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Original Article

# A period of “wild and fierce fanaticism”: Populism, theo-political militarism, and the crisis of US hegemony

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**Abstract** This paper argues that one key characteristic of the new American populism is its orientation toward global military confrontation with “Islam.” The paper focuses on texts by Michael Anton, Stephen K. Bannon, including Bannon’s film *Torchbearer* (2016). Comparing their ideological work to Alexander Dugin’s writings on the global order, the authors organize the comparison around the contextual similarity between American and Russian right-wing thinkers. There are substantive affinities, but more important is the similar relation between textual production and imperial context. We conclude by arguing that these new authoritarian movements and regimes combine coherent ideological projects with deliberately chaotic, even incoherent statements and interventions.

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The interval between the decay of the old and the formation and establishment of the new, constitutes a period of transition, which must always necessarily be one of uncertainty, confusion, error, and wild and fierce fanaticism. John C. Calhoun (1851).<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction: Exploding the “Liberal International Order”

In October 2016, the *Claremont Review of Books* published “The Flight 93 Election.” The author opened with the ominous claim that “2016 is the Flight 93 election: charge the cockpit or you die.” The author constructs an analogy on two levels, one literal, and the other metaphorical. First, he equated the possible election of Hillary Clinton with a game of Russian roulette. On the metaphorical level, the author then compares the seizing of the cockpit of Flight 93 by the terrorists with the Democrats continuing their hold over the office of the Presidency. The passengers who stormed the cockpit, the author intimates, were patriotic Americans willing to take decisive action. In his eyes, they represent Americans who recognize the “tidal wave of dysfunction, immorality, and corruption,” an “American decline” to which the GOP had contributed. In yet another historical analogy, the author compared Republicans to Hannibal hesitating to carry the Carthaginians’ battle all the way to Rome. Completing this analogy, the author’s pen name, Publius Decius Mus, referred to a Roman consul who sacrificed himself in battle.

The Flight 93 article was penned by none other than Trump’s senior National Security Council communications advisor, Michael Anton.<sup>2</sup> Essentially framing the election as a populist seizure of power or *coup d’état*, Anton concluded that the only option for Republicans was to support Trump despite their misgivings. William Kristol called the author of “The Flight 93 Election” a Schmittian (Herr, 2017), sensing that Anton’s logic followed that of Carl Schmitt’s “state of exception.” That is, his logic justifies assertions of sovereign control outside the legal constitutional order, in the interest of preserving that order (Schmitt, 2006). Framing the current political moment as a state of exception, the author thus demands decisionist action.<sup>3</sup> More precisely, he contributes to the radical

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<sup>1</sup> Calhoun ([1851] 2003, p. 50); Arrighi and Silver (1999, pp. 271–272).

<sup>2</sup> Anton was a speechwriter for the George W. Bush administration, worked for Rudi Giuliani and Rupert Murdoch, and supported the 2003 Iraq War before turning against it (Anton, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Coined by Carl Schmitt, decisionism refers to “the rule of a personal will as opposed to the rule of impersonal norms” (Cristi, 2015, p. 831). The priority of the decision over norms arises for Schmitt in moments of exception—moments that are “not codified in the existing legal order,” in which the state and extant political order are faced with an existential threat (Schmitt, 2006, p. 6).



conservatives' *construction* of the current political, economic, and cultural crisis as a state of exception.<sup>4</sup>

Anton's decisionism is not the only Schmittian element of Trump's campaign rhetoric or of the emerging Trumpian policies. The second Schmittian aspect is the definition of the political in terms of friend–enemy logics and the frenetic intensification of that Manichean logic. This intensification characterizes both the domestic and the international political spheres, and entails an increasing racialization of the enemy. This too follows Schmitt. In the third edition of *The Concept of the Political* (1933), Schmitt transformed the concept of enemy "in harmony with the prevailing *völkisch* vocabulary." Now substituting the word "*der Andersgeartete*" (meaning "alien of a different nature") for "*der Andere*" ("the other"), Schmitt articulated otherness with the German noun "*die Art*," signifying genus or kind. Schmitt thereby added an unmistakably racial connotation to the concept of the enemy.<sup>5</sup>

For Schmitt, the friend–enemy logic refers first and foremost to foreign policy. Most of the literature on the new right-wing movements has focused on domestic populism (e.g., Müller, 2016), however, and most of the writing on Trump has highlighted his domestic racism and sexism. While not downplaying the central importance of these elements, we want to bring out the specificity of this movement and the Trump regime as compared to nineteenth century American populisms and the contemporary European far right. The proliferation of domestic friend–enemy constructions within the new American authoritarian populism, we argue, is articulated with a militarized theo-political logic of global war against Islam.

This brings us to the third Schmittian aspect of this populism, which emerges most clearly in the musings of Stephen K. Bannon and his Russian counterpart, Alexander Dugin. This concerns Schmitt's (1941 [1991]) theory of "Great Spaces" (discussed in more detail below). The background to these geopolitical aspects of the new far right movement and to the Trump regime's seemingly erratic foreign policy interventions is the drawn-out crisis of US hegemony and the radically unsettled global situation resulting from hegemonic decline. World system theorists have suggested that declining US global economic predominance causes "a defensive maneuvering to maintain militarily what implicitly was guaranteed previously through economic hegemony" (Bergesen and Lizardo, 2004, p. 46). This leads to a powerful or even enhanced American imperial carapace – a residual global military machine – being left in place. Such an "Empire" is untethered from its previous anchoring in logics of securing

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<sup>4</sup> David Brooks, the recipient of an award for Excellence in the Reporting of Social Issues from the American Sociological Association, gave one of his 2016 "Sidney" awards to the "Flight 93 Election." Brooks' comments ignore or suppress the essay's radically antidemocratic thrust (Brooks, 2016). His essay is posted on the website of the *American Affairs* magazine associated with Anton.

<sup>5</sup> On this conceptual shift see Gross (2007, pp. 36, 177–178).



order in the interest of American and global capitalism. Challenged by rising powers that try to move into the vacated place of the hegemon, and by terrorist actors unleashed by the demise of hegemony, the US lashes out militarily, exacerbating global chaos (Mitchell, 2002).

There have been intense struggles within the declining US state and political field over the American role in the posthegemonic world. Gesturing at Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Anton's Flight 93 essay thematizes American decline in analogy to the Roman Empire. The comparison of the US to Rome, a mainstay of right-wing American discourse, figures centrally in Bannon's *Torchbearer* (discussed below) and other films (including *In the Face of Evil: Reagan's War in Word and Deed* and *Generation Zero*).<sup>6</sup>

Several alternative pictures of the global future can be gleaned from these discussions:

- (1) The emergence of a new, non-American hegemon (e.g., China) along with a new unipolarity.
- (2) A stabilized multipolarity in which the US (and its "Great Space"; see below) coexists with the Great Spaces of other Great Powers (Dugin, 2014).
- (3) A destabilized global political system of universal isolationism, leading to militarized global chaos due to the absence of stabilizing forces.
- (4) The US re-establishes itself as global hegemon, continuing the post-1945 model of the "liberal international order" (albeit under some new name that avoids the word liberal).
- (5) The US re-establishes itself as a new global superpower driven by theological militarism and going it alone, or creating flexible and unconventional military alliances.

Traditional Republicans still clearly privilege the fourth option. Yet a startling position has emerged on the far right that resembles the fifth option. Stephen K. Bannon is the member of the new Trump government who has advanced the most coherent proposal for a new foreign policy. Bannon's ideas about the US's role in the global order bear little resemblance to the post-1945 consensus model. What we find in Bannon's texts is a series of blueprints for a new global order, with a specific focus on America's place in that order. Either the US will act as a superpower leading the "Judeo-Christian West" in a global war against Islam, or the US will engage in this fight alone, opportunistically collaborating with whomever is willing to join the fight. Obviously what we do not find is open endorsement of either (1), (3), or (4). There are hints, however, of Bannon's interest in Dugin's (2015) version of option (2): a model of a multipolar world of

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<sup>6</sup> *In the Face of Evil* (Bannon, 1997) begins and ends with Cato's exhortation to destroy Carthage. *Generation Zero* (Bannon, 2010) includes images of the Roman Forum. This film is based on an amateurish work of world history as a succession of cycles and generations whose authors trace their concepts back to the Romans (Strauss and Howe, 1997, pp. 26–28).



"Great Spaces," each of them defined theo-politically as encompassing a specific civilization and its tradition. This model, for Dugin, is based explicitly on Schmitt's theory of Great Spaces and ultimately on Heidegger's rewriting of Oswald Spengler's concept of decadent civilization as economic imperialism and culture as a politics of conquest (Hell, in press).

Bannon attended the Principals Committee of the National Security Council between January 28 and April 5, 2017 and was White House chief strategist in the Trump administration. Although his official role in the administration has been diminished, Bannon remains a member of Trump's Cabinet, as of this writing. Even if Bannon were to quit or to be dismissed, however, and even if none of the policies associated with Bannon were to be implemented, his ideology would still merit analysis, not least because it played a central role in the Trump campaign and in the first weeks of the Trump government, most notably in the infamous "Muslim ban."<sup>7</sup> Second, as we will argue in the last section, Bannon occupies an analogous position to that of Dugin, since both are developing their political projects with respect to states that are global military powers.

Moreover, we want to emphasize that Bannon is a central actor in the emergence of a new right-wing populist movement in the U.S. grounded in ethnic nationalism and Christian Islamophobia (Bail, 2015). This movement now has its own organic intellectuals, think tanks, foundations, and news media, and is partly funded by the Mercer family,<sup>8</sup> including Breitbart News, the Media Research Center, and the Florida based Government Accountability Institute (Mayer, 2017). By now, this broad counterculture reaches from colleges like Hillsdale College and journals like the *Claremont Review of Books* to strategically provocative performances by people like Milo Yiannopoulos. Located on the fringes of this movement are neo-Nazi organizations like Richard Spencer's National Policy Institute. Having succeeded in establishing a broad counterculture, this movement's long-term aim, as stated by Andrew Breitbart, is "taking back the culture" for "the silenced majority" (Mayer, 2017, 41). Trump's election unexpectedly shifted many of these right-wing activists closer to this long-term goal.

Although we focus on Bannon, he is part of a group of radical conservative thinkers, some of whom are also now inside the Trump administration (e.g., Anton, Sebastian Gorka, Stephen Miller, and Julia Hahn).<sup>9</sup> Bannon presents

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<sup>7</sup> A more recent Bannon-esque moment was Trump's speech in Warsaw on July 6, 2017. Though the talk was written by Stephen Miller, it was clearly aligned with the Bannon worldview, calling for the "defense of the West," i.e., for a defense of Christendom against Islam (Beinert, 2017). As the reader will see in the rest of this article, the ideological concept of "the West" plays a central role in this discourse.

<sup>8</sup> On Robert Mercer's racist and Islamophobic views, see Mayer (2017, pp. 36, 40).

<sup>9</sup> Sebastian Gorka, who wore a military medal associated with Hungarian Nazi sympathizers at Trump's inauguration, is a member of the Strategic Initiatives Group, which was supposed to function parallel to the National Security Council (Jaffe, 2016). At the time of writing, Miller is



himself not only as the leading strategist but also as the leading intellectual of this new radical right. We are mainly interested in this latter role.

More specifically, we are interested in three aspects of his activities: first, his activity as ideologue; second, his activity as film producer and director; third his role as mediator to the identitarian, right-wing populist movements in Europe and Russia. We will argue that Bannon's thinking resonates intriguingly with the Russian Heideggerian sociologist-philosopher Alexander Dugin. Pursuing these topics, our paper will focus on three texts. We will first examine Trump's Inaugural Speech on January 20, 2017, written by Bannon and Stephen Miller. Second, we will analyze Bannon's 2014 speech to the Human Dignity Institute at the Vatican. Third, we will read the 2016 film *Torchbearer*, written and directed by Bannon. Each of these texts follows a characteristic arc. First, a condition of decay and decadence in the US is identified. Second, the actors responsible for this decay and those opposing it are identified. Finally, readers and viewers are mobilized for a global war against Islam. Bannon's texts and films reveal a militaristic politics driven by friend–enemy logics. These texts and films stage an escalation of domestically focused nationalism into a call for global warfare.

At the end of the article we briefly turn to Dugin, and examine the contextual and substantive similarities between his politics and Bannon's. The comparison with post-Soviet Russia and Dugin allows us to bring out the specific military aspect of contemporary right-wing populism in the U.S., more so than would comparisons with western European far right movements or nineteenth century American populisms.

### **Trump's Inauguration Speech: The Specificity of the New American Populism**

Many commentators have analyzed the Trump movement though the category of reactionary or authoritarian populism (Anderson, 2017; Brick 2017; Jansen, 2017; Müller, 2016). We agree that this movement is defined in part by its horizontal and vertical axes of domestic friend–enemy polarization. What we want to emphasize, however, is this movement's orientation toward international geopolitics and global warfare. This populism is also, and perhaps first and foremost, a military one that defines the people as including only those who are loyal patriots.

Trump's inauguration speech opens with a populist gesture: “today we are ... giving [power] back to ... the American People.” The speech pits the American

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Footnote 9 continued

Senior Advisor to Trump; Hahn is Special Assistant to President Donald Trump and aide to Bannon (Costa, 2017); and Flynn (Schmidle, 2017) was National Security Advisor.



people against the political elite: "Washington flourished – but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed." It defines the present condition as the result of a long-term crisis, and paints an apocalyptic picture:

Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; ... and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.

With these passages, the people are defined in "vertical" terms with respect to the elite, above, and to a "criminal underclass," below.

More importantly, for our present purposes, the people are defined with reference to a military imaginary:

It is time to remember that old wisdom our soldiers will never forget: that whether we are black or brown or white, we all bleed the same red blood of patriots, we all enjoy the same glorious freedoms, and we all salute the same great American Flag.

In other words, citizens are loyal patriots, and only loyal patriots can be citizens. Patriotism is linked not just to the military but also to religion: the people become "God's people." The point is that neither the friend nor enemy categories are defined in exclusively racial terms.<sup>10</sup> Loyal, non-white citizens are included in the concept of the people here, while others (those involved in "crime and gangs and drugs") are excluded. "At the bedrock of our politics," Trump claimed, "will be a total allegiance to the United States of America, and through our loyalty to our country, we will rediscover our loyalty to each other." Trump declared his Inauguration Day to be a "National Day of Patriotic Devotion" – surely another Bannon touch.

The culmination of the speech's militaristic populist logic mobilizes the audience for a war against Islam, led by the decisionistic President: "We will reinforce old alliances and form new ones – and unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth." Trump then portentously pronounces: "Now arrives the hour of action." Those familiar with the so-called Conservative Revolution of Weimar German intellectuals will be reminded of the title of Spengler's (1933) *The Hour of Decision*. As we argue below, this historical echo of the interwar European extreme right is far from random.

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<sup>10</sup> We are not arguing that Bannon's worldview is not racist, but that the *differentia specifica* of this right-wing ideology lies elsewhere, in its theo-political militarism.



The idea of populism will probably lead most readers to think of the Trump campaign's vehement anti-immigrant rhetoric. It is striking, however, that Trump only briefly alludes to immigration in this speech, using the language of protecting and defending our borders. It is also striking that immigration is subordinated to a military language in these examples. Our point is that Trump–Bannon's populism is not merely reactionary, racist, or authoritarian, but specifically militaristic. Indeed, when Trump spoke of the first wave of deportations, in February, 2017, he stated: "it's a military operation."

### **Bannon's 2014 Vatican Speech: Against the "Party of Davos" and "Economic Imperialism"**

There are three reasons for focusing on Bannon's 2014 speech to the Human Dignity Institute at the Vatican.<sup>11</sup> First, his populist anti-capitalism becomes most explicit here, but once again it is subordinated to the war against Islam. Second, Bannon explicitly militarizes the populist subject. Third, the populist subject is constructed as a decisionist collective actor. Next, we examine each of these rhetorical moves.

Bannon distinguishes among different forms of capitalism, only one of which is described in positive terms: an "enlightened" capitalism grounded in "Judeo-Christian belief." The negative forms include the "Ayn Rand school ... of libertarian capitalism" and what Bannon calls "crony capitalism." The latter covers "state-sponsored capitalism" in China and Russia as well as the US – the capitalism "of the Republican establishment." In order to better understand what Bannon means by a capitalism unmoored from its supposed Judeo-Christian foundations we have to look at his cultural critique of the Ayn Rand School, which Bannon describes as "a capitalism that really looks to make people commodities, and to objectify people, and to use them."<sup>12</sup> Neoliberal capitalism is criticized as mere "accumulation," as leaving people "empty." This cultural critique is even more explicit in *Generation Zero* (2010) and especially in *Torchbearer* (2016).

Bannon insists that he is not opposed to capitalism per se. "We believe in the benefits of capitalism," he says, adding: "the harder-nosed the capitalism the better." But Bannon privileges a form of capitalism that spreads "the tremendous value creation throughout broader distribution patterns," and he condemns forms that are only "creating wealth and creating value for a very small subset of people." Bannon pledged to fight for "deconstructing the

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<sup>11</sup> Feder (2016) is a transcript of Bannon's 2014 Vatican speech.

<sup>12</sup> Bannon does not reject capitalism *tout court* but evinces a preference for the mildly redistributive capitalism of mid-20th century Fordist America. On the fascistic impetus of much Fordist nostalgia, see Steinmetz (1994, 2010).





administrative state" (at CPAC, Feb 23, 2017), and *Torchbearer* includes a scene suggesting that the welfare state should be replaced by private charity.

What is especially striking in the Vatican speech is Bannon's understanding of the "partnership of big government and corporatists"—which he calls the Party of Davos—as a form of imperialism. Specifically, this is an "imperialism of a global financial elite," in which "wealth is no longer shared with the people." Although Bannon is a strong proponent of a certain form of US militarism, as we show elsewhere, he is often sharply critical of the sorts of *economic imperialism* that have been denounced by Hobson, Lenin, and many others since the end of the nineteenth century. This specific form of anti-"imperialism" was often linked to the traditional anti-Semitic discourse about global Jewish finance capital, and this is the case in Bannon's discourse as well.<sup>13</sup>

As we wrote above, all of Bannon's texts and films follow a narrative arc culminating in global war against Islam. Thus the militarist project ultimately takes precedence over even the populist logic. This systematic privileging can be seen in the 2014 Vatican speech, which concludes with the argument that we are currently in a fundamental crisis that is not going away. At the beginning of the article we discussed Anton's depiction of the crisis as a state of exception. We find a similar thought pattern in Bannon. As Bannon states, there is a crisis on many levels: "we've come partly off-track in the years since the fall of the Soviet Union and we're starting now in the twenty-first century, which I believe, strongly, is a crisis both of our church, a crisis of our faith, a crisis of the West, a crisis of capitalism." The only possible response to this crisis is a militant, military one:

And we're at the very beginning stages of a very brutal and bloody conflict, ... which if the people in this room, the people in the church, do not bind together and really form what I feel is an aspect of the church militant,<sup>14</sup> ... to fight for our beliefs against this new barbarity ..., that will completely eradicate everything that we've been bequeathed over the last 2,000, 2,500 years.

What Bannon is calling for is a "war of immense proportions," based on a "very, very, very aggressive stance against radical Islam." In other words, in this text, the militarist project ultimately takes precedence over the racist and populist logics.

In this vein, Bannon concludes by taking a very long-term view. Stating that "we're at the very beginning stages of a very brutal and bloody conflict," he

<sup>13</sup> Bannon uses the phrase Judeo-Christian. Significantly, he often drops the "Judeo" or refers simply to the Christian West. See Bruck (2017) on Bannon's anti-Semitism.

<sup>14</sup> As Freedman (2016) points out, Bannon's use of the phrase "church militant" is taken "out of context" here, invoked "in a call for cultural and military conflict rather than for spiritual warfare, particularly within one's soul, its longstanding connotation."



invites his listeners to ask themselves, “500 years from today, ... [W]hat are they going to say about what I did at the beginning stages of this crisis?” With this question, he returns us to the problematic of decisionism. For Schmitt, decisionism is ultimately a question of, and for, the leader. By framing his populism as a theo-political project, Bannon constructs a collective decisionist subject.

### **Bannon’s “Torchbearer”: Western Civilization and the War Against Islam**

Bannon’s film *Torchbearer* (2016) was first screened in the US at the 2016 Republican National Convention. This was not just any film, in other words, but a programmatic work for the Trump campaign.<sup>15</sup> In the anti-Obama film, *The Hope and the Change*, released for the 2012 election and also screened at the Republican Convention, Bannon, equating Obama with Hitler, modeled the opening sequence on the infamous beginning of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (Mayer, 2017, p. 42).<sup>16</sup> Bannon’s Reagan film creates a series of analogies in which the U.S. corresponds to the Roman Republic, while Carthage corresponds to Third Reich, the Soviet Empire, and finally, the Muslim world. In *Torchbearer*, Bannon repeats these moves, with one significant revision. First, Bannon again refers back to ancient Rome. In contrast to the Reagan film, however, Bannon’s *Torchbearer* does not reference Republican Rome but late imperial Rome. Here, Bannon constructs a chain of equivalences (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001) that links the late Roman Empire as a universalist, secular, and decadent formation to the neoliberal imperialist U.S. under Obama. The contemporary U.S. is now part of a series that includes the Third Reich and ISIS. Second, the film involves a deliberate rewriting of the “Prologue in Images” that opens Riefenstahl’s film *Olympia* (1936).

The figure embodying everything that stands in opposition to the chain of equivalences between historical imperialisms is Phil Robertson, the reality television star of “Duck Dynasty” best known for his racist and homophobic statements.<sup>17</sup> More precisely, Robertson figures as the organic intellectual of American white settler society, a prophet arguing for a return to America’s Christian foundations. Riefenstahl’s *Prologue in Images* takes its viewers from the ruins of the Acropolis to the Berlin Sport Palace, the newly built stadium modeled on the Roman Colosseum. Presenting the Third Reich as a new Roman

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<sup>15</sup> *Torchbearer* was first screened at the Cannes Film Festival in May, 2016 (Siegel and Kilday, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> When Patrick Caldwell pointed out the imitation of Riefenstahl, Bannon acknowledged it: “you’re the only one that caught it!” (Mayer, 2017, p. 42). Andrew Breitbart also praised Bannon as the “Leni Riefenstahl of the Tea Party movement” (Green, 2015). Riefenstahl’s opening sequence is one of the most widely discussed points in any undergraduate film course.

<sup>17</sup> Robertson has “bachelor’s and master’s degrees in education, with a concentration in English” (Robertson, 2013, p. 61).



Empire arising out of the ruins of antiquity, the prologue ends with the Olympic torchbearer's arrival in the stadium.

Robertson as the "torchbearer" of Western civilization is a provocative populist gesture. Toward the beginning, the film offers a montage of "liberal" and "elitist" commentators making fun of this "inbred hillbilly," with one of the commentator asking, "Do the thoughts of this Duck Dynasty really matter?" Bannon proves to his audience that they do matter. In this film, the Duck Dynasty patriarch quotes Tacitus, for instance, and explains Aristotle's philosophy of causal powers. Robertson also presents us with a right-wing Christian moral philosophy according to which God alone allows us to distinguish between good and evil.<sup>18</sup>

As torchbearer, Robertson takes the viewer on a journey through the history of "the West," from ancient Athens to the contemporary US. As in most narratives, story and plot are not aligned. The first historical sequence in the film is about the Scopes Trial in 1925, which is presented as the result of a process of secularization leading to eugenics, abortion, and Social Darwinism. Moving Robertson back in time to ancient Athens, Bannon's film then follows a linear chronology, connecting scenes set in ancient Rome, to scenes about the French Revolution, the Nazi Empire and Auschwitz, the invention of the atom bomb, the American Civil Rights movement, and, finally, the end of the Soviet Union, and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

What kind of world history does Robertson narrate? In his 2014 speech, Bannon formulated a critique of neoliberal imperialism. In *Torchbearer*, the present is the moment of the American Empire in decline, a decaying imperialist civilization. Not surprisingly, the first trope of decay has to do with 'homosexuality' and Robertson ranting against gay marriage. Panning across Thomas Cole's cycle of paintings on the "The Course of Empire" (1935), the film then introduces the *topos* of the rise and fall of empires. As a secular empire, run by a global economic-political elite interested only in the accumulation of wealth (and sustained by a popular culture that celebrates money and pornography), the U.S., Bannon and Robertson want us to understand, is destined to repeat Rome's fall.

The *Torchbearer* segment on the Nazis portrays their empire as the ultimate outcome of secularization and scientific rationality, the most extreme form of capitalism, unmoored from any Christian ethics. Politics is reduced to the will to power; the camps are "death factories" designed by Nazi engineers. Bannon films Robertson articulating these ideas while walking through the ruins of Auschwitz. With this analysis of Nazism, Bannon hints at a critique of American capitalism and economic imperialism, its potential for totalitarianism. Bannon's ideas strongly resonate with Heidegger's critique of western "global imperialism" (*Weltimperialismus*), which Heidegger connects to traditional anti-Semitic

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<sup>18</sup> Robertson is shown reading from texts by Paul and Augustine, and reciting Martin Luther King while sitting in King's Birmingham, Alabama prison cell.



discourse about global Jewish finance capital, or what he calls *Weltjudentum*, in his 1939–1941 *Black Notebooks* (Heidegger, 2014, pp. 113, 243; Hell, in press).

Equating late Roman imperialism with the Third Reich, and, ultimately, the ISIS Caliphate, the film thus hints at an analogy between Roman imperialism and the U.S. under the presidencies of Bush and Obama. The countermodel to late Roman imperialism in its ancient and modern forms is Athens. Like Riefenstahl, Bannon shows us the ruins of the Acropolis. Explaining that he is standing on the Areopagus, Robinson tells us that St. Paul spoke at this site about the “one God.” More importantly, Robertson explains that Greek Democracy was not handed to the people but created by their fight against foreign invaders. This is a direct link with the populist decisionist subject discussed in the previous section.

But who is inside and who is outside of this populist American subject? Two key segments of the film establish this distinction. In the ruins of the Acropolis, the film presents a form of citizenship defined ethnically and religiously. As the film moves from the Roman Coliseum to the New World, Robertson defines the American people as “God’s own people,” intoning: “the new civilization they would found would be anchored in God.” Needless to say, there is no mention of Native Americans. In Bannon’s film, the American people are white settlers.<sup>19</sup>

The film’s momentum reaches its climax with a rapid montage of scenes of ISIS soldiers massacring Christians. On the formal level, Bannon introduces here what Kornberg (2017) calls “crisis time”—the accelerated temporality proper to construction of a state of emergency. Bannon introduces this sequence by having Robertson read excerpts from the Book of Revelations. The movie’s final scene, immediately following the ISIS sequence, shows Robertson baptizing people. A call to arms, this scene suggests the country’s “resurrection.” It also lays claim to a Christian ethics providing the foundation for future wars against “radical Islam.”

We wrote above about Bannon’s critique of U.S. imperialist modernity and its Heideggerian echoes. We can trace this linkage between anti-capitalist/imperialist rhetoric and anti-Semitism to populist movements in the nineteenth century in the U.S. and Europe. The theorists of the so-called conservative revolution – Oswald Spengler, Carl Schmitt, Martin Heidegger – theorized this discourse in the wake of WWI. Working with the analogy to the opposition between Roman Republic and late Roman imperialism, they established the opposition between political empire and economic imperialism, ethnically and religiously homogeneous *Kultur* and cosmopolitan, secular *Zivilisation*. While Bannon’s

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<sup>19</sup> White ethno-nationalists see the U.S. as a nation of European settlers, not immigrants. European ethno-nationalists cannot base their claims on settler status but argue that Europe is now being “colonized” by its former colonial subjects (Faye, 2000).



Heideggerian hints remain implicit, Alexander Dugin explicitly harkens back to the thinking of the conservative revolution.

## Dugin and Spenglerian Neo-Eurasianism

Dugin's critique of liberal imperialism leads him to develop a geopolitics with a specific neo-Eurasian traditionalist core. Dugin adopts the Spenglerian idea that the globe is populated by a plurality of civilizations, each with its own sense of time, its own space, and each incomparable with the others.<sup>20</sup> No single state or region has the right to claim to be the standard for all of the rest. Every people has its own pattern of development, its own ages, and its own 'rationality,' and deserves to be understood and evaluated according to its own internal criteria (Dugin, 2015, p. 19). The preferred form of global relations is then a *pluriversum* (Dugin, 2015, p. 44), rather than a universalism or global hegemony of any sort (American or otherwise).

These arguments are embedded within a structural view of the world system derived from geopolitical thinking, from Ratzel to Schmitt (Dugin, 2012, pp. 116–117). Dugin takes from Schmitt the Great Space or *Grossraum* (Schmitt, 2003) as the basic unit of global geopolitical analysis (Dugin, 2015, p. 43). For Dugin, states are an obsolete form. States face three options: (1) self liquidation; (2) struggling to survive; or (3) Dugin's preferred approach: "entering into super state formations of a regional nature (Great Spaces) on the basis of historical, civilizational, and strategic commonalities" (Dugin, 2015, p. 61). For Dugin, these Great Spaces need to be defined in terms of a deep, shared identity, a "common historical destiny." Dugin adds an explicitly eschatological narrative to his geopolitical theory of Great Spaces, just as Bannon adds an eschatological dimension to his narrative of American history. The shared identity is religious. In the Neo-Eurasianist space, Russian Orthodox Christianity is privileged, but will also encompass the forms of Islam that Dugin considers non-universalist: specifically, Shi'ites, not Sunnis.

The US, according to Dugin, is in a much weaker position to discover a deep identity and to create an organic *Grossraum*. Voicing Heidegger, Dugin argues that the US is a "platform for an artificial civilization," a "purely conceptual society conveying the very essence of modernity" (Dugin, 2015, pp. 45, 117). Crucially, the US has no relationship to soil—"or rather, the soil that it has doesn't belong to Americans. ... The real living space belongs to those who inhabited the continent before the Whites, to the Indian" (Dugin, 2015, p. 119). In this essay on "some suggestions for the American people," Dugin sketches three paths for this rootless nation. One with particular resonance in the current discussion is "to discard one's American identity and .... return to one's European roots"

<sup>20</sup> On the imperial theories of Spengler, Ratzel, Schmitt, and Heidegger, see Hell (in press).



(Dugin, 2015, p. 121). Elsewhere Dugin embraced a definition of *ethnos* as “any set of individuals or any ‘collective’: a people, population, nation, tribe, or family clan, based on a common historical destiny” (Dugin, 2015, p. 21).

After Trump won the 2016 election, Dugin seemed to abandon his skeptical view of the U.S. He then argues that there is an America that is “traditional and conservative, healthy, and worthy of respect,” a “real America....which has not succumbed to the false propaganda of the globalist liberal media.” Dugin concludes that “If America, like Trump promised, focuses on its internal problems and leaves humanity alone, then there is no longer any reason to hate it.” Trump, he concludes, will support “other values” than the liberal imperialist ones—“conservative, American, and Christian” (Dugin, 2016).

Here we have come almost all the way back to Bannon. Of course there will still be friction, or worse, between Russia and the U.S. Bannon’s program targets all Muslims, not just Sunnis. The U.S. is unlikely to recognize Russia’s claim over the vast territory included in Dugin’s Eurasia. The point is less concerned with the substantive compatibility or identity of the two thinkers, however, than with their analogous locations within their respective national contexts. Understanding this helps us understand the specificity of the Trump phenomenon. How does this work?

First, we have to acknowledge that there are ideological similarities and a few actual ties between Bannon and Dugin. Both men are harshly critical of American economic imperialism and brutal neoliberal capitalism. Both advocate a kind of nationalist traditionalism. Bannon’s critique of American *economic* imperialism and liberal internationalism has affinities with Dugin’s argument in favor of traditionalist “Great Spaces” as opposed to universalist forms of global domination. Bannon, Anton, and Dugin all articulate a populist critique of “financial global elites” and their political allies. Bannon and Dugin both support military interventionism by their respective states, grounded in a theo-political logic.

Bannon and Dugin are aware of one another. Like Bannon, Dugin styles himself as both movements’ intellectual and political advisor to his sovereign. The identitarian movements and alt-right movements they support are also interconnected. Dugin is sometimes referred to as “Putin’s brain”; Bannon is often called “Trump’s brain.” Bannon stated in 2014:

[W]hen you really look at some of the underpinnings of some of [Putin’s] beliefs today, a lot of those come from what I call Eurasianism; he’s got an adviser who harkens back to Julius Evola and different writers of the early twentieth century [i.e., thinkers of the Conservative Revolution] who are really the supporters of what’s called the traditionalist movement, which really eventually metastasized into Italian fascism. A lot of people that are traditionalists are attracted to that.



The advisor to whom Bannon is referring is Dugin. As for Dugin, his website *Katechon* (named in homage to Carl Schmitt)<sup>21</sup> has commented sporadically on Bannon.

The resonances between Bannon and Dugin stem less from direct connections, however, than from their comparable locations in their respective political fields. Compared to west European states, Russia and the U.S. both have a powerful military, popular imperial traditions, and large groups who can be mobilized to support foreign military interventions. By contrast, the typical west European state is limited in its ability to intervene outside its national boundaries and faces a citizenry that is generally skeptical about overseas military adventurism. The French, German, or British far right may fantasize about imperial revivals, but for obvious reason are much more focused on domestic battles against immigrants and multiculturalism.

## Conclusion

We have argued that closer attention to Anton's texts and Bannon's speeches and films reveals a particularly dangerous aspect of the specifically American version of authoritarian populism. We connect the characteristically militarized discourse of these radical thinkers to the crisis of American political hegemony (what Anton refers to as the end of the "liberal international order") and to the enduring supremacy of the American military. Anton's and Bannon's decisionist politics and their relentless production of friend-enemy constructions are ultimately harnessed to a militarized political project. The specifically American populist subject is thus not only racist, sexist, and anti-elitist, like contemporary European populists, but shares something with the Russian populists: it is propelled in the direction of military adventurism, into campaigns against the civilizational enemy.

How does this relate to the different geopolitical scenarios that we outlined at the beginning of this article? Based on our reading of Bannon, we would anticipate efforts to build up a coalition of "western" countries under US leadership with the goal of waging war against Islam (option #5). This would be an empire driven by a political logic, not an economic one—and therefore, in Bannon's view, a non-imperialist empire. This scenario seems to exist in tension with the geopolitics flowing from a more radically nationalist populism. An isolationist politics combined with the most powerful military in the world may result in a second scenario: what we called above "militarized global chaos" (option #3). Here, the anti-Islamic impetus of the movement translates into theo-racist immigration policies at home and military adventurism abroad.

We finished this article on the day the National Front was defeated by Emmanuel Macron in the French 2017 Presidential elections. But while Marine

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<sup>21</sup> On the role of the *Katechon* in Schmitt's imperial theology see Hell (2009).



Le Pen lost this time, she is positioning herself for the next round of elections five years hence, in 2022. Like Michael Flynn, Bannon, Anton, Miller, Gorka, Hahn, and even Trump may all be removed from office before the next Presidential election in 2020. Yet they represent a radical new way of thinking within the American political landscape and the expansion of a political movement that cannot be ignored. Our analysis might seem to exaggerate the coherence of Bannon's project. Similarly, scholarship on Nazi thinkers has tended to dismiss writers like Hitler and Rosenberg as incoherent and third rate. And they were—like Bannon. But we think it is important to analyze these texts, for two reasons. The first has to do with the urgent task of understanding Bannon's project.

The second has to do with the specificity of Trump as an authoritarian leader in a period of hegemonic decline. As Masha Gessen continuously emphasizes, the hallmark of autocratic leaders is to generate confusion and chaos through seemingly random, self-contradictory, and incoherent statements and practices. This undermines democratic institutions and the conventions and norms on which democracy is based, in both Russia and the U.S. Ultimately this chaotic politics is a way of signaling and accumulating power. What this suggests is that a complete analysis of the new right-wing movements and authoritarian regimes needs to pay attention to both the politics of chaos and incoherence, and to the efforts of people like Dugin and Bannon to forge coherent hegemonic projects.

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