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## Ultraconservatives in a Contentious Cusp between Past and Future: A Review of Dan Brown's novel "Origin"

### Abstract

Taking Dan Brown's latest novel *Origin* as a thought-provoking heuristic device, this essay discusses the many facets of ultraconservatives' anti-intellectualism (from their stances on evolution and climate change, and also their conspiracy theories). Brown's novel particularly details the cultural tension between progressives and conservatives, depicting a very real far-right and how they respond to a hopeful and diverse youth (while exploring how political perception, fake news, and public information in the virtual era affect politics). The essay concludes that by raging war at science and deliberately making policies against progress, conservatives are at war against rationality itself, by defaming reason and allowing fascistic-authoritarianism to shape politics when, at the age of information, we should be moving to a more open, democratic, and post-capitalist world.

### Keywords

Anti-intellectualism, ultra-conservatives, authoritarianism, history, science, religion, fake news, post-truth politics

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### Cover Page Footnote

Lucas Miranda has a Masters in Political Science at Florida International University. He aspires to get his PhD in political theory in order to keep exploring the concepts of anomie and individuality in the modern age. He has written book reviews for Marx & Philosophy Review of Books and his previous essays on Rick and Morty and Star Wars were also published in "Class, Race and Corporate Power."

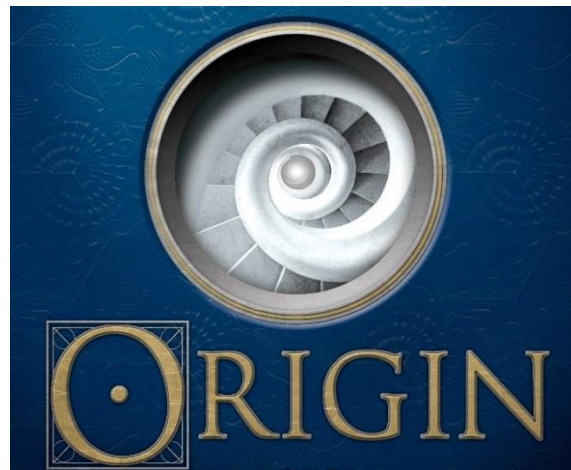
“We are now perched on a strange cusp of history” is a fair assessment of the present as the century of information continues perpetuating ignorance while allowing for greater wisdom to gradually emerge. The sentence is from Dan Brown’s latest novel *Origin*. Dan Brown has become famous for writing suspense novels (mostly famous for *The Da Vinci Code*) where intriguing plots unfold through a myriad of lectures on history, art, philosophy, and religion. With *Origin*, it is no different; however, two features have made this book quite unique in comparison to its predecessors: how overtly political the main plot is, and how timely and culturally relevant the overall themes are. In a nutshell, the novel’s overarching theme is best expressed by one of its own lines: “a contentious cusp between past and future.” Undeniably, for the only past two decades, the world has witnessed drastic and rapid changes in virtually all dimensions of human life; culturally, we have become more open and tolerant, and politically more acutely observant and self-critical (and if you just thought “but have we?” then you are on the right track). Also, it goes without saying, technology has reshaped all landscape of social life. The book pinpoints the emergence of this new era, but it explores the inevitable cultural turbulence which has been—and will certainly continue being—the clash between progressive views and more conservative generations.

While millennials have surely made their voice heard, we have witnessed the rise of the far-right (under the guises of fascistic-nationalism and authoritarianism) in many parts of the globe (Trump being just the most bigoted face of this backlash). To create a storytelling structure reflecting this, the novel sets a plot involving an ailing conservative Spanish king, an intellectual and progressive woman (future queen of Spain), and between them, her spouse—a conflicted prince. Also, we have radical religious groups highly discontent with the “modernization” of the Vatican and its new Pope, and an influential bishop who has both the king and the prince’s ears on political matters (while the Spanish youth calls for the end of the monarchy). This is the background which establishes the themes of the novel which will be echoed in the main storyline: a famous scientist, Edmond Kirsch, claims to have answered the questions “where do we come from?” and “where are we going?” and triumphantly affirms that his breakthrough will forever crush the foundations of all world religions and make us all rethink the path we have taken and the one we are about to take. Nonetheless, he is killed shortly before making his discovery public (thus giving our hero, Robert Langdon, a journey to embark upon).

Delving into this “strange cusp of history,” between past and future, the book showcases why and how the far-right responds to a hopeful, vibrant, progressive and diverse youth. From casting doubt on scientific claims (from evolution to climate change), establishing fanatical narratives through the proliferation of conspiracy theories, and making of fake news the main means to spread pseudo-information, *Origin* depicts a very *real* far-right, one that has become so reactionary in its anti-intellectualism and flirt with fascism, that it demands our attention. Furthermore, using these current social-phenomena as devices to the story, Brown is not just assaulting the modus-operandi of ultra-conservatism, but also calling our attention to how insidious, and highly non-conducive to debates based on factual analysis, the virtual era can be.

Meaning that, conversely, the virtual era has proved to be highly conducive to rather post-truth politics: when debates are framed by the repetition of talking points appealing to emotions (i.e., to the ideological core of one's political identity) thus creating pseudo-arguments disconnected from policy details and to which factual rebuttals are utterly ignored—and the role of mainstream media on this cannot be overstated.

In this review essay, I analyze how Brown's novel is commenting on current social developments, from cultural changes to political challenges, and to which reflections we are invited to make upon central features of the present world—while bearing in mind the wrongdoings of our past, the conundrums of our present, and the possibilities for our future.



(<http://danbrown.com/origin/>)

(There are no major spoilers in this essay. By reading the book after reading this, one would be surprised by how much has been preserved for the reader to experience the story in its fullest).

### **Ultraconservatives: Authoritarians against Science**

As I have alluded above, I believe that *Origin* makes a case of what the zeitgeist of our time encapsulates: *a contentious cusp between past and future*. There is a dark past, one of persecution and intolerance, which seems to be haunting many contemporary societies as authoritarian leaders are on the rise. We have seen their ascension in the Philippines, Poland, Turkey, Hungary, the US, and most recently in Brazil. In tracing clear parallels to this real phenomenon, in the novel, we are brought to the historical and political contexts of Spain. Brown creates a fictional political scenario—a delicate moment of transition of power which could bring an ideological-shift to the country—to provide context to a real sentiment: that such a shift, for progressives, would mean their country moving towards progress and reasserting itself in the right side of history. On the other hand, for conservatives, it would mean their ultimate failure in protecting their country from the dire consequences of progressivism and its immoral banner of social justice. Brown uses this cultural tension throughout the story as a character of its own: “In

the streets older traditionalists waved Spanish flags, while young progressives proudly wore their antimonarchic colors of the old Republican banner.”

He constantly brings up the phantom of the “...ultraconservative dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, whose brutal regime advocated nationalism, authoritarianism, militarism, anti-liberalism, and National Catholicism.” Franco’s dictatorship lasted from 1939 to his death in 1975. Brown comments that the dictator “depicting himself as the defender of “Catholic Spain” and the enemy of godless communism, Franco had embraced a starkly male-centric mentality, officially excluding women from many positions of power, or even the right to flee from an abusive husband...among other restrictions, he outlawed divorce, contraception, abortion, and homosexuality.” Brown adds that “since Franco’s death in 1975, the king had tried to work in hand with the government to cement Spain’s democratic process, inching the country ever so slowly to the left.” However, “for the youth, the changes were too slow. For the traditionalists, the changes were blasphemous.”

This last sentence bluntly mirrors the current political climate in the US as progressives increasingly tend to want to push for more radical reforms (while completely breaking away from the Democratic Party) while the GOP, under Trump’s administration, continues to push back and undo much of the social achievements of the last decades—from LGBTQ rights to abortion, and most recently reviving the ban on transgender military service. Whether or not we take Brown’s claim that “many members of Spain’s establishment still fiercely defended Franco’s conservative doctrine” with a grain of salt, the fact is that bringing this notion to the political reality of the US—of an ultraconservative elite residing in power and purposefully making reactionary policies—does not only sound true but is also currently very relevant. Brown depicts these “traditionalists” as “plenty of old-timers who looked at the chaos and spiritual apathy of contemporary Spain [if only they saw this anomic state as a product of capitalism] and felt that the country should be saved only by a stronger state religion, a more authoritarian government, and the imposition of clearer moral guidelines.” “*Look at our youth!* They would shout. *They are all adrift!*” would be their response to a rapidly growing number of Spain’s youth who were “brazenly denouncing the hypocrisy of organized religion and lobbying for greater separation of church and state.”

Examining further this contention between longing for past paradigms and fighting for a progressive future, the book also heavily addresses conservatives’ denial of science. Given the overarching theme of the book relying much on the importance of scientific breakthroughs, the issue most discussed on this area is that of creationism versus evolution (which is why the discussion over separation of church and state is repeatedly reiterated). To many this might sound unbelievable, but the debate to whether or not to teach creationism over evolution in public schools is still alive to this day in the US. Equally absurd, though possibly more politically relevant, is their denial of climate change. I say more politically relevant because, especially on this topic, we all know that their denial, in its majority, is not sincere intellectual skepticism of science (though they like to pose as such) but rather their concern over the

progressive politics that comes with this issue as it advocates for significant changes regarding how we do politics—the long well-established politics which capitalism survives from (while leaving ecological matters on the humanities’ bookshelf of non-profitable, hence meaningless, considerations—as if the longevity of human existence did not depend on such considerations, ecological, psychological, or what not). In fact, this logic runs through all the political spectrum of the American political establishment: while Democrats do have a better discourse and do convey better intentions on the matter of climate change, if one looked at their actual plans and policies (and the lack of leftist praxis therein), one should conclude that they only seize the topic as means to get votes from the so called liberals and some progressives (while not doing anything that could do their words any justice).

The book makes it clear again and again that there is “no question whatsoever among real scientists that evolution is happening. Empirically, we can *observe* the process. It is based on scientifically *observable* fact...” And of course the exact same could be said about climate change. But focusing on the debate over evolution and its detractors, the book comments, mostly through our protagonist—Harvard scholar Robert Langdon—that there is indeed a quite vast literature of books claiming to disprove Darwin, most of them from a fundamentally Christian point of view. Langdon mentions how the “Institute for Creation Research” funds and publishes these books. This is a real institute located in Dallas, Texas, and in its own website they state that they “want people to know that God’s Word can be trusted in everything it speaks about—from how and why we were made, to how the universe was formed...”<sup>1</sup> In other words, they take the Bible, particularly the Genesis, very seriously. The book’s social commentary also sheds light on the Palmarian Church: another real organization that really has broken from the Vatican and since 1978 no longer recognizes the legitimacy of the Catholic Church’s Pope for, as they believe, their Popes have not followed dogma as wanted by God. Although the Palmarians serve the plot as antagonists (as ultraconservatives), it is also an interesting factuality to add to further illustrate the epochal conflict between the politics, ideology, and worldview of different generations and social groups.

Although the narrative is fiction, given the starkly factual political atmosphere established in the story, we are entitled to reflect on the question how conservatives will continue treating science in the next decades and how would they possibly react to any upcoming breakthrough that could either undermine more pillars of religion or call for even more radical action regarding the state of the planet. Be it for cunning political motivations or for ideological (dogmatic, superstitious) convictions, conservatives’ stance on evolution, climate change, and vaccines (let alone Flat-Earthers who actually are considerably a large group of people considering their preposterous cause)<sup>2</sup>, the fact is that the strain of anti-intellectualism in the far-right is disturbingly worrisome.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.icr.org/who-we-are>

<sup>2</sup> According to this recent piece of news, <https://mashable.com/article/flat-earth-international-conference-cruise-gps/#Mv16ou7s6Oq9>, Flat-Earthers will do a cruise to prove the Earth is flat, though using GPS based on Earth as it is—a round planet (and now they have also forced me to be redundant).

This anti-intellectualism and its sheer dismissal of reality leads us now to the far-right's conspiracy theories and the role the internet, another integral feature of today's world, plays on their formulations and proliferation—as politics of fear is a powerful ally to post-truth politics.

### **A Dizzying Kaleidoscope of Conspiracies**

What also makes *Origin* different than others Brown's novels, is how this time around the story had to incorporate today's technological means of information and how information itself has become ever more fluid, instant, and mercurial. In today's world, because of our current means of communication, had some famous scientist been shot when he was about to announce his discovery, the entire world would watch and follow closely the story and its developments. So, Brown could not just ignore that the entire world would logically have almost the same amount of information as the reader and thus speculate just as the reader has always speculated while reading his books—but the world has changed much since *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). Hence the public's speculation, most likely the same as the reader, had to become part of the story.

Intercalating between chapters, the book often provides one or two pages of 'Breaking News' mostly reported by *ConspiracyNet.com* (a fictional website). While in his old novels there would be, for example, suspicious encounters between individuals which only the reader would know about, in this one such encounters quickly come to light in the novel's world as anyone can take pictures, post them online, enhance their quality to caught small but important details, etc. (and of course one should always wonder whether or not such pictures could have been edited—21<sup>st</sup> century problems indeed). To save spoilers and space, it will suffice to say that suspicions aroused connecting Edmond's assassination to the Royal Family's religious orientations and political motivations. This turn of events leads the reader to what becomes a very important setting in the story: the control room of the Royal Palace, where agent Garza, overseer of the Guardia Real, and Monica Martin, public relations coordinator and strategist, try to make sense of the crisis while trying to protect the image of the Royal Family.

Martin represents a younger generation—a tech-savvy who knows full well how politics and information works in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (including the complacent and hypocrite role of mainstream media as the incendiary and reckless nature of conspiracy theories' outlets). Garza represents the other end of the spectrum, someone who constantly feels like they are "getting too old for this modern world" and "no longer recognized the world in which he lived." As shady evidence start popping up all over the internet, "facts" concocted out of thin air ("alternative facts," if you will), and reason and logic thrown out of the window to be replaced by hysteria and euphoria, the term "conspiracy theories" gains significant relevance in the story. While Garza feels bewildered that "fake news now carries as much weight as real news," Martin does not feel surprised at all at how chimerical narratives ultimately framed the discourse of the night among

journalists, pundits, and politicians.<sup>3</sup> In a climate of post-truth politics, the media only seems to be interested to capitalize upon fake or banal stories by exercising their shallow at best, or biased at worst, “journalism.” As the story unfolds, the reader is drawn into a “dizzying kaleidoscope of competing conspiracy theories,” as the book puts it. Eventually, as the book nears the end, there is a consensus among the authorities on who had been behind the whole scheme evolving Edmond’s assassination. And us, the readers, are most certainly on the same page—because the solution is simple, elegant, “makes sense,” and seems to follow our logic upon what was given as facts and evidence. But of course the twist comes to make all of us wrong. But this is not just any twist; the book clearly makes a point of how much we crave for explanations that are, simultaneously, simple but grand enough to explain very complex problems which stem from political reality.

In order to do this, there is no more effective device than creating the infamous and ominous “Other.” That is, creating an enemy. Conservatives have been playing this game—that of the politics of fear—for a really long time (along with threatening the freedom of the press—yet another basic characteristic of an authoritarian political ethos). Since his campaign Trump has been on a crusade against immigrants, which has recently resulted in the longest shutdown in US history and now to his announcement of a national emergency that literally does not exist (and he has openly admitted how conservative outlets have “informed” his, quite authoritarian, decision). Trump’s proposal policies have from the beginning been designed to push, particularly conservatives’, emotional buttons—not based on intelligence, feasibility, or cost (a good example of post-truth politics). Furthermore, supported by outlets like Infowars and Breitbart, Trump and his supporters (many from whom are “decent people” who march with torches chanting racial slurs), decided that the world’s problems are due to the leftist-agenda of a secretive global scheme. Many Republicans now speak often and openly of these “globalists,”—but, as Fareed Zakaria notices, “for some reason these ‘globalists’ tend to be Jewish financiers (Lloyd Blankfein, Gary Cohn, Janet Yellen and George Soros). One can only conclude that elements of the Republican Party are either clueless about anti-Semitism or actively encouraging it.”<sup>4</sup> They are not clueless. They have just found a story they feel quite comfortable with, especially, as it villainizes those who they have always marched against—in general, minorities.

And of course, taking part in this global scheme, they also include the hoax of climate change, Marxist indoctrination in schools, that the UN is also part of the globalist agenda, and so much more that could be straight from a Dan Brown book on the illuminati. In all honesty, I am sure Brown could write a hell of a book about the long arms of Globalism seeking to destroy conservatives and everything they hold dear. But seriously, why such a conspiracy? Let’s say the world is indeed getting anti-religious, pro-socialism, and pro-minorities. Even if they do not like

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<sup>3</sup> There is an entire chapter dedicated for her thoughts on the media: “you are supposed to report the news...not spread vicious rumors in the form of questions...turning every ludicrous statement into a leading question.”

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-gop-has-become-the-party-of-fake-news-and-paranoid-fantasies/2018/11/01/0f45ba88-de13-11e8-85df-7a6b4d25cfbb\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.d52ebbab1a28](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-gop-has-become-the-party-of-fake-news-and-paranoid-fantasies/2018/11/01/0f45ba88-de13-11e8-85df-7a6b4d25cfbb_story.html?utm_term=.d52ebbab1a28)



it, why can't conservatives just acknowledge that the times are a-changing? Do they believe so ardently in the "natural order and way of things" that a slight disruption of it would require a global conspiracy to spread communist propaganda? And "communist propaganda" being so loosely stamped on any discussion over a range of topics (gender, immigration, universal health care, separation of church and state, gun control, feminism, etc.), only shows how they have conjured up one single all-mighty enemy (the globalists) to engulf all of these, actually, very rational debates that just happened to be cultivated up by the latest waves of history. Hegel said it better: "the world looks rational to those who look at it rationally." And this does not mean that the "world being rational" equals it is what it "ought to be"; it only means that as history proceeds, there is a reason for the way human life (customs, norms, laws, culture,) changes over time—and this can be historically (empirically) examined by reason. However, where there is so much anti-intellectualism, is just natural that rationality will be scarce while paranoia abundant.

As conservatives keep going further to the right, the more radical and ultra-conservative they will get, and therefore, more their political conduct will be one driven by fanaticism—hence irrational. Ultimately, their rationality is just as misguided as their sense of morality. Conservatives' unwavering sense of righteousness, their adamant belief into defending what is morally superior to any other worldview, is possibly the most powerful source of their inclination to authoritarianism. In holding "conservative values" as the *only* remedy for a troubling world, inadvertently or not, they gravitate towards, and blindly deposit all their faith, in authoritative figures or traditions. Conservatives spend so much energy on not wanting to change traditional power structures, that they have historically, more often than not, stood in opposition to many victories and virtues mankind earned during history: virtues coupled with any fight for the possibility of a brighter future.

### **Conclusion: A Rather Uncertain Future**

By the end of the story, Robert Langdon launches Edmond's pre-recorded presentation to the world, where Edmond explains how his science has shed light on mankind's origin and destiny. For the purposes of this essay, the answer to the question "where do we come from?" is not terribly relevant (though thought-provoking to those who read the book and appreciate legitimate scientific speculations with a touch of fiction). As for the question "where are we going?" Edmond's answer lies on the evolution of technology and how it has been "absorbing" the human experience. He claims "we are becoming a hybrid species—a fusion of biology and technology. The same tools that today live *outside* our bodies—smartphones, hearing aids, reading glasses, most pharmaceuticals—in fifty years will be incorporated into our bodies..." In short, "new technologies like cybernetics, synthetic intelligence, cryonics, molecular engineering, and virtual reality will forever change what it means to be *human*." Here the book touches on an extremely important and very serious discussion regarding what it will be of mankind in this century. The take of the book is overly optimistic:

*Edmond persuasively described a future where technology had become so inexpensive and ubiquitous that it erased the gap between the haves and have nots; a future where environmental technologies provided billions of people with drinking water, nutritious food, and access to clean energy. A future where the awesome power of the internet was finally harnessed for education...a future where assembly-line robotics would free workers from mind-numbing jobs so they could pursue more rewarding fields that would open up in areas not yet imagined...a future in which breakthrough technologies began creating such an abundance of humankind's critical resources that warring over them would no longer be necessary.*

Absolutely none of this is certain. On the contrary, what we have seen is that our politics has not been up to the speed of the technological revolution while our culture has not been taking the best advantage of it. This does not mean that such a future is unthinkable either (and nor should it be). Whether technology will enhance the cultural and socio-economic ills of capitalism or push mankind to a post-capitalist world will depend precisely on how we move forward from this strange cusp of history we find ourselves in; whether society moves in the direction of greater and more substantive democracy, or continues being structurally complacent with strains of authoritarianism (as technology can provide the tools to break from perpetual capitalistic mentality as well as continue begetting social alienation and economic misery which, together, always pave the way for a more authoritarian track).

But this is also the beauty of history: the future has always been uncertain and all of history has always been a series of contentious cusps between pasts and futures. History of man has always been one of conflict. History is not linear; it is a spiral. Unfortunately (or not), reason is not the only faculty man is born with. Insofar as we remain human, our history will continue to reflect our inner battles; it will continue being, not just the record, but the very ordering and disordering of all human experiences. Which is why, once again in Hegel's words, "we have to take history as it is; we must proceed historically, empirically." Otherwise, we will allow any frame of orientation we might have (ideological, political, or religious) to do all the interpretation for us without any self-criticism (which is so important once such frames are often desirable and even more often inevitable). Hence why politics must always be aligned with reason, with what we can logically observe and objectively prove—all the while aiming at what we can improve; i.e., also being attentive to the normative goals guiding our politics (be it from the left or right—while we must be vigilant to stick to factual analysis, normative judgements will always accompany even what we consider to be the most objective assertion).

While ultraconservatives might stretch their judgment of a changing world to conspiracy levels, they are not incorrect that progressive change is present and causing change in many spheres of life. This raises an important question on how conservatives might want to reevaluate their normative goals and how "conservative values" could, along the rest of us, evolve and what they should stand for in a more progressive world—or they can continue equating progressivism to

blasphemy, defaming reason, making up facts, promoting intolerance, inciting hate and fear, and giving life to a long dead past. At the moment, the anti-intellectualism of ultraconservatives raging war at science, creating paranoid fantasies, and deliberately making policies against progress, is not just a backlash to millennials' progressivism—it is war to rationality itself, and along with it, war to the best humanity can aspire to do and to be.

Edmond's vision might come true if we continue the fight for what is just, defending what is true, learning with the past, and most importantly, *always being critical of the present*—that is, paraphrasing Nietzsche, “applying the knife vivisectionally to the chest” of our zeitgeist; which is exactly what Dan Brown did. Finally, that hopeful vision might come true if we do justice to Edmond's final words:

*I urge you to place your faith in the human capacity for creativity and love, because these two forces, when combined, possess the power to illuminate any darkness*

*May our philosophies keep pace with our technologies. May our compassion keep pace with our powers. And may love, not fear, be the engine of change*

And may history go on...



(<http://danbrown.com/origin/>)