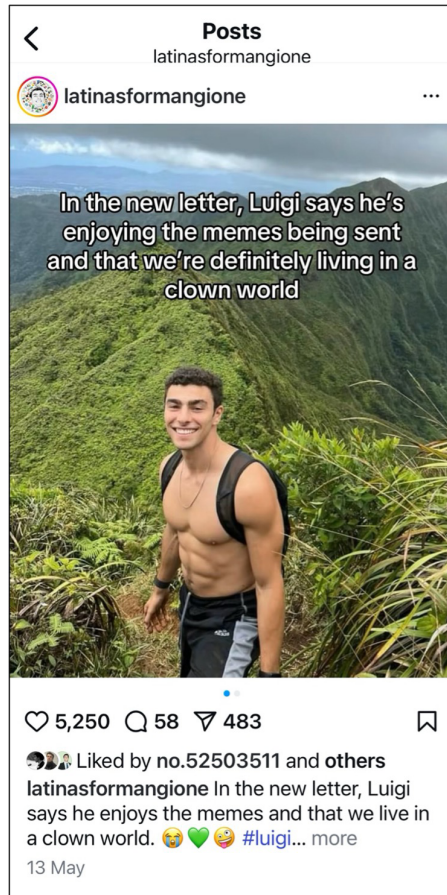


Figure 5.

In my last example, Mangione appears shirtless and smiling, with a lean muscular torso, standing atop a lush green mountain range in Hawaii. This image has helped cement his online sex appeal as a heartthrob assassin—a fusion of spectacle, virility, and erotic charisma. From jail, Mangione reportedly wrote that he “enjoys the memes” and agrees that “we’re definitely living in a clown world”; he mentions that he is grateful for the account @latinasformangione from which my last examples are taken. The captioned phrase about the “clown world,” lifted from alt-right discourse, typically signifies civilizational collapse. Here, it is reappropriated as a quasi-comic diagnosis of our neoliberal moment: If the world is absurd, then absurd memes are its most truthful mirror. The image itself stages a visual contradiction. The physique—symmetrical, disciplined, hypermasculine—draws on aesthetics common to fitness influencer culture. Yet the surrounding discourse, steeped in “chanspeak” detachment, renders that idealization unstable. This tension fuses divergent meme currents: the ironic nihilism of alt-right humor and the aspirational semiotics of self-optimization. The body becomes both billboard and battleground: an avatar of “therapeutic” violence, where rage and health, vengeance and virility, are imagined as coextensive.

Some viewers on the Left, while sympathetic to Mangione’s anti-corporate target, recoil at the unseriousness of his canonization: the thirst-trap, the merch, more memes. Others see the image as a refusal of liberal moralism—an aestheticized, albeit volatile, response to structural injustice. For conservatives, the dissonance cuts differently. Mangione—white, cis, male, gun-wielding—is an archetype they might typically valorize. But his target was a corporate CEO, and his fanbase is maddeningly “woke.” What frustrates Left and Right alike is that Mangione resists their scripts. Indeed, he is no socialist firebrand. His online footprint tilts libertarian, featuring posts about fitness, masculinity, and even Ted Kaczynski’s manifesto.<sup>39</sup> Some on the Left would cringe at his reposts mocking DEI or so-called “woke capital.” Yet, whatever his ideology, Mangione’s alleged act recalls a long tradition of political violence as “*propaganda of the deed*”: a gesture meant not to persuade, but to rupture; not to propose a platform, but to announce the unlivability of the present and the persistence of class war.

As one article in *The Atlantic* noted, Mangione “became a folk hero even before he was caught,” a symbol of “justified violence” against a system that commits “social murder.”<sup>40</sup> The very hesitation among many to condemn Mangione outright reflects an unspoken recognition: that corporate-controlled healthcare is itself lethally violent. Extralegal violence may seem like the only form of justice left. What liberal critique struggles to metabolize is that the Mangione moment

marks a breakdown not merely of civil discourse, but of its conditions of possibility: Memes like these make affect feel like destiny. Where MAGA iconography wields theodicy—Trump “on a mission from God”—Mangione memes stage a hagiography of counter-violence. Both circulate as mythic figures whose appeal lies not in policy or argument, but in their capacity to refract popular rage into legible forms. Trump seems to speak not from above but from within his base. Mangione now does the same, embodying the fantasy of righteous vengeance when our institutions have forfeited moral authority. Mangione doesn’t punch Left or Right—he punches up.<sup>41</sup>

Taken together, these three images show how Mangione is remediated into what Griffin calls a “palingenetic myth” of societal rebirth. These memes don’t merely represent outrage; as iterative digital speech acts they titillate, monetize, and weaponize affect, turning Mangione into a floating signifier—equally available to anarchist fantasies of direct action and libertarian myths of heroic anti-statism. Whether captioned as saint, visionary, or gym bro, his memetic afterlife resists juridico-moral closure: Meaning doesn’t unfold through argument, but through affective uptake and mythic resonance. His meme-myth stages a theatre of irony, outrage, and disavowal, drawing Left and Right alike into a shared crisis of interpretation. At this threshold, Mangione’s figure glimmers—already captured, already branded—with the volatile energy of grievance transfigured into threat. Here, the revolutionary archive stirs: Fanon’s claim that violence can be “therapeutic” for the oppressed, Sartre’s insistence that massacre is carried out “in my name,” Mao’s axiom that power grows from the barrel of a gun. These fragments of a revolutionary grammar haunt Mangione’s legend, even as meme-politics displaces discipline and doctrine. The affects that gather around him—grievance, exhaustion, fury—hint that the liberal alibi may yet collapse under its own weight.

If it does, what follows may not resemble revolution as we’ve known it. There may be no program, no narrative, no myth to orient us. Mangione is not the vanguard of change: No systemic healthcare reforms followed his alleged act, and he is a saint only in memes. Yet neither can he be dismissed as aberration or madness. He’s a paroxysm of our moment, returning to confront us with its ethical impasse: here and now, where our political ideals (justice, nonviolence, the value of life) collide with the reality of systemic abandonment and ambient rage. The question is not simply whether his alleged act was just. The meme-myth presses harder: What conditions make that act legible *as* justice to so many—and what does our refusal to answer reveal about us?

### 3. The liberal alibi

Liberalism presents itself as the historical custodian of peace, human rights, and the sanctity of life. But what passes for “liberal peace” is, as its critics insist, a conjuring trick—a sleight-of-hand that renders structural violence not only tolerable, but necessary. As Mark Neocleous succinctly puts it, liberalism’s commitment to peace has always been a myth: “As a myth, this has served to gloss over liberalism’s own tendency to carry out systematic violence and to call it peace; to gloss over, that is, the violence *of* the liberal peace.”<sup>42</sup> In practice, liberal regimes wage war, police dissent, and orchestrate innumerable forms of exploitation—all while proclaiming themselves “at peace.” Neocleous traces this logic to the very foundations of liberal international law, born in colonial conquest and steeped from the outset in structural and systematic violence. From nineteenth-century imperial expansionism to twenty-first-century drone strikes, extralegal killings, and migrant concentration camps—from military campaigns to medical triage—liberalism has perfected the subtle art of “letting die” in the name and the necessity of “making live.” This isn’t sovereignty’s ancient right to “take life or let live,” as Foucault phrases it, but a distinctly modern inversion: a biopolitical economy in which the livingness of some is contingent on the death and dispossession of others.<sup>43</sup>

What makes this asymmetry so enduring is its veil of normality. Friedrich Engels, writing of Victorian capitalism, famously diagnoses this economy as disguised, malicious murder, which does not seem what it is because no one sees the murderer. If an individual kills, we rightly call that murder. Engels writes, however, that “Murder has also been committed if society places hundreds of workers in such a position that they inevitably come to premature and unnatural ends. Their death is as violent as if they had been stabbed or shot.”<sup>44</sup> Nineteenth-century English workers denounced this as “*social murder*,” naming the liberal order’s most enduring alibi: the production of lethal conditions under the guise of “inevitability.” Here, no agent is visible, no crime committed, and thus no individual is held to account; death occurs as if “by natural causes.” Foucault calls this “indirect murder”: “the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection.”<sup>45</sup> The ideological cunning of liberalism lies not merely in its capacity to inflict violence, but in its power to reframe, sanitize, and dissemble it—as market logic, security imperative,<sup>46</sup> humanitarian rescue,<sup>47</sup> or the slow, steady march of progress and civilization. As Engels wryly notes, “English society is *fully aware*. . . of the fact that its policy results not in manslaughter but murder.”<sup>48</sup> And, as much as we might disavow it, we too are fully aware that the game is rigged.

Structural violence is largely invisible by design. In Slavoj Žižek's terms, it is "the catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems," a systemic violence he calls "objective."<sup>49</sup> Such violence does not explode; it accumulates. It operates silently, immanently—through poverty, illness, environmental degradation, and premature death—all in peacetime, all under the aegis of liberal decency. Meanwhile, liberal moral attention fixates on what Žižek calls "subjective" violence: those visible, disruptive, individual acts of crime, riot, terror, or simply civil unrest perceived to disturb the status quo. This produces what Žižek calls the "hypocrisy of those who, while combating *subjective violence*, commit *systemic violence* that generates the very phenomenon they abhor."<sup>50</sup> In this moral topology, the rioter or terrorist becomes legible as evil, while the conditions that produce desperation—or the regimes that quietly administer death—remain ideologically unmarked. We condemn the murder, but not the "social murder" endemic to, say, a for-profit healthcare system whose bureaucratic indifference silently sentences so many to death.

Liberal ideology sustains an alibi—a myth that preserves its innocence even as it sanctions systemic harm. So long as no individual is seen killing, violence remains abstract, depersonalized, and morally exonerated. Liberal subjects can proclaim: "I did nothing wrong; I harmed no one," even as their flourishing depends on circuits of exploitation and the passive logic of "letting die." This performance of innocence rests on the fantasy of privacy and individuation—the premise that suffering is always elsewhere; that one's own life is sealed off from its conditions of possibility. It's a pact that cloaks structural violence in the fabric of everyday life, rendering the self as "innocent" precisely by disavowing the countless ways that self is implicated as a passive beneficiary. Those outside the liberal domain are abandoned—not killed in a sovereign sense, but permitted to die by neglect. Achille Mbembe extends this logic through his concept of *necropolitics*: Even liberal democracies, he argues, possess a "nocturnal body," exercising a latent power to expose an entire population to death in order to serve another: "the brutality of democracies has simply been swept under the carpet."<sup>51</sup> The result is a partitioned world, where zones of abandonment—of war, hunger, exploitation—function as the racialized "death-worlds" that preserve the *bios* of liberal, nominally democratic life. As Mbembe writes, "To dissimulate the contingency of its foundations and the violence constituting its hidden aspects, modern democracy needed at its inception to envelop itself in a quasi-mythological structure."<sup>52</sup>

In *The Force of Nonviolence*, Judith Butler offers a searching defense of nonviolence as a mode of political resistance grounded not in pacifism or moral restraint, but in ontological interdependency. "Violence

against the other is, in this sense, violence against oneself," Butler writes, because "violence assaults the living interdependency that is, or should be, our social world." In that world, they continue, "the equal claim to a livable and grievable life . . . is fundamental to an ethics and politics of nonviolence."<sup>53</sup> But if interdependency is the ground of nonviolence, as it is for Butler, might it not also serve as the ground of violence? To the extent that violence enacts a relation denied or foreclosed, violence too could be understood as an expression of connection, however desperate, rather than its breakdown.<sup>54</sup> But Butler's formulation presumes that our relational bonds, once affirmed, tend toward care or restraint. Why should they? If relationality is constitutive (and let's accept this premise as true), then its negation may demand redress or reclamation by other means. Nonviolence, then, isn't the only possible expression of interdependency; there may be moments when preserving that very interdependency demands violence.

In response, Butler advances a theory of "aggressive nonviolence," asserting that "nonviolent forms of resistance can and must be aggressively pursued" and that "a practice of aggressive nonviolence is . . . not a contradiction in terms."<sup>55</sup> Yet if our interdependency is threatened and we must seek recourse in an "aggressive" nonviolence, then, in Butler's view, this "aggression" remains affective and discursive—it's an ethical insistence, a stylized performativity. What this lacks is a theory of militancy adequate to the historical and infrastructural scale of the structures it claims to resist. A sense of revolutionary responsibility seems foreclosed from the outset. Butler's critique of the state's "naming practice"—whereby state violence is "dissimulated" as "legal coercion" and projected onto the figure of the protester—is incisive but ultimately an external critique: "That monopoly," they write, "depends upon a naming practice, one that . . . rediscover[s] [violence] as the violence of the other."<sup>56</sup> And yet the liberal subject of address is itself constituted through these very naming practices—it often benefits from them, or is silently complicit with the apparatus it otherwise condemns. Relationality and vulnerability appear as primordial and ethically binding rather than historically sedimented through regimes of discipline and violence. As a result, militancy remains symbolic, and Butler's ethics of nonviolence risks functioning as a liberal alibi—not only because it presumes an innocent "we," but because, as I argued above, its discursive force falters under the saturation logics of meme-world circulation. Butler's "aggressive nonviolence" is perlocutionary in aspiration: It seeks to move, to compel, to produce a shift in ethical stance. But in a media ecology defined by the time signature of compression, virality, and ambient capture, such speech acts stall—reduced to repetition without uptake.<sup>57</sup>

Butler's account remains tethered to a liberal ethical framework in which violence is addressed primarily through resistance—through discursive force and affective contestation rather than through the structural rupture implied by genuine revolt. This ethical framework, grounded in presumptive innocence and individual relationality, mirrors the broader logic of liberal political thought—a quiet relinquishment of material struggle in favor of cultural politics. Liberalism, with its emphasis on individual rights and a private sphere that morally supervenes on the public, cultivates a disavowal of structural violence—where (to invoke Butler's words again) “violence against oneself” becomes the measure of “violence against the other,” and where ethical recognition relies on a relationality that ultimately begins—and ends—with the self. Engels called this the “isolation of the individual—narrow-minded egotism,”<sup>58</sup> the cornerstone of a social order that elevates private interest and moral self-regard while shunting systemic injustice into impersonal forces. And while liberalism is claimed by the Left, here, oddly enough, it also supplies the kernel of social conservatism and laissez-faire: the very logic deployed by reactionary conservatives when they attack, for instance, critical race theory and DEI for suggesting that racism could be a structural phenomenon rather than merely an individual concern.

Hannah Arendt diagnoses the corrosive effects of this logic in a political landscape of isolated monads, where atomized individuals retreat into private survival and regard collective suffering as some tragic inevitability “that works behind the backs of men.”<sup>59</sup> When injustice is everywhere, liberalism's reflex is not to intervene but to withdraw; to say, “Who am I to judge?” and thereby avoid judgment altogether. This mock-modesty, Arendt warns, becomes moral paralysis. Her critique of the “cog theory”—the idea that one is merely a passive component in a vast machinery—exposes the evasive comfort this offers: a denial of responsibility that applies equally to bureaucrats, citizens, and witnesses.<sup>60</sup> And while Arendt distinguishes sharply between collective responsibility and collective guilt, she is skeptical of those who see violence as catharsis or redemption. In her critique of Sartre and Fanon in *On Violence*, she warns that true political power arises not from destruction but from collective action—people acting “in concert,” not individuals surrendering to “metaphysical nihilism.”<sup>61</sup> Butler's defense of nonviolence ultimately echoes Arendt's conviction that politics depends not on purification through violence, but on the shared capacity to act, to appear, and to judge in concert.

The deeper discomfort—the one liberalism cannot bear—is that we are already complicit in this structural violence. As long as we retreat into private happiness as the world burns, we become, as Fanon puts it, “accomplices” to oppression through our very silence.<sup>62</sup>

Colonial bourgeois society, Sartre writes in his preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, is one "where massacres are committed in your name."<sup>63</sup> Its comforts are secured by a brutality invisible to the average European. Arendt's response is that we must understand our *vicarious responsibility*: the idea that one can be implicated in acts one does not individually commit, or commits involuntarily, simply by belonging to a community, a nation, or a system that commits them. For her, political responsibility is distinct from personal guilt, and she insists that it persists even in the absence of direct agency—not as guilt, but as a political and ethical obligation to reckon with what is done in one's name. In other words, we must be held liable even if we are not personally to blame. For Fanon, however, complicity demands more than recognition—it demands rupture. "Colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking," he declares; "it is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence."<sup>64</sup> Revolt, for the colonized, is not nihilism but necessity—a "kind of therapy" by which one reclaims one's humanity through decisive rupture. "As soon as you and your fellow men are cut down like dogs," Fanon urges, "there is no other solution but to use every means available to reestablish your weight as a human being."<sup>65</sup>

Sartre addresses this same bad faith, this "affectation" of innocence. Once again, in his preface to Fanon, he indicts the liberal "humanists" who so vocally, so sanctimoniously, deplore violence yet do nothing to intervene: "You who are so liberal, so humane . . . you pretend to forget that you have colonies where massacres are committed in your name."<sup>66</sup> Sartre calls this the "strip-tease of our humanism"—the slow unveiling of noble ideals until only naked violence remains.<sup>67</sup> Beneath the rhetoric of peace lies the real social contract: complicity in death for the sake of order. Sartre pushes the confrontation further still, arguing that revolutionary violence not only liberates the oppressed but also purges the oppressor—a disturbing but pointed provocation that the violent overthrow of empire is, ethically speaking, cleaner than its continuation. This is because violence inevitably turns back on—and returns to—the oppressor in forms that are not always recognizable: "How come he cannot recognize his own cruelty now turned against him?"<sup>68</sup> What liberal Europeans moralized as savagery becomes, in Sartre's reading, history's reckoning. "You, standing at a respectful distance, you now feel eclipsed, nocturnal, and numbed. It's your turn now. In the darkness that will dawn into another day, you have turned into the zombie."<sup>69</sup>

This conviction—that systemic violence inevitably rebounds as revolutionary violence—did not belong to Fanon and Sartre alone. Amílcar Cabral, Nelson Mandela, Che Guevara, and Mao Tse-Tung, among others, reached similar conclusions: When peaceful appeals are

crushed by “lawful” brutality, resistance will escalate. “Government violence can do only one thing,” Mandela reflected, “and that is to breed counter-violence.”<sup>70</sup> Mao wryly reminded his audience that “a revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery”; it is “an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.”<sup>71</sup> What liberalism disavows as extremism, much of the world has recognized as the price of decolonization, liberation, or historical repair. In this frame, revolt is not a perversion of politics but the mythic resumption of it—the moment when the dehumanized refuse their role in the liberal fiction and become subjects of history once again, humanized. If Arendt feared that violence could destroy politics, Fanon and Sartre insisted that, in the colony, politics was already destroyed—and that only through rupture could it be reborn.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has circled a persistent and unresolved question: Where does violence come from? Is it summoned by political myth, latent and awaiting a spark? Is it structural, already at work beneath the surface of discourse? Or can it arrive as a rupture, from beyond? In Sorel and Fanon, violence is endemic, accumulating until myth organizes it into revolt. In Butler, it is structural and discursive, reiterated through power and language. And in Walter Benjamin, it appears as something else altogether—a force that neither makes nor preserves law but breaks with both, a strike that interrupts the cycle of retribution. These lineages converge in an impasse that is no longer merely conceptual: Violence appears as latent, performed, and transcendent all at once. And Benjamin’s distinction between *mythic* violence and *divine* violence still shadows that terrain. “The first,” he writes, “*demand*s sacrifice”; “the second *accepts* it.”<sup>72</sup> *Mythic* violence binds power to order—it legislates, punishes, perpetuates—“bloody power over mere life for its own sake.” *Divine* violence unbinds—it “boundlessly destroys” without founding—“pure power over all life for the sake of the living.”<sup>73</sup> If Benjamin refuses to define the latter, it is because its arrival is unimaginable; it names the point beyond which revolt ceases to fit within law or narrative. What he called divine violence is not a strategy but a limit, a horizon of exhaustion: the space where ethical solitude begins.

In the meme-world topology I have mapped—from God Emperor Trump to St. Luigi—myth no longer mobilizes collective memory or counter-history; it no longer incites revolt by linking past grievance to future hope. Once a counter-discourse, myth persists now as circuitry—machinic, ambient, affectively saturated. Its power no

longer lies in sovereignty or story but in the automated infrastructures of digital life—what Alexander Galloway calls *protocol*, the rule-based governance of networked life.<sup>74</sup> Where political subjectivity once appeared as the liberal individual, we now encounter only an avatar: a nodal artifact, a derivative self, parsed and circulated as algorithmic affect. If liberal subjectivity was always a fiction—a moral alibi for systemic violence—then I must ask whether my refusal of violence is itself just another form of complicity. Whether abstention merely reaffirms the violence already carried out in my name. This flips the usual liberal script: Instead of asking the ethical subject to renounce violence in favor of dialogue, it asks that I renounce the far greater violence—cloaked, normalized, infrastructural—by which order is preserved.

What we confront, then, might best be called mythical violence without myth: a system that perpetuates sacrifice not through founding gestures or divine decrees, but through circulation, virality, and algorithmic drift. Unlike the myths of nation, revolution, or sainthood, today's memetic formations rarely claim transcendence; yet they operate as if they did—as if Trump were chosen by God, as if Mangione were a martyr, as if tech oligarchs were saving civilization. Meme-myths gesture, mock, or ironize; they are not legitimized through religion, law, or the state—and yet, increasingly, these very institutions are seemingly legitimized through *them*. To call this “mythical violence” in Benjamin's sense is to name a violence that no longer needs to legislate, because repetition itself compels compliance. Guilt becomes ambient; sacrifice is routinized; order sustains itself without decree. This is the machinic afterlife of myth—post-sovereign, de-theologized, algorithmic. Memes of transcendence still circulate, of course—Trump ascending, Mangione beatified—but they do so ambivalently, myth as anti-myth, critique as complicity, seriousness as satire as seriousness. The meme does not demand belief; it cultivates it through uptake, making of myth a joke that is no joke.<sup>75</sup>

This is the terrain on which the Right now thrives. In the reactionary imaginary, liberal hypocrisy is license: evidence that legality itself is a fiction to be overcome. Illiberalism becomes virtue; redemptive violence becomes style. On the liberal Left, meanwhile, the myth of the autonomous individual persists and is summoned—nostalgically, almost compulsively—as an alibi for innocence. Civility, dialogue, procedural compromise—these are invoked as if communicative life had not already been subsumed by endless remediation. But no myth—of civility, of resistance, of redemption—can absolve us of the violence we tacitly uphold. As Engels warned, liberal society commits “social murder” while calling it progress. Žižek reminds us that liberalism condemns subjective violence while thriving on systemic brutality. Mbembe names the necropolitical death-worlds that sustain

democratic life. “I” — the good citizen, the ethical observer, the innocent bystander — am less a bulwark against violence than its moral screen. Under digital conditions, even counter-myth is pre-metabolized: Memes absorb inversion itself, recoding contestation as reinforcement, peace as violence. Here Luigi Mangione becomes emblematic: martyr and meme, icon of rage and commodity at once. His image enacts grievance and rebellion, but almost wholly within the infrastructures it appears to resist. What emerges is not a new myth of liberation, but the exhausted repetition of mythic form itself.

And while this spectacle unfolds, the state hardens its “prophylaxis.” On September 25, 2025, the White House issued a *National Security Presidential Memorandum on Countering Domestic Terrorism and Organized Political Violence*,<sup>76</sup> citing the assassinations of Charlie Kirk and a senior healthcare executive as justification for expanded surveillance, asset tracking, and pre-emptive prosecution. The US Treasury and the IRS were instructed to monitor NGOs and donors for “indirect” financing of extremism; Joint Terrorism Task Forces ordered to coordinate across media platforms and law enforcement agencies. The directive enumerates “indicators” so capacious they fold dissent into suspicion: “anti-Americanism,” “anti-capitalism,” and “anti-Christianity”; “extremism” on migration, race, and gender; and “hostility” toward those who hold “traditional” American views on family, religion, and morality. Such phrasing renders critique indistinguishable from threat, analysis from agitation. In effect, dissent itself becomes actionable, affect suspect, solidarity criminal. The memorandum’s logic is perverse but familiar: It purports to *counter* domestic terrorism so as to enact it, converting circulation into evidence, belief into an “indicator,” and the will to justice into the very object of state security.

Is rupture still imaginable — or only as simulation? If it comes, it will not arrive as a new myth or foundation, but as refusal: a break that no platform can circulate, no procedure can absorb. At that limit, politics becomes solitude — the solitude of judgment, of deciding when refusal must move from ethos to praxis. Can I kill for justice — or let others die — and remain just? This is the question liberalism evades, but that Mangione’s memetic saturation refuses to forget. Benjamin, again, does not banish the possibility of ethical violence, rupture: “Those who base a condemnation of all violent killing of one person by another on the commandment [‘thou shalt not kill’] are therefore mistaken,” he writes, because the commandment “exists not as a criterion of judgment, but as a guideline for the actions of persons or communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take on themselves the responsibility of ignoring it.”<sup>77</sup> Violence here is not principle, but burden — exceptional, unspeakable, and owned.

That solitude is what liberalism cannot bear. It prefers posture to risk, innocence to responsibility. And yet: when the law arrives to

disappear my neighbor, my student, my child's classmate—when refusal becomes the last membrane between a body and the machine—what will I do? The Presidential Memorandum's architecture ensures that even asking this question will be flagged as threat. But the question will return, again and again, wherever care collides with capture. Between mythic restoration and the void, between the flood and what follows, we are already half-submerged—performing virtue as the waters rise, holding our breath. The task is not to sanctify violence, but to confront its claim upon us: to know when ethos must become praxis, when care must become defense, when the myth of peace finally collapses under its own cruelty. If liberalism cannot imagine that moment, it is because it has mistaken the feeling of goodness for the work of justice. What follows, if anything follows, will depend on those who refuse that comfort.

## NOTES

1. Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 28.
2. Horkheimer and Adorno remind us that the Enlightenment dream of liberation is inseparable from its tendency toward domination. "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology," they write. "On the way from mythology to logistics, thought has lost the element of reflection on itself, and machinery mutilates people today, even if it also feeds them." These lines now read like a prehistory of meme-world politics, where rationalized infrastructures generate new mythic feeds under the sign of freedom and technological progress. See Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002), xviii, 29.
3. I don't conceive of myth as "primitive" or pre-scientific. I follow Hans Blumenberg, who rejects the simple teleology that *mythos* was gradually supplanted by *logos* across the Enlightenment. For Blumenberg, myth responds to the "absolutism of reality," the human lack of control over the conditions of our existence. See Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (MIT Press, 1985).
4. For sustained accounts of technical ontology in contemporary media, see Justin Joque, *Revolutionary Mathematics: Artificial Intelligence, Statistics and the Logic of Capitalism* (Verso, 2022), which theorizes the statistical and algorithmic logics that underpin AI systems and their entanglement with capital; Paul Kockelman, *Last Words: Large Language Models and the AI Apocalypse* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2024), which examines large language models as semiotic and infrastructural agents that reconfigure human-machine relations; David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Harvard University Press, 2009), which situates digital imaging within a broader philosophy of media and the loss of photographic indexicality; Amanda Wasielowski, "Unnatural Images: On AI-Generated Photographs," *Critical Inquiry* 51, no. 1

- (2024): 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.1086/731729>, which analyzes the aesthetic and epistemic instability of AI-generated imagery; and Ignas Kalpokas, “Work of Art in the Age of Its AI Reproduction,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 51, no. 8 (2025): 1268–86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537231184490>, which revisits Benjamin’s aura and mechanical reproduction in the era of generative AI.
5. See Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New Press, 1997), 223–51.
  6. Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Shocken, 1978), 293.
  7. Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (Picador, 2003), 269.
  8. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 269.
  9. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 270; translation corrected.
  10. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” 271.
  11. Michel Foucault, “Useless to Revolt?,” in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley, et al. (The New Press, 2000), 449–50.
  12. Foucault, “Useless to Revolt?,” 450.
  13. Foucault, “Useless to Revolt?,” 450.
  14. Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (Routledge, 1993), xi.
  15. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, 27.
  16. Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, 32.
  17. Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (University of Chicago Press, 1996), 53.
  18. Leo Strauss qtd. in Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 101; Strauss’s emphasis.
  19. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 35.
  20. Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 35.
  21. Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (Routledge, 2010).
  22. Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 29.
  23. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. Annette Lavers (Hill and Wang, 1972), 148.
  24. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 109.
  25. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford University Press, 1962).
  26. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 123.
  27. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 131.
  28. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 143. Where Barthes analyzes myth as the ideological naturalization of bourgeois culture, Löwenthal and Guterman anatomize a similar structure in mid-century fascist rhetoric—one that operates not by overt doctrine, but through suggestion, innuendo, and affective charge. Their agitator speaks in fragments and innuendo, in accusations without names. In this way, the agitator anticipates the memetic logics of today’s

- digital mythmaking, where meaning is viral not because it is clear, but because it is resonant and repeatable. See Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator* (Harper & Brothers, 1949). Reprinted by Verso in 2021 with a foreword by Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, and an Introduction by Alberto Toscano.
29. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, 1997), 13.
  30. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, in *Limited Inc* (Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1–24.
  31. Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 28.
  32. Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 116–17.
  33. Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 115; Sorel's emphasis.
  34. Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis* (Verso, 2023), 99.
  35. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 15.
  36. On accelerationism and the ideological undercurrents of neo-reactionary thought, see Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*, ed. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Urbanomic/Sequence Press, 2011) and "A Quick-and-Dirty Introduction to Accelerationism," *The Jacobite*, May 25, 2017; Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009); Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, "#ACCELERATE Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics," *Critical Legal Thinking* (blog), May 14, 2013, <https://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/>; and Andy Beckett, "Accelerationism: How a Fringe Philosophy Predicted the Future We Live In," *The Guardian*, May 11, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/11/accelerationism-how-a-fringe-philosophy-predicted-the-future-we-live-in>. On the digital and mythic dimensions of the Dark Enlightenment, see Curtis Yarvin (Mencius Moldbug), *A Gentle Introduction to Unqualified Reservations* (2009), <https://www.unqualified-reservations.org/2009/01/gentle-introduction-to-unqualified/>.
  37. Emerson College Polling, "December 2024 National Poll: Young Voters Diverge from Majority on Crypto, TikTok, and CEO Assassination," December 17, 2024, <https://emersoncollegepolling.com/december-2024-national-poll-young-voters-diverge-from-majority-on-crypto-tiktok-and-ceo-assassination/>.
  38. Ed Simon, "The Canonization of St. Luigi," *Hyperallergic*, December 20, 2024, <https://hyperallergic.com/977203/the-canonization-of-st-luigi/>. Also see Lorna O'Neil, "The Life and Mystery of Luigi Mangione," *Rolling Stone*, March 9, 2025, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/luigi-mangione-united-healthcare-ceo-shooting-suspect-1235290609/>.
  39. See David Wallace-Wells, "Can Anyone Make Sense of Luigi Mangione? Maybe His Favorite Writer," *New York Times*, Dec. 18, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/18/opinion/luigi-mangione-writer-tim-urban.html>.

40. Charlie Warzel, "Luigi Mangione Has to Mean Something," *The Atlantic* (Dec. 12, 2024), <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2024/12/luigi-mangione-internet-theories/680974/>.
41. I thank my student Sean Muncaster for this formulation.
42. Mark Neocleous, "War as Peace, Peace as Pacification," *Radical Philosophy* 159 (Jan./Feb. 2010), 9; Neocleous's emphasis.
43. Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," 239–54. Also see my book *The Living from the Dead: Disaffirming Biopolitics* (Penn State University Press, 2022), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/109192>.
44. Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (Basil Blackwell, 1958), 108.
45. Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," 256.
46. E.g., see Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (Verso, 2011).
47. E.g., see Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (University of California Press, 2012).
48. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*, 109; Engels's emphasis.
49. Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (Picador, 2008), 2.
50. Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, 206; Žižek's emphasis.
51. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Duke University Press, 2019), 16.
52. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 23.
53. Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (Verso, 2020), 25, 24.
54. This critique of Butler has been advanced by others. E.g., see Ann V. Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* (SUNY Press, 2012); Simone Drichel, "Introduction: Reframing Vulnerability: 'So Obviously the Problem...?'" *SubStance* 42, no. 3 (2013): 3–27.
55. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 21, 22.
56. Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 6.
57. For a related account of how speech acts can be silenced by context, see Rae Langton, "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 22, no. 4 (1993): 293–330.
58. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*, 31.
59. Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (Schocken Books, 2003), 20.
60. Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 57ff; also see Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin, 1977), 289.
61. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970), 44, 52, 82, 91.
62. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2004), 118.
63. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Preface," in Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, xlix.
64. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 23.

65. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 221.
66. Sartre, "Preface," xlix.
67. Sartre, "Preface," lvii.
68. Sartre, "Preface," li.
69. Sartre, "Preface," xlviii.
70. Nelson Mandela, *Nelson Mandela by Himself: The Authorised Book of Quotations*, eds. Sello Hatang and Sahn Venter (Macmillan, 2013), 232.
71. Mao Tse-Tung, *Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan* (Foreign Languages Press, 1967), 8.
72. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 297; emphasis mine.
73. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 297. As Derrida reminds us in "Force of Law," Benjamin's distinction between mythical ("law-preserving") and divine ("law-destroying") violence is conceptually unstable, and perhaps even dangerous. Divine violence, Derrida notes, seduces precisely because it promises rupture without remainder: an ungrounding of law, power, and justification. What, he asks, will guarantee that this rupture is truly divine and not merely revolutionary terror, foundational violence, or the sovereign exception cloaked in messianic form? See Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority," *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1989): 919–1045.
74. Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (MIT Press, 2004).
75. See Tad Lemieux and Stuart J. Murray, "The Pandemic as 'Joke': Meme Culture, the Alt-Right, and Steve Bannon's 'War Room'," *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 41 (2020): 94–103; Stuart J. Murray, "Empathy as Bug: The Rhetoric of MAGA's 'Battle'," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2025): 363–75. doi:10.1080/02773945.2025.2533751.
76. White House, "National Security Presidential Memorandum on Countering Domestic Terrorism and Organized Political Violence." September 25, 2025. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/09/countering-domestic-terrorism-and-organized-political-violence/>.
77. Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," 298.