

The Disturbing Rise of Criminal Idolatry in a Superficial Age

By Theodore Dalrymple

A portrait of Luigi Mangione has been painted on a wall in London under a brick arch which might be very well interpreted as a halo. In December, a graffito appeared in the same city demanding his release. Mangione seems to be in the process of joining George Floyd some kind of radical Valhalla.



A man takes a selfie in front of a mural of Luigi Mangione, who is charged with killing the CEO of UnitedHealthcare last year in New York, in the Bethnal Green area of London, England, on March 4, 2025. Leon Neal/Getty Images

Mangione is accused of having shot Brian Thompson, the chief executive of [UnitedHealthcare](#), in the back while Thompson was walking at night to his hotel in Manhattan. I will not make the mistake of calling the alleged attack cowardly, as if murder ought to be an equal contest and the person to be

murdered given a sporting chance of getting away with his life.

In times of peace, it takes courage, in fact, to act as Mangione is alleged to have acted, but courage is not a freestanding virtue independent of the cause in which it exercised. It is perfectly possible, after all, to be courageous in the pursuit of evil, and many of us wouldn't say boo to a goose even if to do so entailed a good deal less than the death penalty for us.

Mangione is a hero to many young people, not despite his act but because of it. There are reasons that he is the object of great sympathy amounting in some cases almost to adulation, the first being utterly frivolous and the second deeply sinister. He is admired because a) he is young and handsome, and b) because the slain man was rich. A third reason was his alleged ruthlessness.

If Mr. Thompson had been shot by, say, a 48-year-old man of more than usual ugliness, I doubt that the latter would have become the object of a cult. (George Floyd was not a handsome man, but he died rather than killed.) To turn an assumed killer into a hero, however, because he is young and handsome could hardly be more frivolous, more indicative of a very warped scale of values. It is the apotheosis of the trivial and superficial celebrity culture in which so many people seem now to live or immerse themselves. Our superficiality runs deep, if I may so put it.

The target of the killer was rich, and hatred of the rich is a common but a mean and ignoble emotion. Let me here say that I hold no brief for UnitedHealthcare, I have no shares in the company, or any other healthcare company, and am agnostic as to whether it has committed large-scale fraud, as is sometimes alleged, in order to boost its profits, a fraud that, if proven, would have caused much suffering. Moreover, while in theory the chief executive of a giant organization is administratively responsible for all that the organization

does, his personal moral responsibility may be less clear.

At any rate, I surmise that the great majority of the young admirers, supporters of, and sympathizers with Luigi Mangione, who of course assume he allegedly killed Brian Thompson (if he were not charged, they wouldn't have taken any interest in him), would say that they were totally against the death penalty. This is inexact, actually: their attitude is more like that of the Peronist who, when asked whether he was against torture, replied that it depended on who was being tortured and who was doing the torturing.

In other words, they are against the death penalty when it follows a trial by due process, but when it is administered ad hoc, in the name of a supposed higher cause such as economic equality, by people handsome enough to be admired, they are perfectly willing to excuse, countenance it, or even advocate it. I find this appalling and sinister.

It is not news that all is not well with American healthcare. It is vastly expensive and its results, at a population level, mediocre. Many patients are overtreated and many undertreated. It is bureaucratic, and there are numerous complaints that it is unfeeling and indifferent to suffering while it makes huge profits. But even if all complaints are true, they do not amount to justification of murder.

It is significant, moreover, that Mangione himself, who had a painful back condition, was operated on with apparent success and was not a client of the company whose chief executive he is accused of killing. He stands accused also of terrorism because his alleged motive was not mere personal vengeance, but to strike fear into the hearts of a whole class of people.

I live in Britain, where we have different complaints against our healthcare system from those of Americans. The British system is largely, though not entirely, socialist, a parallel private system, immensely expensive, working as a kind of

safety valve for the rich.

The state system works comparatively well for emergencies and life-threatening illnesses, though by no means always; but for anything else—for chronic painful conditions such as arthritis of the hips, for example—it imposes terrible waiting times on patients who are forced to enter a Kafkaesque world of constant obstruction, delay, excuse, false hopes, broken promises, and so forth, in which their worsening condition counts for nothing. Death is one way of shortening waiting lists.

It is obligatory to have a family doctor's referral to access specialist services, but even getting an appointment to see a family doctor can be a nightmare, in part because the system has succeeded in creating a situation in which three-quarters of family doctors do not work full-time. This is the result of a combination of the feminization of the profession, generous payment so that doctors do not feel obliged to work full time to earn enough to live, high taxation of higher incomes, and the imposition of nightmarishly bureaucratic working conditions that can be avoided only by working part time.

The result is general frustration in the population that the supposed and frequently vaunted right to healthcare has been transmuted into the extreme difficulty or near impossibility of consulting the type of doctor you need unless you are able and prepared to pay. And to pay high taxes and then to have to pay again for what the taxes are supposed to fund is surely grounds for dissatisfaction.

Would any of this, however, justify me in the murder of the minister of health, or of senior hospital bureaucrats?

Another reason for sympathy for Mangione is the common belief that the lengths to which someone is prepared to go in the pursuit of the cause reflects favorably on the justice of that cause, though the whole history of the 20th century

conclusively proves otherwise. Ruthlessness is no guarantee of virtue.

We do not know what proportion of the population, especially in the rising generation, sympathizes with Mangione, but by all accounts the number is not small, and furthermore the proportion is probably higher among the educated than among the uneducated. This is because the educated are better at rationalizing evil than the uneducated, and it sometimes seems as if this is what universities are teaching them to do.

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