

Letting Russia Be Russia

Political philosophers stressing Traditionalist values have influenced the thinking of Presidents Putin and Trump, but that may offer a path for Russia and the U.S. to coexist, explains ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Many in the West have purported to find Candidate, and now President, Trump's insistence that détente with Russia is a "good thing" to be troubling. Some suggest that the President's insistence on this is somehow sinister – worse even than troubling. But perhaps Trump and his chief strategist Steve Bannon's sense that détente may be possible is not so much "sinister," but has more to do paradoxically with a particular coincidence – a confluence of intellectual thinking, a confluence that has been taking shape, almost unnoticed over recent years, but which nonetheless is becoming more significant, and which posits a profound foreign policy potential.

Much has been read (most of it hostile) into Steve Bannon's comment, via the internet, at a 2014 Vatican conference, during which he said that many of Vladimir Putin's views were underpinned by eurasianism: "He's got an adviser who harkens back to Julius Evola and different writers of the early 20th century, who are really the supporters of what's called the Traditionalist Movement ... We, the Judeo-Christian West," continued Bannon, "really have to look at what [Putin]'s talking about as far as Traditionalism goes – particularly the sense of where it supports the underpinnings of nationalism."

Here lies one immediate problem. It is presumed in the Western media, that the unnamed Putin adviser who harkens back to Julius Evola is Professor Alexander Dugin. And here, precisely is the first difficulty: both philosophers have a rare quality of intellectual brilliance, a command of the literature that is encyclopedic, but they are *radical* – radical way beyond, and at odds with, today's secular, and uniform tastes. Indeed, even today in Italy, it is best to read Julius Evola, a prolific Italian philosopher and writer, with some discretion, or at least to hold such a book within nondescript, concealing covers, if one is to avoid hostile glares, or even physical abuse.

And the second difficulty? Alexander Dugin has been described as Putin's "Rasputin" – a "mad mystic." And Julius Evola was charged in 1951, with others, with the crime of promoting the Fascist Party, and of promoting ideas proper to fascism. Both philosophers, in short, are controversial and have proved hugely vulnerable to sometimes quite wild misrepresentations. Evola was acquitted on both charges of promoting fascism (though he is popularly still viewed as linked

to post-war Italian neo-fascism), and Dugin, from 1998 to 2003, was a geopolitics counselor of the Duma's Chairman (Gennadiy Selezvov) – but was not adviser to Vladimir Putin.

In fact, as Professor Bertonneau has written: “Evola condemns with equal fervour Muscovite communism and American money-democracy, as representing, the both of them, the mechanization and dehumanization of life. Unlike the Marxists – and unlike the Fascists and National Socialists – Evola saw the only hope for Western Civilization as lying in a revival of what he liked to capitalize, on the one hand, as Tradition and, on the other, as transcendence [personal transformation]; he thus rejected all materialism and instrumentalism as crude reductions of reality for coarse minds and, so too, as symptoms of a prevailing and altogether repugnant decadence.”

Delicate Ground

So why raise these controversial figures? Particularly, as in raising them we tread delicate ground. Well, it is because of that interesting coincidence to which we earlier alluded. Here is one aspect, as Professor Dugin himself notes:

“Julius Evola's works were discovered in the 1960s [in Russia] by the very esoteric group of anti-communist intellectual thinkers known as ‘the Dissidents of the Right’. They were a small circle of people who had conscientiously refused to participate in the ‘cultural life’ of the USSR, and who had instead chosen an underground existence for themselves. The disparity between the presented Soviet culture and the actual Soviet reality was almost entirely what made them seek out the fundamental principles that could explain the origins of that evil, absolutist idea. It was through their refusal of communism that they discovered certain works by anti-modernist and traditionalist authors: above all, the books by René Guénon, and by Julius Evola.”

And, in America: “Sometime around the year 2000, the work of Julius Evola reached [the American] public consciousness, and thanks to writers like Bill White, Radical Traditionalism entered the [American] right-wing lexicon. This is a philosophy more than a political view, but fits neatly into the New Right idea that culture must be the generative actor for change which will manifest in politics and other areas ... It is concerned with two fronts: first, arresting the decline of the West by crushing the Left by any means necessary; and second, a zeal for restoring the greatness of Western Civilization at its height, and [even] surpassing it.”

And here lies the third “difficulty” (or perhaps not a difficulty, but its particular merit, in the eyes of many): in a secular, liberal age, Evola's philosophy is anti-modernist, anti-secularist and anti-Liberal. It harks back

to *philosophia perennis*, and in American terms, to Aldous Huxley's definitions of Perennial Philosophy. (In France, the Nouvelle Droite has a different, but parallel, ontological basis, i.e. with such as Alain de Benoist). More confusingly, though it is called Traditionalism, it is really a traditionalism that has no defined tradition.

Of course, this is not to suggest that Julius Evola was the only writer in this radical traditionalist vein. There was René Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, and many others. But, as the *New York Times* acknowledges (in a typically hostile piece): "More important for the current American administration, Evola also caught on in the United States with leaders of the alt-right movement, which Mr. Bannon nurtured as the head of Breitbart News, and then helped harness for Mr. Trump. 'Julius Evola is one of the most fascinating men of the 20th century', said Richard Spencer, the white nationalist leader, who is a top figure in the alt-right movement."

Just to be clear, that the widely-read Steve Bannon made mention of Evola does not, of course, make him an Evolista. And nor does Putin's embrace of Eurasianism, make him a Duginista. "But," as the *Times* quotes one specialist, "the fact that Bannon even knows Evola is significant."

Radical Traditionalists

In fact, what we seem to be witnessing is that just as the Russian philosopher, Dugin, draws on Radical Traditionalist thinking and then tries to apply it to the Russian situation, so too, the Alt-Right in the U.S. seems to be doing something similar: drawing on Evola and other Traditionalist sources, while distilling their ideas into an American cultural perspective (linking back to Huxley and Edmund Burke).

In this respect, Trump and Bannon may indeed find much in common with Mr. Putin (though it would be a mistake, I believe, to read the Russian President through the prism of Professor Dugin). Where there is common ground between the latter (Putin and Dugin) is the sense that the West has never made a satisfactory attempt to try to understand Russia as distinct, and of worth, in its own right.

So the West has always tried to change Russia into something that it isn't – has always tried to make it more like the West: more liberal, more democratic, more "diversity"-orientated – always assuming that that's how it somehow *has to be*, and is *the best way* for it to "be." But Russia is a thousand-year civilization; it has its own religious sites and its own particular civilizational code. Russia's leaders do not want to let the West dictate to it how to interpret Russia's history, or its present – and, certainly not its future.

Dugin unquestionably does share Evola's unyielding disdain for liberalism, liberal modernity and liberal democracy. And moreover, he also intensely dislikes how the West tries to force this liberalism upon others – in ugly ways – as an “universal value.” This attitude has led him to be cast as fiercely anti-American and a Russian imperialist to boot, who yearns to re-establish the Soviet Empire.

It is possibly Dugin's polemical video *In Trump We Trust* that contributed to the (unwarranted) U.S. inference that President Putin too, favored Trump in the U.S. Presidential election. To read Putin in this way, would be wrong. He likely does have empathy for the Traditionalist leaning toward differentiation (national as well as personal, in the Evola sense of *becoming*: of becoming oneself, of a return to origins). President Putin frequently makes this very point about Russia having its own essential essence and having, too, every right to that differentiation and cultural particular (as do other nation-states).

Evola *does* refer to Empire, but this has to be understood in a very different way from our contemporary understanding. And Dugin reflects this explicitly:

“One particular layer of Evola's thoughts is felt by the Russians to be of imminent and extreme importance: his praise for the Imperial Ideal. Rome represents the focal point of Evola's worldview. This sacred living power which had manifested itself all across the Empire was to Evola the very essence of the West's traditional heritage ... But a similar line of thought is seemingly naturally felt by the Russians, whose historical destiny has always been profoundly tied to that of Imperium ... [that is to say], Moscow as the ‘Third Rome’: It should be noted that the ‘First Rome’ in this cyclic orthodox interpretation, was not Christian Rome, but rather Imperial Rome, because the Second Rome (or the ‘New Rome’) was Constantinople, the capital of the Christian Empire.

“Thus the idea of ‘Rome’ held by the Orthodox Russians corresponds to the understanding of ... the inseparable ‘symphony’ between the spiritual authority and the temporal realm. For traditional orthodoxy, the catholic separation between the King and the Pope is simply unimaginable and close to blasphemy; and this very concept is actually called the ‘Latin heresy.’ Again, one can see the perfect convergence between Evola's dogma and the commonplace mindset of Russian conservative thought.”

In his book on Evola, Paul Furlong describes it thus: “Evola sees nationalism as, in essence, the offspring of liberalism, modernity and bourgeois subversion, which announced the arrival of the fourth state that destroyed the traditional order of empire. Within the empire, nations find a just hierarchical order; [whereas] outside of it, they are mere tools of chauvinistic nationalisms, and

of regimes interested only in material conquest in the name of contingent realities such as fatherlands.”

Misreading Philosophy

It is not hard to see how Dugin might be misread (and therefore perhaps project a false reading on to President Putin of Imperial revanchism rather than, as Dugin intends, of the hoped-for co-joining of the spiritual with the secular). This, despite President Putin having been at some pains to distance his own notion of eurasianism (communal psychology and a single geo-geographic and civilizational unity as a firm basis for state solidarity) from the more (literal) nationalist currents in Russia today.

The point here is that Dugin’s (and Evola’s) thinking is novel, and can give rise to wrong assumptions about what some Russian philosophers mean when they talk about “Empire” – a terminology which is translated in the West to imply Russia as being a potential “aggressor.”

But, if we turn to Steve Bannon and his 2010 film *Generation Zero*, which narrates America’s decline into crisis, it is not hard to detect some Evola resonances – albeit ones tailored to the distinct American cultural code:

Firstly, there is the idea of virile America (as it used to be) as the traditional, just, order of American society – a sort of “New Imperial Rome” perhaps, rather than a “New Jerusalem.”

Secondly, Bannon – like Evola – traces the beginning of the American slide towards decadence to the narcissistic, self-indulgent 1960s (to the Woodstock era, in Bannon’s narrative). Ditto for Europe, in Evola’s view.

Thirdly, Bannon – like Evola – disdains the undifferentiated, materialist and uniform bureaucratic modernity, to which this decadence has given rise. Evola admires ancient and historical societies for the virility of their structures – and not as tools of power (or of chauvinistic nationalism).

Fourthly, Bannon – like Evola – extols the symphony between the spiritual (Judeo Christian) and temporal authority.

Fifth, both see history as cyclical: the fourth turning in Bannon’s narrative versus the fourth stage in Evola’s.

Sixth, both believe that if you are a traditionalist, you must challenge “decadence” by all means.

I do not know whether Bannon or Trump have read Evola, but his spirit, and that of other Radical Traditionalists, has certainly permeated the thinking of the

Alt-Right circles in which both men have been moving.

The important point here, is not to draw out all the parallels in order to assert a literary lineage. That does not matter. But rather, to point to something far more substantive: their foreign policy implications. The concinnity of thinking – albeit one refined through different cultural optics – is there.

Trump and Putin do indeed have something in common. If both parties – as it seems they do – concur that differentiated, individuated (but not individualist) states, are legitimate and appropriate to their separate and particular, cultural codes – what then, is there to fight about?

If America and the West now can disavow the need to remake Russia in the Western, diversity-centric, individualist, liberal-democratic image, and agree to accept Russia simply for what it, and its culture, “*is,*” then this would amount to a shift in Western policy of tectonic import. It would indeed be paradoxical if a figure, such as Evola, somehow might have contributed to such an event.

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