

PREFACE

This book is a footnote to Adorno. Some of the content of that footnote is inspired by Žižek. I therefore suppose that it is a footnote to a footnote.

It is also a different book to the one that I originally intended to write. That was going to be a “metacritique,” that is, an investigation of the conditions of possibility for a kind of political commentary. It has turned into a report on the very disturbing discovery of a cataract of hate-literature, spewing forth in the space of online publishing.

The book originated as a question amidst the tumultuous events of 2019–2021—Covid lockdowns, rightwing protests, the rise of QAnon, the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. How and why are certain forms of ideological propaganda, despite their manifest irrationality, so effective in recruiting individuals to authoritarian politics?

Adorno’s answer—that it is so because it appeals to a psychological type, the authoritarian personality, which is pre-disposed to anti-democratic politics—remains absolutely persuasive. But for a variety of reasons, Adorno’s original formulation stands in urgent need of updating. As I read further, it seemed to me that Žižek had already done much of that rethinking in his theory of “totalitarian subjectivity.” This implicitly rethinks the “sado-masochistic character,” said to be at the heart of the authoritarian personality, in Lacanian terms. Accordingly, my book intrepidly set forth as a reformulation of the authoritarian personality in Žižekian terms, one that would boldly reinscribe the importance of the psychoanalytic approach to rightwing authoritarianism. What had to be done was to

apply the Žižekian lens to the existing field of research on rightwing authoritarianism, in order to produce a new understanding of activation and radicalization. Within that strategy, the analysis of fiction was initially intended to be merely one resource amongst a variety of communicative forms.

Alongside the present book, however, Helen Young and I began investigating fascist accelerationism and its links to gaming culture, speculative fictions and digital publishing. At the same time, with rightwing parties espousing authoritarian populist ideologies mushrooming around the world, and an American president making an overt bid to subvert democracy, this intellectual quest triggered another question. What can a literary studies researcher do to help defend democracy from a rising tide of rightwing authoritarianism?

As regards novels, I started where everyone starts—with William Luther Pierce’s *The Turner Diaries* (1978), written under the pseudonym Andrew Macdonald, a dystopian story of fascist insurrection that has inspired hate crimes, mass murders and terrorist groups around the world.¹ At that point, *Turner* was still available through Amazon, so, I popped it in my shopping basket, and to my horrified surprise, the algorithm then helpfully suggested a dozen other books that readers who liked it also liked. I popped them in too, but this just made things worse: instead of drying out the trickle, this cracked the dyke. A steady flow of disturbingly racist and sexist, rightwing authoritarian books began to cascade into my shopping recommendations.

We began a systematic investigation of one stream in the cataract of authoritarian recommendations, those which rework the kind of narrative presented in *Turner* as an imaginative scenario of a Second Civil War. Together with Rachel Fetherston, we documented how almost 100 of these texts meet demanding criteria for being classed as rightwing authoritarian fictions, of a kind that can be confidently described as ideological propaganda. As my reader may perhaps imagine, my reading recommendations now looked like a neo-Nazi bookstore. Even with *Turner* removed by Amazon in 2021, after its relevance to the events of January 6, 2021, in America became manifest, the recommendations algorithm had plenty to work with.

The terrible fact is that there is an entire rightwing authoritarian library, revolving around the absent centre of *The Turner Diaries*. But where *Turner* is the blunt weapon of the typical neo-Nazi skinhead, vomiting out racist denigrations such as “K—e” and “N—r” within the first thirty pages, these are the ideologically insidious instruments of a new sort of authoritarianism. These novels wear expensive suits and style themselves the work of constitutional “patriots” and “proud” men. They present their grievance politics and ideological resentments from behind the mask of injured bewilderment at

¹ Andrew Macdonald, *The Turner Diaries (Second Edition)* (Cosmotheist Books, 2019).

their “silencing” by advocates of “political correctness.” Racism and sexism are presented stochastically, as statistically significant, persistent correlations between ethnicity and gender, on the one hand, and treason and whining, on the other hand. A savage class politics is presented through the patriotic lens of pro-constitutional resistance to liberal conspiracies, which generally turn out to be socialist plots, some with Jewish origins.

The representations of political violence in *Turner* are the work of a slaving gargoyle—the cartoonish hate-porn of a truly horrible individual—racing breathlessly forward through an avalanche of murders. The author wants to get to the real business: lavish descriptions of the machine-gunning of tens of thousands of African Americans and Latinx Americans, mass executions of “race traitors” by hanging squads, the immolation of the cities of the Eastern seaboard in nuclear fire, the chemical and biological extermination of the peoples of Africa and Asia. By contrast, the novel of the new authoritarians is as patient and precise as a sniper, which is not surprising, because many of them are written by combat veterans who understand insurgency, know (and love) their guns, and write convincingly about low-intensity warfare. These are detailed, calculated descriptions of how to stage a rightwing authoritarian anti-government insurgency. They are written by authors who seem convinced that low-intensity warfare can win against the Federal government of the United States. Although the US Army cannot be defeated on the battlefield, they believe it can nonetheless lose the politics of a civil war to a determined force prepared to do terrible things. It doesn’t really matter whether this is a completely incorrect assessment of the political situation, because the real question is what acts this might inspire.

That is not speculation—it was expressly the strategy of Harold A. Covington, William Luther Pierce’s arch-rival on the neo-Nazi Right and an influential figure in Extreme Right politics and literature. Immediately seeing the opportunity that online self-publishing offered to extremist ideologies rejected by commercial presses, Covington digitally issued thousands of pages of hate between 2003–2008.² These novels concern white nationalist secession in the northwestern USA, as a result of protracted guerrilla insurgency and ethnic cleansing. But presenting rightwing authoritarian extremist ideology as military adventure, rather than a fascist insurrection, is a deliberate effort to mainstream the politics. Additionally, different readerships need the politics tuned to their cultural preferences, which is why Covington also wrote medieval thrillers with

² Harold Covington, *Dreaming the Iron Dream* (York, SC: Liberty Bell Publications, 2005). See also: George Michael, “Fighting for an Aryan Homeland: Harold Covington and the Northwest Front,” *Journal of Counterterrorism & Homeland Security International* 20, no. 4 (2014).

a fantasy twist and science fiction utopias set in a racial future. What Covington realized was that the political manifesto or the guerrilla manual, which might earn the author a gaol sentence as non-fictional statements, can perfectly well be presented through fiction—the ideal alibi.

To some extent, indeed, the novel has replaced the manifesto and the manual in the contemporary discourse of rightwing authoritarianism, at least in the English-speaking democracies. The reason that so many on the Extreme Right have gone, as one counter-terrorism researcher puts it, “from the bomb to the book,” is that this corresponds exactly to the demands of the conjuncture.³ These are mostly e-books—with print-on-demand helpfully supplied by global distributors—digitally (self-)published by letterbox vanity popups with names like “2nd Amendment Press” and “Patriot Publishing.” The leading exponents have been *USA Today* and *New York Times* bestsellers, but that was mostly as a result of concerted manipulation of the algorithm. Nonetheless, successful rightwing authoritarian novels have a 4 ½ star rating and about 1,000 reviews on Amazon, with similar performance on Goodreads. So rightwing authoritarian fictions sit just below the threshold for commercial viability, in a space where there is a minority audience with a consistent preference for novelistic representations of political violence. In short, the popular support for nationwide anti-government insurgency is under construction today, in part as the readership of rightwing authoritarian fictions.

I know that this may strike some readers as incredibly counter-intuitive and potentially wrong-headed. The political constituency of authoritarian populism is supposed to consist of Internet trolls, doom-scrolling Boomers and pimply meme-warriors. There they are, woodpeckering away at their keyboards or bleeding from the eyes at their screens: misinformation junkies with low educational achievements, lower cultural understanding and abysmal political knowledge; a “basketful of deplorables,” whose preference for visual icons expresses illiterate ignorance. That’s a profound mistake, for reasons too numerous to unpack here. These people can read—and they do. So here is my last point.

The reason that many of them read novels is intrinsically connected to the nature of the ideology. Conservatism is an ideology of not-changing. But authoritarianism is not the same as conservatism. Authoritarianism is an ideology of change. In fact, it is an ideology of radical change, a drastic social simplification, designed to return the nation to the golden age. Make the nation great again! Should any resist, gaol them, shoot them, hang them on the National Mall, deport them to Guantanamo Bay; “terminate” inconvenient clauses in the Constitution, “go after” judicial officials who insist on the rule of law. That

³ Jacob Aasland Ravndal, “From Bombs to Books, and Back Again? Mapping Strategies of Right-Wing Revolutionary Resistance,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021), <https://doi.org/doi:10.1080/1057610x.2021.1907897>.

ideology is not just an ensemble of actions, policies, ideals. It is also an angular doctrine about human nature, a shocking vision of human flourishing. The terrible impoverishment and repulsive politics of white supremacy do not stop it being a wish-fulfilment dream about vengeance and restoration for its true believers. Radical change involves social transformation through subversion of democracy, as the most expedient trajectory to the achievement of the utopian vision, the regaining of the lost paradise. That trajectory consists of a conjectural chain of causes-and-effects, which is to be driven by the actions of political agents, namely, the movement followers recruited to a form of ideological subjectivity. The best name for the representation of a causal pathway driven by agential actions is narrative, and the name given to speculative trajectories of this type is “narrative fiction.”

Authoritarianism involves radical change, which means that it is an ideology that particularly depends on narrative fictions. These tell us something crucial about what it feels like, how it happens, who it involves, and what it leads to. In political terms, this works. Timothy McVeigh, who bought *The Turner Diaries* because he was looking for an imaginative representation of white nationalism, used the text as the direct inspiration for his shift from the book to the bomb.⁴ On April 19, 1995, he detonated an explosive device in the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people (19 of them children) and injuring another 680. Books do convert, do activate, do radicalize, and may do real harm in the process. Where the political manifesto and the insurgency manual present the conjectural sequence as exhortation or instruction, the novel shows what it would feel like. It presents the possible experience of a radicalized subjectivity as a vicarious reality, which the reader can try on for size. In turn, the narrative pattern becomes the blueprint and template for actual experience. When asked by journalists what they imagined they were doing in the lead up to January 6, 2021, members of the Proud Boys paused before storming the Capitol for long enough to reply: “Read *The Turner Diaries* and you will find out.”⁵

⁴ J.M. Berger, “The Turner Legacy: The Storied Origins and Enduring Impact of White Nationalism’s Deadly Bible,” *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague (ICCT): Evolutions in Counter-Terrorism* 1 (2020); George Michael, “Blueprints and Fantasies: A Review and Analysis of Extremist Fiction,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33 (2009).

⁵ Alexandra Alter, “How ‘The Turner Diaries’ Incites White Supremacists,” *The Guardian (US Edition)* (New York), January 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/12/books/turner-diaries-white-supremacists.html>; Dorany Pineda, “‘The Turner Diaries’ didn’t just inspire the Capitol attack. It warns us what might be next,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), January 8, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/books/story/2021-01-08/kathleen-belew-on-the-turner-diaries>.

My questions, about the nature of rightwing-authoritarian ideological propaganda and the potential impact of literary knowledge on countering violent extremism, had converged. This book is the rather small contribution that a literary studies researcher can realistically make to the very big task of protecting democracy from rising authoritarianism.