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Revolution in the High Castle: Interpretation & the Political Implications of Hope

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Abstract

This essay explores the politics of Amazon Prime's *The Man in the High Castle* by focusing primarily on how the series deals with the politics of hope, as well as how certain events in the narrative condition or exclude certain potential interpretations. The crux of the argument here is that the show tends towards a revolutionary conclusion, despite also bearing the marks of the depraved society this work emerged within.

Keywords

The Man in the High Castle, Politics of Hope

Cover Page Footnote

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The Man in the High Castle, one of Amazon Prime Studio's first hit shows on their streaming service, became more relevant than its producers could have ever imagined when the first season was written, filmed, and released. Tellingly prescient to say the least (and that it was possible to predict this relevance is all the more telling). This was a world before the election of Donald Trump (and many other far-right reactionary, perhaps even neofascist, leaders around the world). The first season was planned and written before Donald Trump even announced his bid for the presidency. The resurgence of the far right was barely on the radar for many people, though it had emerged globally certainly (see Golden Dawn in Greece and the National Front in France, and Britain First and UKIP in the UK). Yet, *The Man in the High Castle* (*MHC*), compels its viewers to imagine a world where the Allies lost World War II and the Nazi Third Reich and Imperial Japan conquered the eastern and western United States respectively (with a neutral zone of sorts between them). The audience is compelled to imagine the US torn between, at least two, fascisms, where the Nazi extermination program has achieved the fullness of its perversity on a global scale: Jews barely exist as an entirely underground people, and Black women have been systematically sterilized (with millions killed as well).

Before *MHC* reached the peak of its relevance, airing subsequent seasons through the real world rise of various stripes and shades of reactionary populisms, up to and including neofascisms around the world and in the US, it was a commercial success, with engaging characters and an imaginative premise that could have only come from the mind and pen of Phillip K. Dick, author of the novel on which the show is based (though the show uses the same premise and many of the same characters as the novel, the trajectories and emphases are quite different—especially in the last two seasons). The show takes the most interesting elements of the source material and expands upon them in creative ways. But the show has some very weird moments that take some struggling through. It is a show that, especially in season one and season four, require sitting with and through a lot of confusion—only some of which is eventually clarified. If you're looking for a show where all the loose ends are tied up and all your questions are answered, this isn't the show for you.

Interestingly though, this is where the political value of the show is in a general sense. Politics is the often terrain of the undecided, the unknown, and the unpredictable (even when we might think otherwise)—but it is also the terrain of the decision, of the learning (of the trying-to-know), and needing to predict. These contradictory elements are at the heart of *MHC*. Politics, as the realm of the struggle over the collective exercise of legitimate power and decision-making, is one where we must make decisions, take positions, engage with others, and (re)negotiate all of these things. *MHC* is, at its best, a story of struggle.

While there are always many different ways to evaluate the quality of a show (or any art object), as is my typical approach, I evaluate the quality of *MHC* in terms of how thoughtfully and convincingly it contributes to a deeper understanding of the politics of interpretation and the politics of hope. I am not interested in the intentions of the writers (neither Dick's nor the team of writers' for the show), the quality of the acting, nor the cinematography (though if any of these were horrible, there wouldn't have been any resonance to begin with, so that there is resonance speaks for itself to a large degree). I am entirely interested in *MHC* as a political intervention, which should not imply that this is wholly different than treating it as a piece of art.

Hoping Beyond Hope

Each season of *MHC* engages with hope in some similar ways. There is the less overtly but still political hope of successfully surviving some predicament that a character or group of characters is facing. This is the generic hope of any dramatic narrative. There is the more particular lack of long-term hope of characters who've resigned themselves to the cynicism of collaboration or to a perhaps necessary separatist survival. More specifically, we see two interrelated lenses through which to understand the function of hope in MHC and in politics more generally. First, we have the films. Before the audience has any specific sense of what is actually on the films or what they might mean, there is the hope that comes with the struggle to get each film to the eponymous and initially anonymous man in the high castle. Second, once the audience learns of the connection between the films and the existence of the kind of modal realist multiverse, alternative realities where different choices are made and history plays out differently, we see hope and its function in the storyline evolve. Hope is diversified.

But before hope is expanded, it is just the films, which neither the audience nor the characters have any idea about their substance. Juliana Crain's (the main protagonist) personal politicization is a vaguely anti-authoritarian commitment rooted initially in her more politically radical sister's previously secret involvement with the transcontinental resistance. Though the personal element of a sister fulfilling her dead sister's mission never ceases, the films increasingly become Juliana's focus and motivation.

Even after viewing the first reel and subsequent films, their incomprehensibility does nothing to dissuade Juliana of their absolute political importance. And what could that political importance be in practice? Certainly nothing material or intrinsic. Before or after Juliana and the audience know more about what the films actually are, their political character is fundamentally hopeful. They are the objectification of hope, which in turn becomes a subjective factor in the development of organized political struggle. So while we could say the films are really nothing substantial--they're not a guide to some secret weapon; they hold no clues for effectively defeating the imperial Japanese or Nazi regimes—and yet, at the exact same time that they are merely films, they become everything for the resistance.

Once we do learn about what these films are, how they are glimpses of alternative histories of alternative realities, their hopeful character only expands. They become specific material evidence—still requiring something of a suspension of disbelief for all of our characters—that there is reason to be hopeful: because other realities didn't play out how this one did, there is now literal proof that things can be (and, in other worlds, are) different. Indeterminacy and contingency become the augmentation of hope. In fact, indeterminacy and contingency, once introduced never leave the storyline of *MHC*. Without getting into the weeds of political-philosophical debates still ongoing among the Left, it is important to say that while bad teleologies are harmful, endless indeterminacy and contingency are only positives in a context where without them there would no possibility for progress or hope for progress. They are, despite their centrality to *MHC*, just as the films are, nothing in and of themselves. Struggles still need to be waged and won.

MHC leaves us with an opening, which takes us beyond hope. At that point, hope and struggle and organized must be maintained and combined in new ways; the specificity of the future will need

to be built (and further struggled over). The Japanese may have fled and were facing problems of their own in east Asia, and the American Reich (the Greater Nazi Reich, as it is called) may have fallen, but the Third Reich remains. Nazism, and American Nazism, ideologically at least, endure. The deaths of leaders don't erase the project of ideological conditioning that they previously built on and perpetuated.

Lessons for today here are not what one would typically consider to be subtle. Fascists and fascism, in precisely zero of their forms can be voted out of power. It is a definitional quality of fascism in power. But other mechanisms of removal of leaders and destroying of oppressive institutions, don't remove the soul of fascism that enabled it, combined with force, to succeed in the first place. One lesson stands above all the rest though: without a basis for hope, all is lost.

But that isn't quite true, is it? The Nazis didn't need hope. The Imperial Japanese didn't need hope. Today, the US government doesn't need hope. The global capitalist class and its variously bigoted allies and political manifestations don't need hope. Revolutionaries struggling for human emancipation? The exploited and oppressed? We need hope.

A Paean to Liberal Triumphalism or Something More?

Through the films, and eventually through actual traveling between the realities, specific alternative histories are presented to the audience. These alternative realities vary in relation to actual historical events in our real world, but they all seem like improvements compared to a world ruled by dueling fascistic empires. Anything is better than Nazis, right? I mean, yes, the answer is yes. There is no other answer. It is hard to imagine, perhaps impossible, to conceive of an eviler force in human history than the Nazis and the Third Reich. While there is no shortage of vile, degraded humans who may favor this kind of world, that isn't the point. The point is that just because nothing is worse couldn't possibly imply that everything else is worth defending.

One might be tempted, when confronted with a series that offers one world where the Axis powers took over the United States and much of the wider world, alongside other realities where the Allies won and look much similar to our actually lived history and present, to lean too mightily into the interpretive conclusion that *MHC* is some kind of vindication of the neoliberal capitalist trajectory of the twenty-first century: a kind of kick that says to the audience, "hey aren't you glad history didn't play out like *that*?!" Perhaps with the added caution to be aware of the rising fascist presence in the US (and elsewhere). But not much more than that. This is a general perspective that I've encountered in casual conversations with friends and colleagues about the show, and given the moderate liberal capitalist ideological hegemony in the US in the late 2010s and early 2020s, there is good reason to assume that this interpretation has broader resonance as well. Surely, there are many viewers who will take this approach, particularly those viewing the show more for entertainment than political critique (which isn't to suggest that these are always or even often mutually exclusive motivations).

However, there are several moments in the series that challenge the interpretation suggested above, focusing particularly on events from the final season (four). First, we have the scene from episode five ("Mauvaise Foi") of this season, with John Smith in the main alternative reality, with the still-

alive version of his son Thomas in the diner where they are discussing this alt-Thomas's decision to follow in his father's footsteps (goosesteps?) and join the military—to join the war in Vietnam. John offers alt-Thomas a kind of anti-war position, but without any motivation beyond pure possessive selfishness driven solely by fear of losing another son to an insanely violent ideology. Here we see the ethical comparability of Nazi eugenics, which is what leads to Smith's actual son Thomas's death, and delusional American patriotic murderous militarism. While we see a semblance of a human father in John Smith here, the audience is spared from having to actually sympathize with him. Smith gives this alternate version of his son a compelling argument against volunteering to defend American values. "It is all bullshit…" he tells alt-Thomas (and the audience). "It's a fucking lie. Medals, flags, anthems. Pledges of Allegiance. Freedom." This scene is skillfully portrayed such that the audience can ignore Smith's narrow and unprincipled motivations, and still see alt-Thomas's well-intentioned but misinformed decision to enlist for what it is. Smith is nothing more than a broken clock that happens to stumble onto the correct time.

This is a rich scene; in the moments right before these lines, where John and Thomas are arguing, a Black couple walks into the diner (which we then realize was previously only populated by white people) and sit at the counter. Keep in mind, for *MHC* to be interpreted as a glorification of its audience's history, surely this scene would need to be ignored. The white employee behind the counter tells the couple they can't sit at the counter, but he'd be happy to get them takeout. The Black couple politely refuses. The employee, in a classic male Karen move, calls the cops. The couple is violently removed from the diner, while alt-Thomas and John watch. Alt-Thomas expects who he thinks is his real father (not a putrid Nazi) to speak up in defense of the Black couple. It is noteworthy though that none of the other white patrons speak up either. Alt-Thomas himself doesn't speak up either. These regular wholesome Americans take the same position as the Nazi infiltrator—and for the same reasons. The alternate universe, presumably our universe, isn't the "good" universe too many (especially white) Americans falsely believe, still. This scene refuses its audience that perversely feel-good interpretation. And good.

This episode is the very same one where the audience is shown a bit of detail on how the Allied Forces losing played out for those in the military and living in the US during what historically was the end of WWII. We see the implementation of anti-Semitic policies and eventually a wider-reaching racial extermination agenda. We had already learned of its effectiveness. Beyond witnessing the absolute personal betrayal of a Jewish friend and brother-in-arms by Smith, we see how easily Americans became formal and dedicated fascists. It was as though besides the fact that maybe some of their friends wouldn't get to live, many American soldiers just like Smith were completely fine with their new lizard overlords. After all, the political proximity between the old lizard overlords and the new ones was a matter of degree not of kind. Lest we forget the heinous experimentation on Blacks and Hispanics at the hands of the US government; lest we forget about the internment of Japanese-Americans; lest we forget about Jim Crow or the slavery-based plantation economy that preceded it—all carried out on land stolen from indigenous peoples who were subjected to one of histories' greatest crimes. Nazi-esque crimes.

Today, we have children in concentration camps, an immigrant detention gulag archipelago, built not only by Donald Trump (and America's great corporations…), but also under the Obama administration (though they too were literally building on the work of previous administrations as well). Trump has weaponized these camps and increased their population beyond the

unconscionable degree that had been too easily ignored. *MHC* is thus, in a sense, barely fiction at all.

One of the final pieces of sustained dialogue in the series, is among the Black Communist Rebellion (BCR) leaders in the now-formerly Japanese Pacific States. Lem Washington (one of the few Black characters present throughout the series), Elijah, and Bell Mallory (the de facto leader of the BCR) are discussing the political usefulness of a recovered American flag. Lem believes the flag could split the Reich, with the former Americans ostensibly willing to stand up to the German Nazis if it meant having their own country again. Elijah and then Bell Mallory quickly explain the error in Lem's position.

> "The way it used to be? Do you remember how it used to be, brother?
> Lem responds to Elijah, "If there's one thing that can split the Reich in two, it's this flag. All them goddamn Nazis used to be Americans once."
> Elijah immediately retorts: "And all those white Americans are Nazis now….Man this flag ain't never done shit for us. That ain't what we fought for. That America's gone."
> Bell Mallory sides with Elijah as she takes the unfurled flag off the table, "Sorry, Lem. I know what you're trying to do, but we can never go back."

These three examples, and there are many potential others, refuse the interpretation of *MHC* as a liberal triumphalist series. And while they point towards an alternative, more radical, interpretation, they don't quite get us there on their own. There is one additional aspect of the series that serves to cohere a different picture of this series, perhaps even a revolutionary one: the clear emphasis on the intersection of Black radicalism, feminism, and communist (or at least anti-capitalist) politics in the form of the Black Communist Rebellion.

Not only does the show indicate the ethical plausibility of effective dissident violence against an oppressive regime—an idea the contemporary liberal left and centrist bloc abhor far far more than the systemic oppression they feign to recognize and oppose (but instead reproduce or advance)—but the eventual centrality of the BCR screams towards a more radical alternative: racially-just and gender-inclusive communism.

As if echoing through time, here we feel the afterlives of Toussaint Louverture, John Brown, Franz Fanon, Malcolm X, Emma Goldman, Fred Hampton and countless others. We are drawn toward the following political conclusion: we might not be able to win the cause of human emancipation by replicating the masters' violence in reverse, but where we do engage in violence, our violence is not the masters' violence; it is a righteous violence, a revolutionary and defensive violence, used as one component of a broader material and ideological struggle aimed at the cessation of all forms of violence, direct and structural, through transformational politics. We can hope to win without violence. We can denounce and refuse the violence of our exploiters and oppressors. However, we may not be able to survive long enough to win the ideological struggle without defending ourselves, or perhaps more than that.

I'm not entirely sure how I feel about this conclusion, but this is surely what a radical reading of the *MHC* series tells us. And while there are many reasons to criticize this series, in part or in whole (including having a really lame and unproductively open-ended final scene), that *MHC* is a

too-clever-by-half or backhanded endorsement of the "real world" is not one of them—because it isn't that at all.

The Liberal (Interpretive) Virus

In place of a more conventional conclusion, I want to point to a major omission in the series: the economy. This is where we see the strongest presence of liberal politics in the series. It is a distinctive kind of presentation of politics that is more or less entirely separate from economics (and while it is fitting that we see this in an intentional work of fiction, this pretension is hardly limited to intentional works of fiction—it is quite common in unintentional works of fiction too). In *MHC*, we hear about the politics of trade a little. We hear about some shortages and supply-lines. We know some people have regular jobs, including some not for the governments. We see people working what would otherwise seem like regular jobs, just like today. However, there are no major elements of political economy explored in any of the universes. I'm surely overstating things a bit, but not by much. We learn very little about how the fascist capitalism of the Nazis developed in any specific way after the Axis victory. There are a few examples of what appear to be private companies, but otherwise it seems the Japanese and German governments control almost everything (but even that is never really said).

And so while we see pieces of what we might associate with an economy, we end up with no coherent picture of what the economy of this world looks like. How do these interrelated but distinct imperial societies (re)produce themselves materially? While this may be a question only a Marxist would ask (or an omission they'd noticed), alas, here we are. This omission produces a degree of implausibility to a story that makes a multiverse of different realities with different versions of ourselves believable. This is not a trivial omission either. Our final radical protagonists are communists. Surely that makes economic dimensions of what these communists are opposing worthy of exploration. Short-cutting the economy is also noteworthy, because too often mainstream discussions of historical fascism or Nazism overlook the deep connections between liberal capitalism and fascism too. In this regard, *MHC* problematically doubles-down on a blind spot its audience was primed to have illuminated.

Really what this means is that *MHC* is an intellectually, artistically, and politically valuable series with a strong radical ethos—but it remains an imperfect artifact of the world that birthed it.