



The Nationalist Revolution of 2017

Lawrence

Rosenthal

“WE NEED A POLITICAL REVOLUTION:” The line was a standard in Bernie Sanders’s¹ speeches during his campaign for the Democratic nomination for president.

While Bernie may have talked revolution, it was the election’s eventual and improbable winner, Donald Trump, who has ushered one in.

Not that Trump himself was the revolutionary. Instead he was the vehicle for it. The revolutionary was Stephen Bannon, Trump’s final campaign strategist and senior White House advisor who, in the first months of the new administration, was frequently referred to as Trump’s “brain”².

Barely a week into the new administration, Bannon outraged the political world by telling the New York Times to shut up.

“The media should be embarrassed and humiliated and keep its mouth shut and just listen for a while,” Mr. Bannon said in an interview on Wednesday. “I want you to quote this,” Mr. Bannon added. “The media here is the opposition party. They don’t understand this country. They still do not understand why Donald Trump is the president of the United States.”³

What Bannon was talking about was incompatible worldviews. For him, the media, what the British call the “chattering classes,”⁴ are stuck in a conventional-wisdom worldview that has been superseded by a new order. In the conventional view, politics is seen as a closed bipolar game: liberals versus conservatives; Democrats versus Republicans; right versus left. This conventional thinking could even accommodate the extremes on this spectrum, Bernie Sanders’s democratic socialists on the left and the Obama-era insurgency on the right, the Tea Party. But it could not, Bannon was saying, grasp his insurgency, the Trump insurgency.

For Bannon both the standard bipolar view of the political order, as well as its very protagonists, the Republican and Democratic parties, are tired, weak and worn out. They are no match for his vital new movement, the political revolution which he embodies and which prevailed in the Trump election. Their very resistance to it diminishes the old order

and nurtures the new. At his most Hegelian, Bannon wrote in an email to the Washington Post:

What we are witnessing now is the birth of a new political order, and the more frantic a handful of media elites become, the more powerful that new political order becomes itself.⁵

Bannon's telling the Times to shut up bears an eerie and ironic resemblance to an earlier admonition at a time of cultural revolution in the U.S. In the words of the current Nobel laureate:

Come writers and critics...
Come senators, congressmen...
Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don't criticize
What you can't understand...
For the times they are a-changin'⁶ (emphasis added)

An Aggressive Nationalism Comes Full Circle

At the center of the new worldview is nationalism. Nationalism can be an elusive concept. How, for example, does it differ from patriotism, the feeling of identity and pride in one's country? Certainly, nationalism is an exaggeration of patriotic feeling. But it is more than that. It is a statement about how the world works. It is a theory of history. Or better, a theory of history with a master concept—the nation.



Marxism is a well-known theory of history (and theory of revolution) with a master concept—class. In Marx's familiar drama, a rising capitalist class, the bourgeoisie, overthrew feudalism. And the bourgeoisie would get its comeuppance at the hands of a rising class that they themselves had spawned, the proletariat. Class is the master concept and the “motor force” of history is class conflict. As a first approximation, nationalism resembles a Marxist theory of history where the concept of class is replaced by the concept of nation. Nation becomes the motor force of history. And history is the story of struggle for dominance among nations.

The varieties of nationalism add to the concept's elusiveness. In the last half of the twentieth century, nationalism, in the form of national liberation movements, fueled third-world insurgencies that threw off Western colonial powers. But that nationalism was a far cry from the ethnic nationalism that provoked civil war at the end of the century in the former Yugoslavia, when it seemed that the fall of the Communist world loosed dark, long-dormant ethnic passions.

Bannon and Trump's nationalism is a variety that first arose at the turn of the twentieth century, primarily in Europe. Earlier European nationalism, in the nineteenth century, had sometimes resembled twentieth-century national liberation struggles as movements to be rid of foreign domination. This was the case in Greece and, to some extent, in Italy. Other times nationalist movements were motivated by “a sense of communal destiny, a conviction that atomized states that shared a common language and culture belonged together,

represented a higher moral and political unity: a nation.”⁷ This was the force behind the Unification of Germany and, again to some extent, Italy, where Unification’s leading thinker, Giuseppe Mazzini, crafted a liberal nationalism.

But the new nationalism that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century looked with an illiberal eye inside established nations and discovered in their midst linguistic, cultural, racial, ethnic or religious anomalies—and wanted to be rid of them. The populations that carried these differing traits, these impurities, were experienced as injuries to the national feeling. Political movements across the continent rose up with the aim of suppressing or eliminating those populations. In the words of contemporary social science, this was a nationalism that operated by “othering”⁸. After World War I, most of these nationalist movements became absorbed by their countries’ fascist movements.

Like its earlier predecessor, Bannon’s nationalism is a transnational phenomenon. The Trump election seems of a piece with the Brexit⁹ election in Britain and the rise of illiberal democracies in countries as diverse as India, Hungary, Turkey, and, perhaps above all, Putin’s Russia.¹⁰ There is a pervasive disquiet in Western Europe and North America that the liberal international order built on the ashes of World War II is under siege.² This year’s elections in France and Germany loom up like tipping points for the European Union.

But the link between the rise of aggressive and “othering” nationalism then and now goes deeper. They are two ends

of a historical cycle: the rise and fall of the industrial system. Back then, the turn of the twentieth century, the modern world as we have known it was emerging. Populations were displaced on a massive scale. Life patterns that had been stable for generations were disrupted as factories demanded labor. Cities grew as people migrated from the countryside and struggled to adjust to rigid clock-based schedules. Life was raw in the new urban settings. Emerging cities not only fed the factories' manpower needs, but also introduced new problems of civil order, novel forms of delinquency and often ghastly public health problems.

Scapegoating seemed to provide an answer to these ills, and it was on this basis that the new nationalism developed a mass following. The very presence of the Other explained lives that were bleak and grim. Today it is the crisis of deindustrialization, the unwinding of what was emerging back then, that is disrupting life patterns that have been stable for several generations. America's Rust Belt has endured a breakdown that has resulted in systemic unemployment or underemployment in service sectors like fast food and big box stores. The results have been devastating: epidemic rates of suicide and substance abuse (alcohol, heroin, opioids) and declining life expectancy.¹²

Once again, aggressive nationalist scapegoating has found a fertile audience. Foreign countries are stealing our jobs. Illegal Mexican immigrants are not only wrecking the labor market or living off the dole, "they're bringing drugs; they're bringing crime; they're rapists."¹³ Muslims are infiltrating the country, bringing Sharia law and threatening national

security. As we watched the election returns that gave Trump the presidency, his eked-out margins in the very heart of blue-collar America—Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Michigan (the home of the United Auto Workers, the very symbol of working class prosperity and advancement!)—we were watching the industrial age come full circle. The conditions that gave rise to aggressive and othering nationalism at the dawn of the industrial age were again revolutionizing a shaky liberal order.

The Alt-Right Comes in From the Cold

The kind of thinking Bannon represents lived at the margins of American political life for decades. American nationalist views have long been intimately connected to the question of race. While Bannon insists his views are what he sometimes calls economic nationalism¹⁴ or populist nationalism, the political milieu from which he has emerged is deeply entangled with thinkers and movements that espouse a variety of racist doctrines: white nationalism, which is, in effect, identity politics for “European Americans”; white separatism, which seeks a U. S. geographical set-aside only for whites; and white supremacy, which posits the genetic superiority of whites.¹⁵

Despite his disclaimers, the differences between Bannon's views and those of the white nationalists are difficult to discern. In part, this is because for much of the past decade this ensemble of political activists has cohered into a self-conscious unity that goes by the name the alt-right. Indeed, the alt-right also accommodates explicitly Fascist and neo-Nazi groups.

Besides his intellectual role in alt-right thinking, Bannon turned out to be the movement's outstanding political entrepreneur. He involved himself in book publishing, movies, finance, and political micro-targeting on social media. His most visible presence was as the head of Breitbart news, which he famously called the “platform of the alt-right,”¹⁶ and where he excelled at coordinating work within the movement and spreading its ideas into mainstream media.

The alt-right was electrified after Donald Trump's announcement of his candidacy June 16, 2015. Suddenly—at the level of presidential politics! —someone was talking their language. For activists who had spent decades in the political wilderness this was deliverance out of the blue. The whole of the alt-right spectrum became dedicated Trump supporters.

For Bannon, it wasn't merely Trump's anti-immigration views and his uncensored scorn for minorities that drew him in the fold. It was Trump's conflation of the Democratic and Republican establishments as well. In his campaign for the nomination and later in the general election campaign, Trump showed no deference to the Republican Party. His critique of U.S. policies, both domestic and foreign, spanned administrations of both parties over the past thirty years.

Crucially this put Trump outside the entire spectrum of conventional politics, outside the worldview rooted in conventional wisdom, and it located him inside Bannon's nationalist worldview. Conflating the Republicans and

Democrats and defining himself as the alternative to their collective enterprise (often attacked as “political correctness”) made Trump the ideal vehicle for Bannon to ride alt-right views not merely into mainstream politics but to the very center of national political power. Bannon enshrined this view in the Inaugural speech¹⁷ he wrote for Trump along with his aide Stephen Miller.

Whither the Revolution?

Bannon’s alt-right ideology dominated the Trump administration in the first months after the inauguration. Besides forming the basis of Trump’s America First/carnage inaugural address, it was the thinking behind the executive orders that attempted to ban entry from Muslim-majority countries. It was the strategy behind putting Jefferson Beauregard Sessions at the head of the Justice Department.

But then, two months into the Trump presidency, came the failure of the AHCA, the long-promised repeal and replacement of Obamacare. And what seemed on January 20th to be the definitive voice of the new Administration, Bannon nationalism, was thrown into question. Alt-right media turned scathing about the Administration’s bombing in Syria and Afghanistan, its rapprochement with China and changing tune about Russia and NATO. In the meantime, the mainstream press began tracking the waxing of Jared Kushner’s influence in the White House and the waning of Steve Bannon’s.

The president himself seemed to back away from Bannon.

Trump on his own has only meager long-time ideological convictions: admiration for strongman rule and Nixonian law-and-order. Beyond that, Trump's approach to ideology and policy seems a matter of improvisation. In a 1990 interview with *Playboy* magazine Trump was asked, "Is there a master plan to your deal making or is it all improvisational?" His answer: "It's *much more* improvisational than people might think."¹⁸ So too is his presidency.

It's exactly a hundred years since the defining revolution of the twentieth century: the Russian Revolution of 1917, which brought Vladimir Lenin's Communism to power. Is there a parallel beyond the mere numerological symmetry of the dates? To some significant observers, the correspondence is unmistakable. A March article on Russian interference the *New Yorker* related the following:

"In 1917, armed supporters of Lenin stormed the Winter Palace and arrested capitalist ministers and overthrew the social political order," the lead article in the daily *Moskovski Komsomolets* read. "On January 20, 2017, nobody in Washington planned to storm Congress or the White House and hang prominent members of the old regime from lampposts, but the feeling of the American political élite, especially the liberal part of it, is not different from that of the Russian bourgeoisie one hundred years ago."¹⁹

Will illiberal democracy contend to chart the future of the USA? Will the liberal post-World War II world order erode?

Will Bannon move forward in his project of revolutionizing the U.S. into a nationalist “America First” state? Some will argue that the trend of history is pointing in the direction of illiberalism and that “American exceptionalism” is no longer a match for its momentum. Others will argue that the American right can be counted on to overreach and the buzz of the moment is unlikely to be sustained in the face of the institutional resistance we are seeing in the courts, in the press and in the public at large. Still others might argue that a government like Trump’s will turn to authoritarian measures—creating new enemies; provoking war—in response to a domestic terrorist attack, or even to shore up support in his base when promises like “bringing back the jobs” fail to materialize.

These alternatives cannot be fully assessed right now. But one thing does seem certain. The alt-right is not going to go away; there is no putting the genie back in the bottle. This is true if for no other reason than the movement’s media presence. The alt-right is the spawn of social media in much the same way as Fox news was the spawn of cable television. Breitbart news has become the second most highly visited U.S. political website (after Huffington Post.)²⁰ The alt-right has committed financial backing, most notably through Robert Mercer and his daughter Rebekah, and has solid footing not only on the Internet but in film and book publication as well.

Whither the Alt-Right revolution? If we have learned nothing else over the past eighteen months, it’s that our politics today is full of surprises. It’s unlikely that the outcome has yet revealed its silhouette.



Lawrence Rosenthal is Chair and Lead Researcher of the Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies at the University of California.

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- 4 https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/the_chattering_classes
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- 8 Othering and Belonging, Vol. 1, Berkeley, July 2016. See Lawrence Rosenthal, "Trump, the Tea Party, the Republicans and the Other." <http://www.otheringandbelonging.org/trump-the-tea-party-the-republicans-and-the-other/>
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- 12 Victor Tan Chen, "All Hollowed Out," *The Atlantic*, 1-16-16. <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/01/white-working-class-poverty/424341/>
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- 14 Bannon offered the following in his CPAC (Conservative Political Action Conference) appearance in February, when he made explicit his plans to gut what he calls the "administrative state"—essentially the federal bureaucracy that runs agencies and programs: "They're corporatist, globalist media that are adamantly opposed to an economic nationalist agenda like Donald Trump has...there's a new political order that's being formed out of this....we're a nation with an economy, not just an economy in some global marketplace with open borders. But we're a nation with a culture." See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXDXJQxbvKY>
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- 18 *Playboy*, March 1990
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