Ideas | 8 October 2020 | updated 22 Aug 2022 8:33am

The rise of the traditionalists: how a mystical doctrine is

reshaping the right

Steve Bannon, Russia's Alexander Dugin and Brazil's Olavo de Carvalho are united by their affinity with a spiritual movement that fundamentally rejects modernity.

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By Benjamin Teitelbaum

Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's former chief strategist, returned to the headlines in August, having been arrested on a yacht and charged with defrauding donors to a private campaign to build a wall along the US-Mexico border. Of the $25m collected by the We Build the Wall organisation, Bannon and three partners are accused of diverting more than $1m for personal expenses. At a preliminary hearing, Bannon's attorney entered a not guilty plea on his behalf.

Bannon is often characterised as a "nationalist" and a "populist", but few realise that he is also affiliated with a much more obscure movement – one stranger and more radical than right-wing populism, and one whose cause is greater than that of a single election, greater, in fact, than politics.

This fringe spiritual movement bears an inconspicuous name: traditionalism. Bannon is not alone in his interest – traditionalist

sympathisers on the right with significant political influence are also to be found in Russia and Brazil. And, as I would learn during the year and a half I spent following and speaking to these figures while researching my book *War for Eternity*, they are attempting to coordinate their actions.

Adherents to this arcane school have made homes for themselves in nationalist-populist movements – although rank-and-file nationalists would likely be alienated by their eccentric ideas. But as I discovered, the incendiary, populist agenda with which traditionalists are associated – border walls, contempt for elites, isolationism, the targeting of racial and sexual minorities – are secondary, preparatory work for an altogether grander project.

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At its core, traditionalism rejects modernity and its ideals: faith in the ability of human ingenuity to advance living standards and justice; an emphasis on the management of the economy; the coveting of individual liberty; the existence of universal truths equally valid for, and thereby equalising of, all. Repudiating the Enlightenment, traditionalists instead celebrate what they regard as timeless values. They honour precedence rather than progress, emphasise the spiritual

Such a philosophy can sound rather abstract, hardly the sort of doctrine that would guide a policymaker. And indeed, until recently, traditionalism has had little to do with politics. Its original patriarch was a French occultist and philosopher named René Guénon (1886-1951), who wrote extensively about Hinduism, though he eventually converted to Islam (traditionalists regard various religions as offering authentic paths toward enlightenment, but tend to devote themselves to one).

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Two of Guénon's ideas gained an unintended legacy in right-wing politics. The first of these was a concept of time as cyclical, generalised from Hinduism: instead of advancing through history in linear fashion – progressing from a beginning toward an end, as Christians, secular humanists, Marxists and libertarians often implicitly believe – humanity is instead engulfed in a cycle, a pattern of eternal return. This cycle proceeds through four ages, moving from golden to silver to bronze to dark, and then – after a cataclysmic event – back to golden again. Thus, save for that moment of return, time is tantamount to decline. Indeed, decline is the only thing humanity can hope for, since the gradual worsening of the world's situation indicates that the cycle is advancing, and that darkness will soon burst into gold, when decline will set in again, on and on.

The second concept that would migrate from Guénon's philosophy into contemporary politics was the idea of social hierarchy. Traditionalists believe the Hindu and Indo-European caste hierarchy corresponds to the turning of the ages. During the golden age, they claim, priests and spiritual values reigned over a social order made up of warriors, merchants and, finally, at the bottom of the pyramid, slaves. As the ages turn, the boundaries between castes disintegrate, culminating in a sprawling slave society infatuated with materiality and hostile to spiritual pursuits. There is a political dimension to this social disintegration too: theocracy and the reign of a spiritual elite devolve into the reign of the masses, which is to say democracy or communism. Traditionalism thus deals in a series of oppositions: between the spiritual and material, quality and quantity, social stratification and mass homogenisation.

This illiberal school of thought was politicised not by Guénon, but by a rambunctious follower of his from Italy named Julius Evola (1898-

1974). Evola crafted a more expressly reactionary traditionalism by introducing the gendered and racial dimensions of these oppositions. To Evola, the opposite poles of the social hierarchy were also Aryan and non-Aryan, masculine and feminine, such that an ideal society would not only be theocratic, unequal and hostile to change, but also dominated by Aryan men.

Evola regarded himself as being to the political right of fascism and Nazism, both of which he saw as merely promising starts. He thought fascism represented a step backwards, in a positive sense: a retreat from the brink of mass egalitarian society. If he could only introduce spirituality into Hitler's and Mussolini's militarism, perhaps the rewinding of time could be accomplished, and a golden age of theocratic virtue restored.

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In the course of our conversations, Steve Bannon never made clear how he came in contact with these ideas – though he assured me the experience was revolutionary: not so much the racism and sexism, which he said he opposed, but the core message that an anti-modern politics could return society to "immanence and transcendence". Bannon grew up Catholic in a Democrat-leaning household in Richmond, Virginia, but describes his youth as lacking in spirituality. After experiments with Buddhism and meditation – as was conventional for spiritually disgruntled Westerners at the time – he eventually found his way to Guénon. By the time of his rise to global prominence at the helm of the Trump campaign, Bannon had also discovered Evola.

Meanwhile, in Russia, another influential political strategist and fellow

traditionalist named Aleksandr Dugin was watching Bannon's rise with interest, regarding it as a divine signal that the turning of the dark age was nigh. Dugin is an intellectual and a writer, but also a political operative who has served in Russian diplomatic missions in obscure ways for decades – advising some members of the Duma (parliament), mediating negotiations between the Russian government, Caucasian warlords and the Turkish state, and agitating for Russian military aggression through media commentary and street protest. For Dugin, traditionalism is a call to arms – figuratively and literally: it means war between the values of tradition – continuity, the preservation of local particularity, theocracy – and the levelling forces of modernity – free markets, democracy, universal human rights. But traditionalism is also a war between states: between Russia, flanked by its Eurasian partners, and the West, led by the US.

Geopolitics appeared to pit Dugin and Bannon against each other, but for years they had been working in concert promoting nationalism in Europe. For Bannon, who championed Brexit in 2016, reviving nationalist politics and social conservatism across the Atlantic promised to, as he put it, strengthen sovereignty and combat the cultural decline of Judeo-Christian states. Dugin, meanwhile, was busy cultivating pro-Russian sentiment among nationalist parties in Italy, Hungary, Austria and Greece, though he, too, sought to weaken the European Union. To traditionalists, a borderless, homogenised Europe represents the dark age; break the continent into smaller units, and sovereignty, order and even divinity might return. Similar aims drove both men to oppose US military intervention in Syria in 2017 – Bannon from within Trump's White House, Dugin as an unofficial mediator between Moscow and Ankara. They differed fundamentally in their assessment of China, however, and this disagreement would mar their first interaction.

Bannon and Dugin met secretly in Rome in November 2018. Following his dramatic ouster from the Trump administration, Bannon was pursuing a range of nationalist campaigns throughout the world, many of which were failing. He was also quietly being paid a handsome salary by a Chinese expat to find ways of frustrating the ruling Communist Party of China. Dugin had been in Shanghai, where he was a guest professor at Fudan University, working to advocate for greater integration among China, Russia, Iran and Turkey against the US.

Their conversation in Rome, as Bannon recounted to me, centred on his appeal to Dugin: that as a traditionalist it was imperative that he embrace Russia's ancient Judeo-Christian roots and begin agitating for union with the West. Such a change would initiate a new geopolitics, one based not on secular political values such as democracy and human rights, but on archaic identities. It would affirm the value of precedence, that the past is not past but lives today for those who would seize it. China, Bannon argued, was no counterweight to modernity as Dugin believed: its manufacturing base was instead the economic engine of globalisation – modernity's pre-eminent homogenising force. Isolate and weaken the Chinese state, and a global system funnelling vast wealth to a rootless, cosmopolitan mercantile elite will dissipate.

[See also: Steve Bannon and the art of the con]

Opportunities to make such appeals to like-minded thinkers with political clout were expanding. In January 2019, within months of his meeting with Dugin, Bannon met with yet another traditionalist sympathiser in power, Olavo de Carvalho, whose rise was as sudden as Bannon's. Olavo is a 73-year-old Brazilian philosopher living in a self-

imposed exile in Petersburg, Virginia – Bannon's home state. Having been initiated into the Sufi tariqa of René Guénon's follower Frithjof Schuon in the 1980s, Olavo then converted from Islam to Catholicism. Professionally, he has migrated from esotericism and astrology to journalism and then politics, becoming a key influence on populist Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro. (Bolsonaro's government offered ministerial posts to Olavo in 2018 but he declined them, apparently happy to remain an unofficial confidant of the president and his sons – a position that afforded him greater influence than that of official advisers.)

Bannon wasn't the first traditionalist to reach out to the Brazilian. Dugin had participated in a debate with Olavo in 2011, when Olavo had yet to gain prominence in politics. The main source of contention in their debate was the status of Russia and the US. Unlike Dugin, Olavo didn't view the conflict between modernity and tradition in terms of nation-states. He claimed that the rural, religious populations of all Western states were keepers of the spirit, rather than a particular nation. This population was particularly robust in the US, and its foes included the merchant class of international finance, a fundamentalist Islam increasingly devoid of spiritual content, and the militaristic Russia-China union. At the time, traditionalists paid little attention to the notion that the US might be incubating eternal holiness among its rural population, but Bannon seemed to be listening.

Bannon's interest in Olavo centred on drawing Brazil closer to the US and away from China, its erstwhile stalwart trade partner. But during their initial exchanges, Bannon mentioned a more daring agenda – to bring Russia into alignment with the US (and presumably Brazil). The foundation for this alignment wouldn't be politics, but spirituality, the element that both Bannon and Olavo consider primary in human

history.

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In Dugin and Olavo, Bannon had found not just fellow anti-immigrant firebrands, but similarly influential figures who shared his esoteric understanding of time and history. By working with them, he hoped not just to change the face of geopolitics, but to transcend modern politics altogether.

It is an arresting realisation: that a significant number of world leaders have been advised by individuals with a profoundly unusual and incendiary worldview. Yet all of the traditionalists I followed have struggled to advance their political cause. This has been true of them individually – Bannon and Dugin have not been able to maintain political posts for extended periods, and Olavo has never sought any – and also of their efforts to collaborate with each other: Dugin rejected Bannon's call to shift his geopolitical project in a pro-American, anti-Chinese direction. However, Bannon can claim to have helped bolster an anti-China faction of the Bolsonaro government – a faction infused with traditionalism. Leading the push against China is Brazil's foreign minister Ernesto Araujo, a former student of Olavo's skilled in the thought of Guénon, Evola and Dugin, and who recently promoted Brazil's primary Evola disciple, Cesar Ranquetat, within the ministry.

It is hard to envision any broad political implementation of traditionalism, for its radicalism puts it at odds with most mainstream ideologies – not just liberalism, but nationalism too. In its original form, traditionalism regards the nation-state as a product of modernity – a more confined space for the eradication of hierarchy and the imposition of homogeneity. The nationalism advocated by

traditionalists such as Dugin and Bannon is thus a sort of intermediary stage between hierarchical society and the levelling of the world through international communism or democracy.

Perhaps then, for Bannon, Olavo and in particular Dugin, nationalism is a two-way street rather than an end in itself. Their calls for the strengthening of borders and even for more egalitarian orders within them (Dugin frequently advocates "social justice", while Bannon, in theory, supports progressive tax policies) may be initial steps in an effort to reverse time. First, establish a horizontal difference by destroying internationalism and crafting a world of islands. Then, reinstate vertical difference with a theocratic hierarchy by sacralising the otherwise modernist and secular institution of the nation-state. For the influential acolytes of traditionalism, nationalism would thus be merely the opening salvo of a crusade to re-segment and re-mystify the world.

The Return of Traditionalism and the Rise of the Populist Right by Benjamin R Teitelbaum was published by Allen Lane on 21 April

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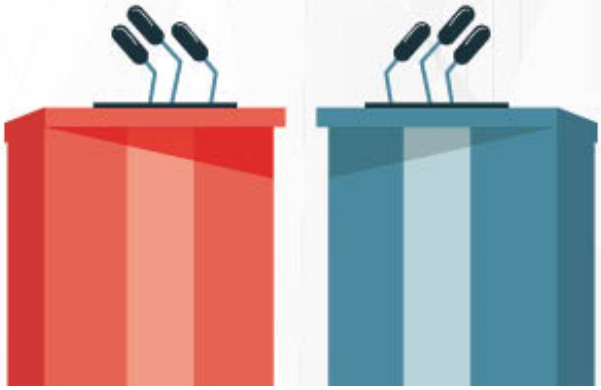

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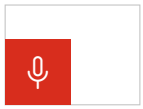

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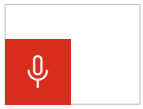

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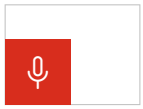

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