

Luigi Mangione's twisted radicalism

Why has the internet rallied around a mysterious suspected assassin?

Fred Skulthorp

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When the UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson was shot dead outside a hotel in New York, the suspect Luigi Mangione would not have foreseen that his own Goodreads list would attract more interest than the blurry CCTV footage of the actual assassination. America has already had two attempts this year by self-mythologising gunmen to enter the pantheon of Lee Harvey Oswald and Ted Kaczynski when two men took aim at Donald Trump. But neither were as good looking or as well read as Mangione.

So far these assets have made him popular. Last night (10 December), Mangione's glib 262-word manifesto leaked online, alongside a video of him being restrained as he shouted, "This is completely unjust," and "an insult to the intelligence of the American people". He will plead not guilty to the charges of murder. Those who regarded him as a violent, mentally unstable individual might have felt vindicated by these statements. But that didn't really matter. An online frenzy of erotic intrigue and intellectual speculation had already triumphed over his suspected act of murder. Digital archaeologists had plundered Mangione's X and Goodreads accounts, an act of collective criticism that has brought a surprising new perspective to dour bestsellers such as Yuval Noah Harari's *Nexus* and James Clear's self-help book *Atomic Habits*.

What emerged, contrary to the insistence on making him the spiritual inheritor to the apocalyptic reclusivity of Kaczynski, was his relative normality. A "LinkedIn bro" as one X user described him. "One of the nicest people I've ever met," said the writer Gurwinder Bhogal, who claimed to have had a two-hour conversation with him about his essay "Why everything is becoming a game". "I LITERALLY FUCKED THE UNITED HEALTHCARE CEO ASSASSIN," wrote the Instagram influencer Caroline Calloway, who also seemed more than happy to be associated with him. In other words he inhabited a milieu vaguely familiar to much of the overeducated, disenchanted Western graduate class: a dull deskbound job, a gym membership, and a drip feed of content concerned with self-improvement and the many apocalyptic crises facing the West.

But what did Mangione really believe? This, given the evident relatability and broad scope of his taste, was what everyone wanted to know. On the Goodreads list there was indeed the Unabomber Kaczynski, whose manifesto he had given a cautious yet favourable review. But there was also Jonathan Haidt and Dr Seuss. He was concerned with the demise of Christianity and the new gods: "*horror vacui* [nature abhors a vacuum]," he wrote on X. The film *Idiocracy* in which the world ends up dysfunctionally stupid was regarded as prophetic. There was an interest in the deleterious impact of pornography, social media and the urban environment on the human spirit. He admired the entrepreneurial accelerationism of Peter Thiel and the pop psychology of Tim Urban, who has described the distinction between the "high mind", which seeks Truth and the "low mind", which leads to social conformity.

The writer Katherine Dee has described Mangione as an adherent of traditionalism, an online reactionary movement concerned with authenticity and despair with technology's "hollowing of the human spirit". Whether he acted on this as a coherent

world-view will only become clear in the coming months. But what the relentless interest in Mangione's supposed hinterland does offer is an exhibition of a generational anomie that shuns contemporary politics as a failed vehicle to change the world, revelling in a purportedly transformative mix of pop psychology and almost narcissistic pessimism. Mangione has become the anti-hero of the hyperactive internet, one that touts radicalism in the world of pixels but not political associations. Here was someone a bit like them: a normal (even attractive) guy who may have been driven to act by the world's chaotic iniquity. In this flattened landscape, an act of hysterical violence – the murder of a corporate chief executive – becomes a dark parody of this visceral doomerism and its ethos of recovering a pre-modern virtue, the daily scroll that tells you the system is doomed, corrupt and meaningless taken to its logical extreme.

Will there be more shootings? Mangione apologists have argued, as they did in the late 1960s, that the collapse of the American left is to blame for a vacuum now filled with spectacles of violence. At present, the cult of interest is having to deal with more visceral and humdrum rumours: Mangione allegedly went “completely crazy” after back surgery, according to someone who knew his friends, and purportedly used psychedelics to deal with the pain. There is also a quiet retreat from some aspects of Mangione's digital hinterland. Jash Dholani, the “Old Books Guy”, a popular account on X that posts snippets of wisdom from Nietzsche to Kaczynski himself, appears to have deleted a post which Mangione praised as an “essential read to understand modern civilization”. Perhaps we were never meant to take these ideas too literally after all.

The Ted K Archive

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