



Trumping Europe? Steve Bannon's manufactured 'movement'

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September 22, 2018

The economist and political theorist Murray Rothbard, generally credited as one of the founders of right-wing libertarianism in North America, was also, somewhat contradictory, enthusiastic about McCarthyism. His support wasn't predicated on the fervent anti-communism of William F. Buckley and other standard bearers of what was then called the New Right, but instead due to what he saw as the Wisconsin Senator's 'populism'; as he wrote:

"[T]here was another reason for my own fascination with the McCarthy phenomenon: his populism . . . there was a vital need to appeal directly to the masses, emotionally, even demagogically, over the heads of the Establishment: of the Ivy League, of the mass media, the liberal intellectuals, of the Republican-Democrat political party structure . . . in sum, by a populist short-circuit."

Rather than the actual fascists he's often compared to, Rothbard might have noted that Donald Trump in some ways copied, most likely by accident, Senator McCarthy's populism, a revival made even easier by contemporary technology and a 24/7 news cycle. Only a demagogue in this mold would announce his campaign by attacking the people of a neighboring nation as rapists and murderers.

Rather than a Red Scare, Trump gave the United States a Migrant Scare. One of the worst results so far, rivaling anything McCarthy ever did, is the cruel separation of children from their families on the country's southern border.

The heir to a massive real estate fortune also somewhat absurdly presented himself as a man of the people with an understanding of ordinary worker's pain, as many right wing populists have done in the past, promising them that he would stand against 'The Establishment' within the Republican Party and "drain the swamp" in Washington D.C.

Instead, as most of us expected, the Trump administration is stacking the courts with right wing judges, handing out massive tax cuts to the rich and corporations and putting the dangerous policies of deregulation that were a hallmark of the George W. Bush years on steroids.

The less said about his erratic foreign policy and massive handouts to the defense industry, the better.

Nonetheless, this same President, at least as far we can tell from the polls, still manages to hold onto his appeal with at least a sizeable portion of (mostly white and male) working people, a co-option of a big part of the left's traditional constituency, long abandoned by both major American political parties and bludgeoned for 30+ years with Neo-liberal austerity politics regardless of which party controlled the presidency.

While Donald Trump himself doesn't seem like much of a reader, he had Steve Bannon as his 'chief strategist', who gave his xenophobic ravings and self aggrandizement a veneer of phony intellectualism on cable news and in public forums.

Bannon's talk of 'deconstructing the administrative state' was music to the ears of libertarians and corporations alike, proof that there's little that benefits working people in the policies that are actually being presented by these 'populists', which could have been drafted by the Cato Institute (incidentally founded by Rothbard and Charles Koch, although they later fell out).

By seizing on the hot button issue of migration, first at Breitbart and in his ridiculous 'films' then during the 2016 campaign, Bannon has also helped to weaponize xenophobic politics in a way Trump probably couldn't have on his own. With others, he helped to turn it into policies like the ban on travel from mainly Muslim countries.

A man unable to stop himself from talking (and apparently, leaking), Bannon's tenure in the Trump Whitehouse was mercifully short and most of us assumed that this strange figure, who often looked as if he wasn't getting enough sleep, would soon disappear into obscurity. In thinking this, we made the mistake of thinking the corporate media wouldn't always be at the ready to provide him a platform to pontificate on all things 'nationalist' and defend his former boss.

He has done this on many occasions since his exile from the White House, and not just in the United States

Even after his main sponsors, the oligarchic Mercer family, publicly disavowed him and he was forced out at Breitbart News, "Sloppy Steve" as Trump has called him, was still welcome on cable news networks, especially after quotes attributed to him in a number of tell all books offered some insider gossip regarding the Trump administration.

Trumpism's European Tour

While the kind of nativist populism espoused by Bannon and his often even less talented peers has been around in contemporary European politics for some time, it's no longer on the margins and is forcing more traditional conservative parties further to the right, especially in terms of anti-Muslim and anti-refugee sentiment. Now at least officially a free agent, it was probably only a matter of time until Bannon would cross the pond to try and influence the rising nationalist parties throughout the continent.

Seemingly always in search of a spotlight, several times during the past year Bannon has made his way there, visiting with the kind of far right figures who appear to be gaining ground in the wake of Brexit and Europe's refugee crisis. Bannon's European project, which has roped in some of these politicians and parties already, is somewhat portentously called The Movement.

As reported by AlJazeera, the organization, which is planning a founding convention sometime in November is, "Based in Brussels... and [is] planning to hire 10 full-time staff, according to

Bannon, The Movement will aim to influence the 2019 European elections by organizing and giving advice to far-right parties.”

The policy issues at the heart of the group, actually started by Mischael Modrikamen, a Belgian politician, will be familiar to most of those reading this, “stronger borders, greater limits on migration and fighting against so-called radical Islam.”

While it doesn't make much sense in this writer's opinion for self-proclaimed nationalists to compete for seats in an EU parliament that they uniformly despise, as reported by multiple sources, Bannon and Modrikamen's strategy is to build a large enough bloc within the body to, at the very least, stall the European project of integrating the continent at its source.

Two of the men courted and won over by Bannon, La Liga's Matteo Salvini, the Interior Minister of Italy's coalition government, and Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, both use strong rhetoric to attack refugees, especially Muslims, and even their countries' own Roma populations. For his part, Salvini recently said that he would look into registering all Roma in Italy and then later expel those that aren't recorded.

Salvini's plan really does echo historical fascism. Roma have been attacked throughout history and a large number of them were mostly forgotten victims of fascism in Europe the last time around.

Orbán, who Salvini claims as an inspiration, speaks of the Roma in similar terms: as if they are foreigners in their own country. Tragically, it appears to be official policy in the country to segregate Roma children in Hungary's schools, resulting in only around 20% of them finishing highschool and less than 1% attending university.

Orbán is also guilty of using anti-Semitic dog whistles, especially when talking about George Soros, a fellow Hungarian, who he seems to blame for everything that's going wrong in the world.

None of this bothers Bannon, of course.

“I don't condemn Orbán or Salvini. They are some of the most caring people in the world,” he told a conference sponsored by The Economist.

However, Bannon's outreach hasn't always been welcomed by some in Europe's far-right, including the AfD (Alternative for Deutschland) in Germany and France's National Rally (rebranded from the National Front by leader Marine Le Pen to erase bad associations from the past).

As Jérôme Rivière, international spokesperson for National Rally was quoted as saying in Politico, “Bannon is American and has no place in a European political party. We reject any supra-national entity and are not participating in the creation of anything with Bannon.”

While despising their racist and anti-Muslim politics, one has to give people like Rivière credit for sticking to their screwed up principles.

Regardless of whether they go along with Bannon or not, these rightwing populists will not be consigned to the dustbin of history by the centrist politics their voters are reacting against. The true antidote to these ultra nationalists is the internationalist left, but even as these kinds of

voices are also becoming more popular, they can expect to be smeared and accused of supporting the very things they're fighting against.

We saw this in the United States when Bernie Sanders was accused of racism and misogyny in 2016 and we're seeing it again in the UK, where Jeremy Corbyn, probably one of the least racist politicians in the country on the basis of his record, is accused of antisemitism in increasingly hysterical terms.

The new reality is that progressives, here in North America as in Europe, must fight on two fronts simultaneously. We must understand that politics as usual are what brought Trump, Salvini, Orban and so many others to power in the first place. The real ideas to defeat right-wing populism must come from the left, not the centrists who offer only more of the same old socialism for the rich and well connected and dog eat dog capitalism for the rest.