

Raging Against the Enlightenment: The Ideology of Steven Bannon



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Steven K. Bannon has been called “Trump’s brain,” the man identified by David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, as the “individual who’s basically creating the ideological aspect of where we’re going.” And as Duke helpfully reminds us, “ideology is ultimately the most important aspect of any government.”

Let’s get beyond the sound bites and photos of Bannon in unbuttoned Barbour and rumpled cords. Let’s look under the hood of Bannon’s mind. What is the ideology of Steven K. Bannon actually like?

One thing for sure: It is pretty much antithetical to the ideas and the spirit of democracy.

When he references big thinkers – he’s a brilliant intellectual and voracious reader, his admirers claim -- Bannon gestures admiringly to fascists, bigots, dictators, and theocrats.

Charles Maurras, for example: The rabidly anti-Semitic French Catholic political intellectual; fan of Mussolini and Franco; leader of the “anti-Dreyfusards” who persecuted the Jewish Army Captain falsely accused of treason; decades long-agitator against the democratic and secular Third Republic; sentenced to life imprisonment after World War II for collaborating with the Nazi occupation.

Or Julius Evola: Italian professor at the weird but aptly named “School of Fascist Mysticism”; ferociously anti-Semitic; intellectual and spiritual advisor to Mussolini; god father of the Racial Laws that sent thousands of Italian Jews to their deaths in the late 1930s.

Alongside admiring allusions to such heinously reactionary intellectuals, one finds nary a reference, amidst Bannon’s many words, to icons of American democracy, such as Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Theodore or Teddy Roosevelt, John Dewey, or even Ayn Rand.

Bannon sees himself as an outsider, just like the political heroes he has cinematized, such as Reagan, Palin, and Trump. And just like all the mythical “lost men” whom candidate and then President Trump, under Bannon’s direction, has ostensibly dedicated himself to resurrecting. Bannon is Irish-Catholic; raised blue collar; matriculated at Virginia Tech; worked at Goldman Sachs but didn’t get to be partner; and hung around Hollywood for years without ever making it. In 2004, Bannon turned his hand to writing, directing, and producing his own crudely bombastic right wing pseudo-documentaries. They proved catnip for the base, but made nary a ripple in the wider world of Indie or pop.

The sense of being left behind, of being dissed and excluded by the establishment, has fueled in Bannon not just resentment but powerful anger, the kind of life-long, supercharged aggression that creates extremists, sociopaths, sometimes even assassins -- just overall really bad and dangerous stuff. His younger brother recounts that, even as a boy, Bannon (like Trump) couldn’t get enough of physical altercation. The adult Bannon as been described as a “screamer” for whom “everything has to be a fight. “He loves the idea of war,” recounts his long-time Hollywood collaborator. Bannon himself tells audiences: “You have to have the fighting spirit of a warrior!” And he described the ethos of his influential megaphone, *Breitbart News*, in this way:

Our big belief, one of our central organizing principles at the site, is that we’re at war ... It’s war. It’s war. Every day, we put up: America’s at war, America’s at war. We’re at war.

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This furious fighting-from-behind mentality certainly qualifies Bannon as an ideological leader of the contemporary American right. Since the days of such progressive reformers as Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, and more fervently and frantically since the 1960s, conservatives have

been flaying in frustration at what they see as the seemingly inexorable expansion of liberalism -- social, cultural, sexual, environmental, and political. Conservatives have reached the highest perches of political power, from state house to White House, from Congress to Supreme Court, from Nixon to Reagan, Bushes I and II, and Donald Trump. But even the full force of conservative state power seems to have failed to put a stop to the steady march of social incorporation, from industrial workers in the 1930s and Jews in the 1950s, to blacks, Hispanics, Asians, women, immigrants, and non-conforming sexualities in the long 20th century, from the 1960s until today.

It is impossible to underestimate how this failure, as extraordinary as rarely acknowledged, has infuriated America's cultural and political right. It has made them rabid with rage. And this anger has boiled over with the decades long decline of American global power; China's rise; stalemated military ventures; the glo-

balizing, post-industrial economy that rewards education and punishes unskilled; and with eight years of the high profile, unflap-

pable, deeply polarizing but also unusually effective reign of America's first African-American president (lest we forget the "Birther" movement that launched Trump's own bid for national power).

By the middle of Obama's second term, the American right was beside itself with frustration. Steven Bannon, Donald Trump, and the "alt-right" -- alternative right, *new* right -- are the result.

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At the core of Bannon-ideology is a series of extraordinarily simplistic contrasts between good and bad, sacred and profane. This series creates dangerous *others* whose continuing existence threatens the good folks who make up what Bannon describes as the "real America."

Bannon heaps scorn on non-white immigrants -- Hispanic, East Asian, South Asian -- and purifies the people he describes as "native Americans." This fantasy category most definitely does *not* include our nation's actual natives, America's indigenous "Indians," much less the most culturally "American" racial and ethnic groups of all, African-Americans.

What are some of the other simplistic binaries that animate Bannon-ideology?

* Nationalists are sacralized, globalists despoiled.

* Property is praised, poverty considered evidence of disqualification.

* Religion is given a god-smacking yes, secularism always disparagingly framed.

* Christianity is equated with Godliness and civilization and, while Bannon sometimes remembers to add the "Judeo" adjective, as in "Judeo-Christian" civilization, neither Jews as a people nor Judaism as a religion is part of Bannon's view of the national mainstream. As for non-Western world religions, most especially Islam, forget about it. Bannon dismisses them as un-Godly, barbarian enemies of Western civilization.

*And let's not forget our own national "elites." Vilified as rootless, cosmopolitan, selfish and self-enriching, Bannon contrasts them with "The People," that vague, mysterious, pious entity he and other populists so reverently evoke.

While one must resist argument ad homonym, in regard to this last binary we indulge ourselves to pause, for just one moment, to consider Bannon's blatant hypocrisy. After

Virginia Tech, Bannon went to Georgetown for an MA and Harvard Business School for his MBA. He has a personal fortune estimated between twelve and fifty million dollars, derived in some part from his work as a deal-maker at super-elite Goldman Sachs, in larger part from the partial rights to Seinfeld reruns from the sale of Castle Rock the helped broker in 1993. Who are more rootless, cosmopolitan, do-nothing, navel-gazing liberals than Jerry and his Jewish clan? Bannon's personal wealth is deeply implicated in the cosmopolitan, cultural and economic elite.

But I digress. Back to the binaries.

Us (pure)	Them (profane)
People	Elites
Real Americans	(Non-white) Immigrants
Nationalists	Globalists
Property	Poverty
Religious	Secular
Christian	Non-Christian
West	The Rest
Civilization	Barbarian

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Between the people and institutions arrayed on one side or the other, one can imagine relations of different kinds. They might view themselves as aggressive opponents, but not necessarily as enemies. In a democratic social order, the adversarial conflict between partisan opponents is *agonistic*, not *antagonistic*. Bannon sees it otherwise. There is no space for comity in his universe. Just as there is no room for supra-national governance, there is no space for constitutionally authorized third parties to mediate conflicts on the domestic scene.

If the opposing sides are, not frenemies but enemies, there can be no mutually binding rules of the game. We find ourselves in Nixon-land, a world of plumbers, spies, and liars, of fierce, extra-constitutional confrontations with congress, press, and courts. Clausewitz remarked that war is politics by another name. Bannon sees politics as *war* by another name. No wonder he has vowed that “every day, every day, it’s going to be a fight.”

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Bannon weaves these tensely opposed binaries into an apocalyptic narrative that pits good against evil in a fateful, bloody, battle-to-the-death fight. Narratives are stories with a beginning, middle, and end. Such stories transubstantiate abstract moral binaries into flesh and blood characters, protagonists and antagonists. Stories plot the struggle between heroes and villains that ends in glorious triumph or nightmarish death.

In his 2004 documentary about Ronald Reagan, *In the Face of Evil*, Bannon condenses his long list of dangerous others into a meta-antagonist that, drawing from the Old Testament’s *Book of Daniel*, he metaphorically identifies as “the Beast.” Against a dark *mélange* of martial images and music, the film narrator recalls the blood lust killing and desperation of World War I, dramatically intoning, “from this fever swamp grows the Beast.” Ominously referencing the “dark side,” the voice over cites “Bolshevism, Fascism, Communism, Nazism, Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler, Tojo [and] Stalin.” It’s clear that Bannon’s Beast really is not about history but the present day. Those who have occupied the dark side are bestial, his narrator explains, because they sought “control of the state,” not for the sake of value but “power as an end in itself.” They were the secularists and cosmopolitans of their day, their Nietzschean “will to power” creating what Bannon would later term “the Administrative State.” The Beast is Bannon’s “face of evil,” and it’s voracious. In the course of the 20th century, the Beast grew strong and stronger, it

feasted not only on the real America but on generations of weak-kneed liberals too cowardly, pathetic, materialistic and pleasure-seeking to stand up to the monster in righteous fight.

Only Ronald Reagan knew “how to confront the Beast.” A “radical with extreme views,” Reagan was “the only true outsider elected in the century.” Before Reagan, liberals “had been hoping that the wolf had passed by the door,” the narrator intones, but Reagan knew better. The Beast may have been quiet, but he was still there, lingering just outside. Against this monstrous presence, Reagan launched a vast military build-up, a saber-rattling foreign policy, and a domestic agenda foraged from the far right. Faithful Christian from the hinterlands, anti-communist, gutsy crusader for God and Country, Ronald Reagan won the Cold War and saved the day -- and not a second too soon, for Apocalypse was imminent.

Today, three decades after being saved by Reagan, Bannon’s America is back in the worst kind of trouble again. In *Generation Zero*, his 2010 documentary that cinematizes the pseudo-science of generational upheaval proposed by William Strauss and Neil Howe, Bannon’s narrator ominously warns, “History is

seasonal, and winter is coming.” First came “The Unravelling,” from 1982 to 2004, when money culture ruled, the work ethic dissolved, and “the self Now we face the “Crisis,” the time of final reckoning. What we do now determines whether the America experiment fails or can be raised. If the right prevails, it will lead, in Howe’s words, to “a new founding moment in American history.” If the left wins out, America is finished. As one critic put it, *Generation Zero* presents a “hellishly bleak vision of past, present, and future, driven by magical belief in historical determinism.”

was really god.”

Violent times require violent tactics. In speech after speech, interview after interview, movie after movie, Bannon connects his prophecy of the coming “radical upheaval” with aggressive, often violent, apocalyptic confrontation. “I want to bring everything crashing down, destroying all of today’s establishment,” he declares, menacing not only the left but moderate forces on the right. Bannon characterizes himself as a Leninist, and he has winked at the Weathermen, the militant Maoists who tried to foment the violent overthrow of capitalism in the twilight of the sixties.

Bannon is not a conservative but a revolution-

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nary. Philosophical conservatives, such as Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott, despise radical and apocalyptic thinking, championing common sense and incremental change. Enlightenment thinkers often felt the same way. Kant warned that, “from the crooked wood of man nothing straight can be built.” No master plan, but rather small steps for “man” adding up to one big step for humankind. Bannon is having none of this. Proclaiming, “darkness is good,” he likens himself to such pulverizing figures as Darth Vader, Dick Cheney and, I kid you not, to Satan himself.

A former *Breitbart* collaborator suggests, “Bannon has no hard and fast political philosophy, only an apocalyptic theory.” But this would recognize narrative form at the expense of the substantive binaries upon which it builds. For Bannon, victory in the climactic struggle will pave the way for reactionary policy and belief, about property, class, immigration, race, religion, nationalism, gender, and sexuality. Victory would turn back the clock to good old American time, when Americans really were God’s Chosen People.

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In 1973, a Frenchman named Jean Raspail published a novel called *Camp of the Saints*. It painted a phantasmagorical story about brown and black immigrants destroying Western civilization - literally. An Indian demagogue called “the turd-eater” leads an “armada” of 800,000 impoverished dark skinned Indians from the subcontinent to Europe’s southern shores. Rampaging through the countryside, these “dark

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hoards” proceed northward, multiplying like bunnies, raping white women and killing white men. Finally, they take control of major cities, Paris, London, and eventually even New York. In 1975, Scribner published an English translation, splashing across its cover, in large capital letters above the book’s title: “A CHILLING NOVEL ABOUT THE END OF THE WHITE WORLD.” The English publication met with withering reviews, to wit this observation by *Kirkus*: “The publishers are presenting *The Camp of the Saints* as a major event, and it probably is, in much the same sense that *Mein Kampf* was a major event.”

The novel, which went quietly out of print, is flagrantly racist, as is its author, now 91 years old and living comfortably in the 17th arrondissement of Paris. “This Western world ... I am sorry to say, is white,” Jean Raspail recently told an interviewer; “there is no other Western world other than white. That’s how it is.”

Why do bring up an obscure book forty years after its failed publication? Because in 1983, *Camp of the Saints* was back in print, thanks to hefty subsidies from right-wing donors, and, republished two more times since, it has gained a cult following among the online alt-right. This is where Bannon comes in. Time and again, this alt-right ideologue has employed *Camp of the Saints* as a metaphor to frame immigration in our own times. “It’s been almost a Camp of the Saints-type invasion into Central and then Western and Northern Europe,” Bannon suggested in October 2015. “It’s not a migration. It’s an invasion. I call it the Camp of the Saints,” he explained in January 2016. “I mean, this is Camp of the Saints, isn’t it,” he rhetorically asked an interviewer in April, 2016, going on to suggest that the refugee crisis “didn’t just happen by happenstance. These are not war refugees. It’s something much more insidious going on.” A conspiracy, a dark skinned demagogue, an Armada, an invasion?

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I’ve entitled this talk “Raging Against the Enlightenment.” Perhaps you are thinking this elevates Bannon a wee bit. Has he read Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot, perused the *Encyclopedia*, or been down with Kant and Tocqueville -- the big thinkers who champion science and humanity, freedom and equality, and the universal rights of man? Doubtful. Has he read Burke, Herder, or De

Maistre, Hegel, Nietzsche or Oakeshott -- the big thinkers whom Isaiah Berlin famously dubbed the “counter-Enlightenment”? While this, too, seems pretty unlikely, it is vital to see that Bannon-ideology is deeply imbedded in this counter-narrative, in the line of conservative thinking that has challenged the emancipatory humanism upon which democratic politics and a hopeful view of modernity are based. Bannon is the ideological heir of the intellectual backlash against modernity that has been unfolding from the Counter-Reformation right up to the present day. He is the foe of every idea, institution, and movement that idealize the universal and raise high the banner of truth, truth, liberty, and equality.

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Why did the President of the most stable, effective, and long lived constitutional democracy in the history of the world choose such a figure as Steven Bannon as his Virgil, his Sancho Panza, his sidekick, his “Chief Strategist”? As the string of awkward blunders and downright failures marking Trump’s first six months demonstrates, one should not look for an explanation to Bannon’s political skills. Trump chose Bannon, rather, because Bannon’s velvet glove fits so snugly around Trump’s iron fist. Bannon-ideology is the water in which Trump swims, in which he has always swum, without knowing he was in the sea. Bannon crystallizes Trump’s inchoate but raging outsider feelings, completes his half-formed ideas, raises to college level his fifth-grade syntax.

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Bannon has been a performance-enhancing drug. The secret of his power over Trump, and over some large swath of the American people, has been his mythopoeic abilities, writing the script, setting the stage, finding the actors, and directing the mis-en-scene so effectively that anti-democratic ideas seem for many sensible and sometimes even inspiring, while democratic ideas appear irrational and profane. Bannon once called Trump a flawed vessel, but into that striving, overheated human container Bannon has poured a magical potion, a fearsome brew.

Bannon is a mythologist. He scripted and produced a new and pernicious political movie, which he continues to direct. Donald Trump plays the heroic protagonist, and Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Democrats, and Enlightenment ideas play the dark Beast that the barking, bleached blond populist President has entered the arena to slay. Bannon once confided to *Variety* that he had a “kinetic editing style that seeks to overwhelm au-

diences.” In the months that led up to Trump’s election, the greater part of America’s citizen-audience were subdued and some offered Bannon’s production a standing ovation. In the months after the election, some of these same viewers have become restless in their seats, and some are getting up to leave. The left, meanwhile, is creating counter-performances, writing new plots and casting around for new heroes.

Democracy is sustained by a discourse that celebrates autonomy, rationality, and moral equality, and by independent institutions that encourage skepticism, participation, and free expression. Trump, as made visible by Bannon, wants to convince us that universalistic discourse is outmoded and independent institutions dysfunctional. He spouts Bannon’s othering binaries, and he attacks core democratic institutions: journalism is fake, public opinion polls fixed, courts biased, voting is not dispositive, office not binding. The aim of Trump and Bannon is deceptive, for they are participating in a political process that democracy has constructed. When we reconstruct Bannon-ideology, however, the truth comes out. They are participating in democracy in order to destroy it.

But nobody can predict performative success. The best funded shows, with accomplished actors, crash on opening night. Unknown plays, performed in obscure venues with untried actors, become dark horse hits.

“I am Thomas Cromwell in the court of the Tudors,” Bannon once remarked. Cromwell was a clever and far-sighted political man. Still, he ended up dead, hung out to dry, and die, by the very King he had so slyly and violently served. Three months ago, this was widely thought to be Bannon’s fate. “Dead strategist walking” is what *New York Times*’ Op-Ed writer Frank Bruni called him, in a column headlined “Steven Bannon Was Doomed.” But the announcements of Bannon’s death have been greatly exaggerated. The “cosmopolitan” team led by GQ-esque son-in-law Jared Kushner has fallen on hard times, performing in the failed Russian version of “Let’s Make a Deal.” Meanwhile, Trump’s withdrawal from the climate accord, his persistence with the Muslim ban, his “decline of Western civilization” Poland speech – these efforts promoting particularism over universalism, in the guise of protecting national sovereignty, have Bannon’s fingerprints all over them. Can Trump the Scarecrow afford to live without his brain?

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