

Two Cheers for the Human Race: On Great Replacement and Suicidal Empathy

Note: These are two related polemics on the contemporary far-right imagination — one about the paranoid fantasy of demographic replacement, the other about the rebranding of contempt as self-preservation. Both are, in their different ways, exercises in making cruelty sound like survival.

The Great Replacement: A Fantasy That Kills

Let's talk about the Great Replacement Theory, because it needs talking about plainly and without the ceremonial academic cautions that give conspiracies more credit than they deserve.

The theory, for those who have managed to avoid it, goes something like this: there is a coordinated, deliberate effort by political and cultural elites to replace white European populations with non-white immigrants, for reasons that are never quite specified but which involve some combination of political control, corporate cheap labour, and what the more candid adherents describe as racial displacement. It has been given airtime by sitting Members of Parliament, it has been referenced in parliamentary debates, it has been the stated motivation for multiple mass murders, and it is, without any qualification whatsoever, a poisonous fantasy.

The historical record is worth establishing at the outset, because the Great Replacement Theory — or Great Replacement Conspiracy Theory, to use the honest name — has a habit of presenting itself as hard-headed realism while being, in fact, a conspiracy theory in the classic sense: an explanation that posits hidden actors, secret coordination, and a narrative of decline and fall that requires rejecting all inconvenient evidence. Demographers have been predicting the ageing of European populations — and therefore the economic necessity of immigration — since the 1970s. This was not a secret plan. It was published, debated, voted on, complained about in tabloids. The demographic realities that supposedly evidence the Great Replacement were visible in plain sight for anyone who cared to look. That they were widely ignored, and that immigration was simultaneously used as a political weapon by parties who had no intention of stopping it, tells us something important: the Great Replacement is not a revelation about hidden facts. It is a *chosen interpretation* of publicly available facts, filtered through an assumption of malicious intent that is itself doing all the work.

And that assumption is doing a great deal of work indeed. The data on immigration — its sources, volumes, integration outcomes, economic effects, and cultural impacts — is complicated, contested, and genuinely interesting. It does not support a single grand narrative of deliberate replacement. What it does support, in the hands of someone already committed to a conspiratorial worldview, is exactly the story they were looking for. This is the tell. Conspiracy theories are not, in the main, responses to evidence. They are patterns that evidence is made to fit. Show a true believer the statistics and they will explain them as evidence of the conspiracy's sophistication, its ability to hide in plain sight. The theory is unfalsifiable by design, which means it is not a theory at all. It is a narrative.

The consequences of this narrative are not merely intellectual. Anders Breivik cited Great Replacement thinking in his 2011 manifesto before killing seventy-seven people, mostly teenagers at

a Labour Party youth camp. Brenton Tarrant cited it before the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019. Patrick Crusius cited it before the El Paso Walmart shooting in 2019. These are not peripheral figures who have latched onto a fringe idea. They are the logical audience for a theory that tells white Europeans they are being deliberately erased, that their societies are under attack, and that something must be done. When the theory is repeated by mainstream politicians and commentators — when it is softened and sanitised and presented as merely a concern about "demographic change" or "cultural identity" — it is the same idea, with the same implications, in a voice that is socially acceptable. The mass murderers are not a distortion of the theory. They are its most honest readers.

This is what makes the Great Replacement Theory not merely wrong but dangerous. It is a theory that, in the form in which it is actually believed, produces violence. That is not an accident. The theory's emotional core is grievance and fear, and grievance and fear, given enough social permission, become anger, and anger, given enough encouragement, become a gun. The people who traffic in this theory, in whatever diluted or respectable form, are trafficking in something that has killed people. That is a fact worth keeping in mind when the conversation turns to "just asking questions" and "concerns about demographics."

What Connects Them: Difference as the Problem

Before turning to suicidal empathy, it is worth stepping back and noticing what these two arguments have in common beneath their surface differences.

Both are, at root, theories about *difference* — about the presence of people who are not like "us" and about what that presence supposedly means for society. Both take a genuine social anxiety and reroute it through a narrative of existential threat. Both offer a clear enemy — the conspiratorial elite in the Great Replacement, the object of misplaced empathy in the suicidal empathy argument — and both tell their adherents that the path to safety runs through the suppression or exclusion of difference.

And both are, crucially, exploiting real economic and social anxieties rather than inventing them wholesale. That is the part that deserves more attention than it usually gets. The people who are drawn to these ideas are not, in the main, pathological racists or ideological obsessives. They are people who have watched their communities hollow out, their jobs disappear, their towns become unrecognisable, their children's futures narrow. They have been told, repeatedly and by people who had no intention of doing anything about it, that they are economically and culturally insecure — and then been offered, by grifters and ideologues and worse, a target for that insecurity. Difference. The other. The people who don't belong.

This is not a defence of conspiracy theories or far-right ideology. It is a recognition that the conditions that produce them — the deindustrialisation of working-class communities, the collapse of social housing, the erosion of trade unions, the failure of mainstream politics to offer any credible answer to the question "why am I worse off than my parents were?" — are real conditions, and that anyone who genuinely wants to oppose these ideologies had better be honest about that. The Great Replacement and suicidal empathy are symptoms. The disease is a political and economic order that has spent forty years telling working people that their insecurity is their own fault, and that the only people who can be blamed for it are the ones below them on the ladder rather than the ones above.

Suicidal Empathy: The Far Right's Most Cynical Rebrand

If the Great Replacement is the far right's most explosive fantasy, "suicidal empathy" is its most

insidious rhetorical achievement. Where the Great Replacement tells a story about external enemies, suicidal empathy tells a story about internal weakness. It is, in a sense, the more sophisticated argument — or rather, it presents itself as more sophisticated, which is often enough to fool people who pride themselves on not being fooled by the first kind.

The concept, as it circulates in far-right and "identitarian" spaces, runs roughly as follows: the empathy that western societies — and specifically white majorities within those societies — are encouraged to feel toward immigrants, racial minorities, women, LGBTQ+ people, and other out-groups constitutes a form of collective self-harm. This empathy, the argument goes, is leading to demographic decline, social fragmentation, and civilisational collapse. Acting on empathy toward those who would not extend the same empathy in return is not merely foolish but suicidal — a civilisation turning its own moral instincts against itself. The strong thing to do, the evolutionarily rational thing, the thing that every successful civilisation has always done, is to stop.

Listen to the structure of this argument carefully, because it is carefully constructed. It does not begin with hatred. It begins with an observation that most people would accept: empathy is a good thing, empathy binds societies together, societies that lose their social cohesion become fragile. This much is, or could be, perfectly uncontroversial. The sleight of hand comes in what follows: empathy for *these particular groups*, the argument suggests, is the problem. The groups are chosen precisely because they are groups that have historically been denied empathy by the societies in question — precisely because extending empathy to them represents a genuine moral expansion, an overcoming of inherited prejudice. And that is what makes the argument so effective and so 惡心. It takes the moral intuition that *prejudice is wrong and empathy is good* and turns it against itself. The message is: you are being moral, and that very morality is what is killing you.

There are several things worth saying about this.

First, the framing of empathy as evolutionarily irrational is itself a rhetorical choice dressed up as biology. Evolutionary psychology is a powerful and legitimate tool for understanding human behaviour. It is also one of the most frequently abused fields in popular discourse, providing post-hoc "just-so stories" for almost any social arrangement its proponents happen to prefer. The claim that empathy for out-groups is "evolutionarily irrational" requires, at minimum, a demonstration that in-group preference is genetically determined rather than culturally learned, and that it cannot be overcome without civilisational collapse. Neither of these things is established. What *is* well-established is that human social organisation is remarkably flexible, that moral circles have expanded dramatically over recorded history, and that there is nothing inevitable about any particular pattern of in-group and out-group formation.

Second, and more fundamentally: the very concept of "suicidal empathy" is a moral claim, not a scientific one, however many evolutionary psychology citations it wraps itself in. It says that certain forms of compassion are wrong — that societies should feel less empathy, not more, toward certain categories of people. This is a prescription, not a description. It cannot be established by pointing to demographic trends or social outcomes, because whether those trends constitute a "decline" depends entirely on a prior moral commitment to a particular kind of society. Calling empathy "suicidal" does not make it so. It makes a value judgement and pretends it is a biological observation.

Third, and this is the thing I find most genuinely disturbing about this framing: it takes the moral progress of the last seventy years — the extension of rights and recognition to people who were previously denied them — and reframes that progress as pathology. The civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the LGBTQ+ rights movement: all of these represent the expansion of moral concern, the recognition that the categories we previously used to deny empathy to some people were morally indefensible. And now we are being told, by people who are often quite explicit about their preference for earlier social arrangements, that this expansion of moral concern is what is killing us. The cruelty is not incidental to this argument. It is the argument.

Here is the thing that should be said plainly: the societies that have most fully embraced pluralistic values — that have extended rights, opened borders, built inclusive institutions — are not dying. They are, by almost every measure of human welfare, the most successful societies that have ever existed. The countries that have most thoroughly embraced the alternative — ethnic nationalism, authoritarianism, the closed society — have, with very few exceptions, produced poverty, repression, and catastrophe. This is not an accident. Open societies are open for reasons that have everything to do with human flourishing. The far right knows this, or should, and its preferred rhetorical strategy — to argue that openness itself is the disease — is the most revealing evidence of where that ideology leads.

Empathy is not a weakness. It is the mechanism by which moral progress happens. The societies that have more of it are better, not worse, than the ones that have less. The argument that we should feel less empathy, that we should contract our moral circles rather than expand them, is not a hard-headed survival strategy. It is a surrender to fear dressed up as strength.

And that, when you strip away the evolutionary psychology and the demographic projections and the careful academic framing, is all it has ever been.

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