

# Missing the Biggest 2016 Story

The biggest political story of 2016 has been the rise of protest candidates Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, but it was a phenomenon that the mainstream U.S. media largely missed or belittled, writes Neal Gabler.

By Neal Gabler

To their everlasting discredit, most of the MSM Big Feet, which is what the late journalist Richard Ben Cramer labeled the self-important, pontificating political reporters and pundits who dominate our press, got it all wrong about Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders.

That is no small thing when you consider those two are the big stories this campaign season. It's like a weatherman missing a Category Five hurricane. Of course, if a weatherman had blown that call, he probably would be fired. With pundits, getting it wrong never seems to matter.

To their credit, a few of those Big Feet have fessed up to their errors. New York Times columnist David Brooks, one of the most contrite, admitted that he realized he had been living in a bubble and had to get out in the country a bit more – “change the way I do my job,” is how he put it – to understand the American psyche.

Brooks is right that a huge disconnect exists between the people who report on our politics and the people who participate in them. My own sense is that by and large political journalists are a smug bunch, but they come by it naturally. If they seem to have contempt for us, it is because they really do have different experiences and inhabit a different world from the vast majority of their fellow Americans.

The most powerful of them – the ones you read, see and hear the most – constitute an elite so far removed that it could only understand us through the most aggressive sympathetic imagination. And that is not going to happen.

For one thing, journalists as a whole don't look like the rest of America. “The typical U.S. journalist is a 41 year-old white male,” began a 2006 report by the Pew Research Center. When that report was updated in 2013, that typical journalist had become a 47 year-old white male, and the median age had risen not only at newspapers, where one might expect journalists to be aging along with their institution, but also at TV and radio stations and even online news sites.

As for the “white” part, journalists are overwhelmingly white in a nation that is increasingly diverse. Roughly 37 percent of Americans are minorities – a

number that is growing rapidly. But by one study, minorities possessed only 22 percent of television journalism jobs, 13 percent of radio jobs and 13 percent of daily newspaper jobs.

Another study, by Indiana University, puts the percentage of minority-held journalism jobs much lower: 8.5 percent in 2013.

And as for the “male” part, while the number of women in journalism has been increasing ever so gradually, only one-third or so of full-time journalists are women – a fraction that has held more or less steady since the 1980s.

So here is the situation: A country that is increasingly younger, darker and half female is being reported on by a press corps that is older, whiter and more male. A gaping demographic gulf separates the press from the people – a gulf that undoubtedly affects the kinds of stories chosen and the way in which they are covered.

And there are other dredges that widen the gulf. Although journalists are obviously scattered throughout the country, they are not geographically apportioned equally. As one might expect, the news centers are New York, Washington and, to a lesser extent, Los Angeles.

Of the 40,000 journalists in America, nearly a quarter live in these three areas, which is staggering when you think about it, and which certainly skews the news coverage. It also seems to confirm the familiar gripe of Middle America that media elites consider most of the country a fly-over from LA to NYC.

I love New York, and I am fond of Los Angeles and Washington, too, but I would hardly say that these three are microcosms of America. While all three rank highly among American cities in a rubric of racial and ethnic diversity, as determined in a study by Wallethub.com (NYC at #6; LA at #54 and DC at #78), all three are middling in income diversity (DC at #86; NYC at #157; LA at #183). That means most Big Feet reporters live in economically stratified cities, and many of them, almost by definition, live in the upper income strata.

The average reporter or correspondent doesn't make very much money, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in May 2015 – a little less than \$50,000. By comparison, the mean household income in the U.S. generally is just about \$52,000. But remember those BLS figures include all reporters and correspondents in the country, including folks in the boondocks where salaries are low. If you focus on the Big Three cities, the picture is somewhat different. The mean annual wage for a reporter in NY is \$69,000, in the metro DC area \$75,000, and in LA \$48,000, actually *under* the general mean, which suggests how much the major news media outlets are really concentrated in the East.

Of course, those figures very likely underestimate what *national* correspondents earn, much less what the Big Feet – the reporters and pundits who wield the most influence – get. We don't know exactly what their salaries are because they aren't going to tell us, but we don't have to exercise too much imagination to believe that they are extremely well paid, as in "one percent" well paid.

This matters because the widest gulf between the press and the people is probably not politics (over 50 percent of reporters call themselves independents, so they aren't pitched at the political poles) or race or ethnicity or geography or even the culture that is forged by a combination of these – though all are important and all contribute to a press corps that neither resembles America nor, in many respects, thinks like most Americans.

Rather, the widest gulf may be economic. It is very possible that reporters – especially the Big Feet – dismissed Trump and Sanders because journalists couldn't possibly fathom the deep, seething, often unspoken economic discontent that afflicts so many Americans and that has helped fuel both the Trump and Sanders movements. They couldn't fathom it, perhaps, because they haven't experienced it. I know because I have.

When you put their geographical proximity together with their class solidarity, it is entirely likely that MSM reporters will huddle, the way most geographic and economic cohorts do. They are more likely to see the same things, attend the same parties and events, mingle with the same people, draw on the same sources and send their children to the same schools, which adds up to their seeing the world in similar ways and reporting the same stories in the same ways.

In short, the MSM is not only an elite, it is a kind of economic and cultural clique. And that clique is not us.

So David Brooks can leave his bubble and attempt to find the soul of America. It is an admirable objective. But like all Big Feet, he would have to do more than change the way he does his job. To do it right, he would have to give up his home, his salary, his friends, his comfort, his inevitable sense of privilege. That is the only way he might truly feel, and thus fully comprehend, the pain and anger that is at the heart of this strange campaign year.

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# A Crazy Establishment Demands ‘Sanity’

**Exclusive:** As support grows for anti-Establishment candidates Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, a frantic Establishment is demanding that Americans “stay sane” and vote for one of its approved candidates. But is it sane to follow advice that has led to endless wars and a disappearing middle class, asks Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

With ever-growing hysteria, the Establishment is begging, cajoling and warning American voters not to elect a rogue President from the Right or the Left, neither Donald Trump nor Bernie Sanders, but to accept instead one of the “sane” mainstream options. Yet, the unspoken truth is that the American Establishment has been off its rocker for decades.

It was, after all, Official Washington’s Establishment led by the neoconservatives and their sidekicks, the liberal interventionists that embraced President George W. Bush’s catastrophic invasion of Iraq in 2003. However, as costly as that decision was in terms of blood and money and cascading chaos now destabilizing Europe the Wise Men and Women imposed virtually zero accountability on themselves or other chief culprits.

Indeed, many of the same neocons who architected the Iraq disaster are listed as top foreign policy advisers to the “sane” candidates, such as Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush. And Hillary Clinton not only voted for the Iraq War but seemed to learn no lessons from what she only grudgingly acknowledged was a “mistake.” As Secretary of State, she sided with Democratic “liberal interventionists” to engineer another “regime change” in Libya that has led to another failed state, further spreading chaos across the region.

A “sane” Establishment, one that truly cared about the interests of the American people, would have undertaken a serious self-examination after the Iraq War. Yet, there was none. Rather than cleaning house and banishing the neocons and liberal interventionists to the farthest reaches of national power, the Establishment rewarded these warmongers, ceding to them near-total control of American foreign policy thinking.

If anything, the neocons and liberal hawks *consolidated* their power *after* the Iraq War. By contrast, the foreign policy “realists” and anti-war progressives who warned against the invasion were the ones cast out of any positions of influence. How crazy is that!

It was as if supporting the Iraq War was the new initiation rite to join the

Establishment's elite fraternity of worthies, a kind of upside-down application of rewards and punishments that would only make sense at the Mad Hatter's tea party in Alice's Wonderland.

In a sane world, the publishers of The New York Times and The Washington Post would have purged their lead editorial writers who had advocated for the catastrophe. Instead, the Post retained its neocon editorial page editor Fred Hiatt and nearly all of its pro-war columnists and the Times even promoted liberal interventionist Bill Keller to the top job of executive editor *after* it became clear that he had been snookered about Iraq's WMD.

Similar patterns were followed across the board, from The New Yorker on the Left to The Wall Street Journal on the Right. Pro-Iraq War writers and commentators continued on as if nothing untoward had happened. They remained the media big shots, rewarded with book contracts and TV appearances.

The same held true for the major think tanks. Instead of dumping neocons, the center-left Brookings Institution went off in search of neocon A-listers to sign, like Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the Project for the New American Century. The ultra-Establishment Council on Foreign Relations recruited its own neocon "stars," Max Boot and Elliott Abrams.

And what did this year's "sane" presidential candidates do as the deadly and dangerous consequences of neocon thinking spread from the Middle East into Europe? They pledged fealty to more neocon strategies. For instance, Establishment favorite, Sen. Marco Rubio, is advocating more "regime change" tough talk and more expansion of U.S. military power.

### **'Stay Sane'**

Nevertheless, when New York Times conservative columnist David Brooks urges Americans to "stay sane," he is calling on them to support the likes of Rubio and reject the likes of Sen. Bernie Sanders, who had the sanity to vote against the Iraq War, and billionaire Donald Trump, who also questioned the wisdom of the war.

Brooks lamented that his favorite Rubio had resorted to some populist rhetoric of his own recently, but added: "Marco Rubio has had a bad month, darkening his tone and trying to sound like a cut-rate version of Trump and [Ted] Cruz. Before too long Rubio will realize his first task is to rally the voters who detest or fear those men. That means running as an optimistic American nationalist with specific proposals to reform Washington and lift the working class."

Yet Rubio led the parade of dancing candidates who performed at the so-called "Adelson primary," seeking to win the favors of gambling billionaire Sheldon

Adelson by vowing to fully sync U.S. policies in the Middle East with positions favored by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (whereas Trump refused to toe that line). And Rubio's warmed-over right-wing, trickle-down economic orthodoxy is sure to do little to help working- and middle-class Americans.

Brooks offers some dubious history, too, writing "In every recent presidential election American voters have selected the candidate with the most secure pair of hands. They've elected the person who would be a stable presence and companion for the next four years. I believe they're going to do that again."

It's unclear how far back in time Brooks is going. Is he acknowledging that the American voters actually favored Al Gore in Election 2000 although the Republican majority on the U.S. Supreme Court decided to give the White House to the untested and unreliable George W. Bush? Is Brooks saying that Bill Clinton had more "secure" hands than George H.W. Bush in 1992 and that the radical right-winger Ronald Reagan was more "stable" than Jimmy Carter in 1980?

Indeed, the rapid divide of the United States into a land of haves and have-nots can be traced back, in large part, to Reagan's economic policies of massive tax cuts primarily favoring the rich and thus incentivizing greed and his disparaging the role of democratic governance, which is the only force that can truly counter the power of the wealthy elites.

Since Reagan's presidency, Republican orthodoxy has been to enact ever more generous tax cuts for the rich while freeing them from government regulation or "red tape." Republicans along with Establishment Democrats most notably President Bill Clinton also favored "free trade" that led major corporations to shift their industrial jobs to Third World low-wage countries.

This combination of tax cuts for the rich, "free trade" for multinational corporations and disdain for "big government" intervention to protect average citizens along with technological advances has savaged the Great American Middle Class, which was largely created by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal programs and the major infrastructure investments after World War II. Under President Dwight Eisenhower, the top marginal tax rate for the richest Americans was 90 percent, essentially enforcing an American egalitarianism.

The abandonment of those hard-earned lessons from the Great Depression – a reversal accomplished primarily by Reagan, Clinton and George W. Bush – returned U.S. income inequality to levels not seen since the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

The Trump phenomenon can only be understood by factoring in the frustration and fear of the white working class that has shifted Republican since the 1960s

because of anger over the Democrats supporting equal rights for blacks and other minorities. But those working-class whites now sense that the GOP leadership is selling them out, too, by favoring the ultra-rich donor class and willing to sacrifice their sons and daughters to implement unrealistic neocon foreign-policy schemes.

So these downwardly mobile white Americans are in rebellion and have embraced billionaire Trump, who rejects politics as usual and understands something of their blue-collar mindset because of his experience on popular reality TV shows.

### **Democratic Populism**

Something similar is happening on the Democratic side through another imperfect vessel, Bernie Sanders. Democratic progressives see the consequences of a steady retreat by mainstream liberals on economic and foreign policy issues since Reagan's election.

Rather than fight to convince the white working class about the need for democratic governance, Bill Clinton and other neo-liberals fashioned a strategy of catering to Wall Street and other rich donors by offering "free market" financial deregulation and "free trade" deals on manufacturing.

Sanders represents the first candidate for president in recent memory who has offered a full-throated defense of government as a necessary counter-balance to the power of the rich over both the economy and the electoral process (though President Obama has paid some lip service to those principles).

By contrast, Hillary Clinton represents a continuation of the cozy relations between the so-called New Democrats and the wealthy power centers of high finance and big corporations. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Clintons' Paid-Speech Bonanza.](#)"]

She also advocates foreign military interventions in line with what the neocons have sought as they demand U.S. fealty to Israeli interests. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Hillary Clinton Seeks Neocon Shelter.](#)"]

As a senator, Clinton voted for the Iraq War and as Secretary of State, she sided with the neocons and their "liberal interventionist" allies in escalating the war in Afghanistan, in engineering a bloody "regime change" in Libya, and in pushing for a direct U.S. military intervention in the Syrian civil war (via the creation of so-called "safe zones").

Though Sanders's foreign policy positions can be [something of a muddle](#), he is generally more skeptical about U.S. military adventures than Clinton.

So, who are the crazy ones here? Does it make more sense to follow Hillary Clinton's Establishment-friendly positions on issues from Wall Street regulation to Syrian military intervention or to support Bernie Sanders's more aggressive strategy against income inequality and less aggressive approach toward foreign conflicts?

Similarly, on the Republican side, is it nuttier to back Rubio and other Establishment favorites who would effectively let Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu set U.S. policy in the region, even if that means invading Syria and accepting permanent warfare or Trump who suggests letting the Russians and Iranians share the burden of battling Islamic extremists?

Clearly, the Establishment would have a stronger case if it hadn't led the United States into one catastrophe after another, while refusing to hold its own representatives accountable.

There is the old line about insanity being defined as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. What David Brooks and other Establishment figures are demanding is that the American voters keep electing the same system-approved neocon/neolib presidents again and again and expecting something better for the nation.

Is that "staying sane" or "staying insane"?

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

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## Spinning US Voters to Stay Passive

As public anger toward America's self-interested establishment bubbles into a boil, the mainstream media has grown frantic appealing to the masses to "stay sane," reject populism – especially Bernie Sanders's variety – and renew the establishment's lease on the White House, as Norman Solomon notes.

By Norman Solomon

For a long time, as he campaigned for President, a wide spectrum of establishment media insisted that Bernie Sanders couldn't win. Now they're sounding the alarm that he might. And, just in case you haven't gotten the media message yet – Sanders is "angry," kind of like Donald Trump.

Elite media often blur distinctions between right-wing populism and progressive populism – as though there’s not all that much difference between appealing to xenophobia and racism on the one hand and appealing for social justice and humanistic solidarity on the other. Many journalists can’t resist lumping Trump and Sanders together as rabble-rousing outliers.

But in the real world, the differences are vast. Donald Trump is to Bernie Sanders as Archie Bunker is to Jon Stewart.

Among regular *New York Times* columnists, aversion to Bernie Sanders has become more pronounced in recent days at both ends of the newspaper’s ideological spectrum, such as it is. Republican Party aficionado David Brooks (whose idea of a good political time is Marco Rubio) has been freaking out in print, most recently with a Tuesday column headlined “Stay Sane America, Please!”

Brooks warned that his current nightmare for the nation is in triplicate – President Trump, President Cruz or President Sanders. For Brooks, all three contenders appear to be about equally awful; Trump is “one of the most loathed men in American public life,” while “America has never elected a candidate maximally extreme from the political center, the way Sanders and Cruz are.”

That “political center” of power sustains huge income inequality, perpetual war, scant action on climate change and reflexive support for the latest unhinged escalation of the nuclear arms race. In other words, what C. Wright Mills called “crackpot realism.”

Meanwhile, liberal *Times* columnist Paul Krugman (whose idea of a good political time is Hillary Clinton) keeps propounding a stand-on-head formula for social change – a kind of trickle-down theory of political power, in which “happy dreams” must yield to “hard thinking,” a euphemism for crackpot realism.

An excellent rejoinder has come from former Labor Secretary Robert Reich. “Krugman doesn’t get it,” Reich wrote. “I’ve been in and around Washington for almost fifty years, including a stint in the cabinet, and I’ve learned that real change happens only when a substantial share of the American public is mobilized, organized, energized, and determined to make it happen.”

And Reich added: “Political ‘pragmatism’ may require accepting ‘half loaves’ – but the full loaf has to be large and bold enough in the first place to make the half loaf meaningful. That’s why the movement must aim high – toward a single-payer universal health, free public higher education, and busting up the biggest banks, for example.”

But for mainline media, exploring such substance is low priority, much lower than facile labeling and horseracing, and riffing on how Bernie Sanders sounds

“angry.”

On “Morning Edition,” this week began with NPR political reporter Mara Liasson telling listeners that “Bernie Sanders’ angry tirades against Wall Street have found a receptive audience.” (Meanwhile, without anger or tirades, “Hillary Clinton often talks about the fears and insecurities of ordinary voters.”)

The momentum of the Sanders campaign will soon provoke a lot more corporate media attacks along the lines of a *Chicago Tribune* editorial that appeared in print on Monday. The newspaper editorialized that nomination of Trump, Cruz or Sanders “could be politically disastrous,” and it declared: “Wise heads in both parties are verging on panic.”

Such panic has just begun, among party elites and media elites. Eager to undermine Sanders, the *Tribune* editorial warned that as a “self-declared democratic socialist,” Sanders “brandishes a label that, a Gallup poll found, would automatically make him unacceptable to nearly half the public.”

A strong critique of such commentaries has come from the media watch group FAIR, where Jim Naureckas pointed out that voters would not be asked to vote for “a socialist— they’d be asked to vote for Bernie Sanders. And while pollsters don’t include Sanders in general election matchups as often as they do Hillary Clinton, they have asked how the Vermont senator would do against various Republicans – and he generally does pretty well.

“In particular, against the candidate the *Tribune* says is ‘best positioned’ to ‘capture the broad, sensible center’ – Jeb Bush – Sanders leads in polls by an average of 3.0 percentage points, based on polling analysis by the website Real Clear Politics.”

In mass media, the conventional sensibilities of pundits like Brooks and Krugman, reporters like Liasson, and outlets like the *Chicago Tribune* routinely get the first and last words. Here, the last ones are from Naureckas:

“When pollsters match Sanders against the four top-polling Republican hopefuls, on average he does better than Clinton does against each of them – even though she, like Bush, is supposed to be “best positioned” to “capture the broad, sensible center,” according to the *Tribune*.

“Actually, the elements of Sanders’ platform that elite media are most likely to associate with ‘socialism’ – things like universal, publicly funded healthcare and eliminating tuition at public colleges – are quite popular with the public, and go a long way to explain his favorable poll numbers. But they are also the sort of proposals that make Sanders unacceptable to the nation’s

wealthy elite – and to establishment media outlets.”

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## Panicked Over the Trump Phenomenon

America’s conservative establishment is in panic mode as renegade billionaire Donald Trump continues to dominate the Republican presidential race and thumb his nose at the GOP donor class, which is alarmed that all its money might not dictate the outcome this time, as Bill Moyers and Michael Winship write.

By Bill Moyers and Michael Winship

David Brooks is a worried man. Like many establishment Republicans, the conservative columnist for *The New York Times* sees the barbarians pouring through the gates and fears for both his party and the republic. Hail, Trump! Hail, Cruz! It’s enough to send a sober centrist dashing through the Forum in search of a cudgel.

There was Brooks on a recent edition of the *PBS NewsHour*, his angst spilling out across the airwaves like fog from a nightmare: “I wish we had gray men in suits,” he told Judy Woodruff, conjuring in some nostalgia-minded the courtly cabal of well-heeled businessmen who drafted war hero Dwight D. Eisenhower to run for president as a Republican.

“We don’t have that,” Brooks continued. “But the donor class could do something.”

Ah, yes. The donor class! Those deep pockets flung open even wider by the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision just six years ago, permitting the richest of the rich to pour even more of their fortunes into control of our electoral process. Brooks was saying openly what many of them are thinking privately: Only we can save the party from the megalomania of Donald Trump and Ted Cruz and protect our precious status quo.

How best to do this? Brooks suggested that panicked “state legislators who are Republicans, congressmen, senators, local committeemen” should join with the donors “so they don’t send the party into suicide.”

Makes sense, many of those very same folks already are deep in hock to the

donors, their contributions often laundered via entities with high-falutin' names ALEC, for one, the American Legislative Exchange Council that lends a helping corporate hand to legislators eager to write favorable laws, provide tax breaks, dismember public employee unions and privatize government services.

As Brooks' vision of a coup unfolded, the donors and their allies would handpick their candidate, "winnowing the field." He reiterated his *NewsHour* lamentations with a *New York Times* column headlined "Time for a Republican Conspiracy!"

So let's get this straight: One of the most prominent of Republican elites in the country, who has even been touted as President Obama's "favorite pundit" (we're not making this up!), is calling on the donor class to rescue the party from the rabble. Game's over, voters: The oligarchs will decide this election.

For that's what they are: a small, unbelievably wealthy group of the powerful and privileged who already have a tighter grip on our nation, its government, politics and economy than the rapacious robber barons of our first Gilded Age. Brooks and like-minded elites believe they must be trusted to do the right thing. Let them be the Deciderers.

Count billionaire Charles Koch among them. He recently told Stephen Foley of the *Financial Times* that he was "disappointed" by the current crop of Republican presidential candidates and especially critical of Trump and Cruz. "It is hard for me to get a high level of enthusiasm," he said, "because the things I'm passionate about and I think this country urgently needs aren't being addressed."

Koch said that he and his well-oiled machine had given each of the candidates a list of issues it wants addressed but "it doesn't seem to faze them much. You'd think we could have more influence." In other words, if you're going to spend \$900 million on this election, as Koch and his cronies plan to do, shouldn't you get what you paid for?

Yes, we know: money can't always buy an election. If it could, Mitt Romney would just be finishing his first term as president. Or Jeb! Bush, whose super PAC runneth over with \$100 million in cash, would be leading the pack. So far he's not even been able to get his silver foot on the first rung of the ladder.

But to the oligarchs, bankrolling an election campaign isn't all that it's about. They contribute now for the day when the electioneering is over and the governing resumes. That's when their investment really begins to pay off.

In the words of the veteran Washington insider Jared Bernstein, senior fellow at the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities and former chief economic advisor to Joe Biden, "There's this notion that the wealthy use their money to buy

politicians; more accurately, it's that they can buy policy."

Environmental policy, for example, when it comes to energy moguls like the Kochs. And tax policy. Especially tax policy.

Bernstein was quoted in one of the most important stories of 2015 an investigation by *The New York Times* into how tax policy gets written. Unfortunately, this complex but essential report appeared between Christmas and New Year's and failed to get the attention it deserves. Here's the heart of it:

"With inequality at its highest levels in nearly a century and public debate rising over whether the government should respond to it through higher taxes on the wealthy, the very richest Americans have financed a sophisticated and astonishingly effective apparatus for shielding their fortunes. Some call it the 'income defense industry,' consisting of a high-priced phalanx of lawyers, estate planners, lobbyists and anti-tax activists who exploit and defend a dizzying array of tax maneuvers, virtually none of them available to taxpayers of more modest means.

"Operating largely out of public view, in tax court, through arcane legislative provisions and in private negotiations with the Internal Revenue Service, the wealthy have used their influence to steadily whittle away at the government's ability to tax them. The effect has been to create a kind of private tax system, catering to only several thousand Americans."

That "private tax system" couldn't have happened without compliant politicians elected to office by generous support from the donor class. As the right-wing billionaire Richard Mellon Scaife put it: "Isn't it grand how tax law gets written?"

Sam Pizzigati knows how it happens. He's been watching the process for years from his perch as editor of the monthly newsletter *Too Much!* Reminding us in a recent report that "America's 20 richest people, a group that could fit nicely in a Gulfstream luxury private jet, now own more wealth than the bottom half of the American population combined, a total of 152 million people," Pizzigati concludes that one reason these and other of America's rich have amassed such large fortunes is that "the federal tax rate on income in the top tax bracket has sunk sharply over recent decades."

So here's the real value of all that campaign cash and lobbying largesse: underwriting a willingness among legislators and government officials to bend the rules, slip in the necessary loopholes and look the other way when it comes time for the rich to hide their fortunes.

This is the status quo to which the donors cling so tightly and clutch their

pearls at the prospect of losing. But now, with Trump seemingly ascendant, some of those who might have been relied on to support a donor revolt are betraying Brooks's call for a coup, weakening in their resolve and beginning to think that maybe the short-fingered vulgarian isn't such a bad idea. Despite his populist brayings, they hope, he might well be brought into their alliance.

Which brings to mind a line from the movie version of the musical *Cabaret*. In pre-Third Reich Germany, the decadent Baron Maximilian von Heune is talking with the British writer Brian Roberts, explaining why the elite have allowed this Hitler fellow to get a jackboot in the door.

"The Nazis are just a gang of stupid hooligans, but they do serve a purpose," he says. "Let them get rid of the Communists. Later we'll be able to control them."

We all know how well that turned out.

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**<http://billmoyers.com/story/money-men-say-voters-move-over-its-not-your-election/>**  
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## Pope Francis' Appeal for the Future

Pope Francis is pleading for world leaders to defend the rights of mankind and the future of nature against the power of corporations and the pillage of "free market" dogma, a warning about the planet's survival that vested political and media interests reject out of hand, writes Daniel C. Maguire.

By Daniel C. Maguire

The Right has no applause for Pope Francis's powerful encyclical *Laudato Si* (See, for example, David Brooks's June 23 [column](#)) What the pope sees and his conservative critics do not is that the world economy is in crash mode, an accelerating train hurtling down the track and ignoring all the signs that say **Bridge Out Ahead**.

The instinct for self-preservation is strong: but in the human species, it seems, not strong enough. Like any good preacher, Francis tries to stir hope as

he calls for radical reforms and the reforms he calls for *are* radical but the shrill of despair keeps peeking out at the brim of his Jeremiad.

At no point in this eloquent *cri de coeur* is the pope playing Pollyanna, but at times he seems close to Cassandra who was blessed with the knowledge of the future but cursed with the realization that no one will believe her.

The oceans with their coral treasures and rich animal life are dying of acidity and poison. The pope asks: "Who turned the wonder-world of the seas into underwater cemeteries bereft of color and life?" Arctic ice is in a death spiral and ice sheets are melting in Greenland as well as in the Himalayan-Tibetan glacier that provides water to hundreds of millions. The portents are nightmarish.

The governments of low-lying nations states like Tuvalu and Maldives have plans in place to remove their entire populations. To where? Topsoil and rainforests are perishing as we turn up the heat. We have double-based the planet with CO2 and we are near to passing or have passed some tipping points in the "big melt" where human efforts to stay catastrophic results will avail nothing. Agricultural scientists calculate that for every degree Celsius that temperature rises, wheat yields drop 10 percent in the earth's hotter midriff.

Clive Ponting notes grimly: "About 40 million people die every year from hunger and related diseases, equivalent to 300 Jumbo jet crashes every day, with half of the passengers being children."

The Pope sees all this and cries ***crisis!*** The neoliberals, drunk on our 300 years of nature-rape, insist we are doing fine. Minor tinkering like carbon credits will do all that we need but the overall system is fine, indeed sacrosanct. Beyond that, conservative critics complain that Francis has no practical alternative vision to the status quo he criticizes. Nonsense! He has an alternative vision replete with practical details that the Right finds abhorrent.

### **The Alternative Vision**

The two dirtiest words in the neoliberal lexicon are *redistribution* and *regulation* and the pope repeatedly calls for both. Indeed he calls for *regulation* on a "global" scale by a supranational authority, "a true world political authority," a concept tribal nationalism cannot abide.

He addresses governments and those gargantuan corporations that roam the planet like rogue behemoths; their legitimacy depends on their commitment to social and distributive justice. He mocks the self-serving naivete that says "the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth." He

scores the “numbing of conscience and tendentious analyses” that ignore the “excluded” poor, the expendables, “the majority of the planet’s population, billions of people.”

As Eduardo Galeano says, the reigning economic system vomits out the poor. The nub of the Pope’s message is: the poor need nourishment and it is murder for greedy hyper-accumulators to deprive them of it.

### **Redefining Social Life**

Government, by definition is *the prime caretaker of the common good*. Francis redefines the “common good” to include the rest of nature, animals, and future generations. He *conscientizes* basic concepts like “development” and “progress” to encompass the well being of nature and future citizens of the earth. He forcefully redefines the most morally pregnant word in our vocabulary **owning**.

There is no *absolute* ownership, he says; *owning* imports *owing*. There is a “social mortgage” on everything we own.

As Warren Buffet says, he could not have built his wealth in the Gobi desert. We *receive* from society more than we ever *contribute*. We owe back: *taxes are not evil* but are essential forms of social and distributive justice to repay part of that debt.

Francis condemns the speculative financial games played by the rich and the accumulation of “virtual wealth.” This casino economy is divorced from “the real economy.” It lacks contact with flesh and blood and soil.

As Nicholas Fagnoli says, it’s not capitalism; it is “greedalism.” And as Thomas Piketty has shown, this form of capitalist economy bleeds inequality. Pope Francis calls the dominant form of capitalism “structurally perverse.”

Are all these the words of an innocent impractical idealist? Hardly. What the Pope offers is what Franklin Delano Roosevelt late in his life said we need badly: an Economic Bill of Rights. Such rights-talk has to get down to facts and the Pope does. Francis calls for “steady employment for everyone, no matter the limited interests of business and dubious economic reasoning.”

As Economist Alice Rivlin says: “It does not seem, from an analytical point of view, that there is any magic number below which we cannot push unemployment. It is a question of the will and of choosing the right mix of politics.” It is a question, the Pope says, of ethics.

The practical wisdom of this encyclical talks details: we need “small scale food

productions systems ... using a modest amount of land and producing less waste." We need to break the power of monopolistic seed providers, not mentioning Monsanto by name but referring to it and other "oligarchies."

People need to be free of noise, overcrowding, lack of safety, poor quality food. The right to clean water is a "human right," not a consumer item for those who can afford it. "Saving banks at any cost, making the public pay the price" is immoral as is the corporate love of socializing costs while privatizing profits.

None of the needed changes will occur without public pressure, including boycotts since purchasing is a moral act. A more attentive and passionate and less compromised press is needed to call constant attention to the ongoing wrecking of the earth. This Pope hits all of that and more.

### **Where the Pope Fails**

Pope Francis has a problem with women and it bedevils this encyclical. While citing the various groups who are exploited the Pope does not call special attention to the worldwide sexist exploitation of women and girls.

Moreover, he insists that "concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion." In so saying he insults the millions of women who end their pregnancies for reasons they perceive as serious. A blanket condemnation of all these choice by women is wrong and even violates Thomas Aquinas's insistence that "human actions are good or bad *according to the circumstances.*" This sorry part of the encyclical is a lamentable remnant of long-tenured woman-free Catholic ethics.

The Pope should realize that there is not a single topic he discusses in this otherwise marvelous encyclical that is not impacted by overpopulation. Every four and a half days a million people are added to our planet, most of those in the poor world. Yet, seemingly deaf to the limits of this planet, Francis says "demographic growth is fully compatible with an integral and shared development."

As biologist Harold Dorn says, no species can reproduce without limit: "There are two biological checks upon a rapid increase in numbers, a high mortality and a low fertility. Unlike other biological organisms [humans] can choose which of these check shall be applied but one of them must be." Otherwise, famine and disease will do it for us and have already begun to do so.

### **On the Art of Looking**

Pope Francis in this encyclical makes a point that is often missed. There is an

inexorable link between aesthetics and ethics. He stresses that the disenchanting cannot save and serve this good earth. He repeatedly urges that we open our wizened hearts to the beauty of this blessed plot. A human spirit that is not alive to the splendor of life, to its poetry and its art, is ill fitted to do earth ethics.

Curious as it may seem, the Pope's stress on aesthetics recalled to me the witness of my son, already terminally ill, when he was around five years old. Danny was severely retarded by Hunter's Syndrome and would die at age ten. I took him one day to see the lovely lagoon near our home which is also a kind of bird sanctuary.

I had passed this scene regularly on my way to Marquette University, thinking serious thought to be sure, but not really looking. When I first took Danny there, he took one look at the sparkling lagoon waters and the mallards and other water fowl bedecked in lovely colors. He grabbed my leg excitedly and shouted: "Daddy, look! Daddy look!!"

This little boy with blighted mind but exquisite affections was retarded but not blasphemous. He was stunned at the beauty of the scene, and he begged me to "look." In his eulogy, I said that that one word "look" was Danny's valedictory to the world, a world more retarded than he in the art of looking and relishing and rejoicing in the gift we have received on this privileged planet.

That too is the heart of the Pope's plaintive appeal. Policy without ecstasy will be barren and ineffectual.

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## Distorting Putin's Favorite Philosophers

Amid the endless demonization of Russian President Putin, David Brooks and other upscale U.S. pundits have taken to misrepresenting the views of several Russian philosophers whom Putin is known to admire, apparently following the theory that whatever Putin likes must be evil, as Paul R. Grenier explains.

By Paul R. Grenier

What started the new Cold War? According to the State Department, it was Russia's illegal violation of Ukraine's sovereign borders. The Kremlin, for its part, insists it was a U.S.-facilitated coup in Ukraine which destroyed the constitutional order there, causing chaos and dangers to Russian security to which Russia had no choice but to respond.

According to academic foreign policy "realists," the cause was the imminent threat of Ukraine's integration into an ever-expanding military pact dominated by the United States. According to George Friedman, president of Statfor, the private strategic intelligence firm, the Ukraine crisis itself is more effect than cause: the conflict started in 2013 when the United States decided Russia's increasing power was becoming a threat.

And according to Kiev, Russian President Vladimir Putin created the whole crisis. He invented the threat of Ukrainian so-called "fascism" and was motivated throughout by a combination of imperial ambition coupled with a fear of democracy.

It is not my present goal to try to adjudicate among the above claims. Despite their obvious differences, they also all share a common trait: none provide any clear direction for how to get out of this mess. It's time to approach it from a completely different angle.

—

When the first Cold War ended, Francis Fukuyama explained, more in sadness than in triumph, that the United States' model of liberal democratic capitalism had won and that this was why "history" the struggle to find the correct answer to the political question regarding the optimal form of society had ended.

What had *won*, in fact, was a set of answers to such key questions of political life as the origin and purpose of the state; what it means to be human; what it is that all humans do, or should, strive for. The classic sources of the specifically American answers to these questions are well known: they are the sources of liberal political thought as such..

Here is another thing well known to the point of being cliché: since 2001, the end of history thesis has been repeatedly challenged by events. In point of fact, Fukuyama's thesis cannot be challenged by mere events, because he never said that unpleasantness would cease to be part of the human experience. He said that humans were unlikely to come up with a more effective and attractive compromise solution to the key political questions than the rather dull set of answers that make up the liberal, democratic capitalist world.

To those who point out that ISIS has disproven his “end of history” thesis, Fukuyama could with good reason reply: “Well, if you find that sort of thing *attractive*, you may accept my congratulations.”

But I am writing neither to defend nor to attack Fukuyama. I am simply suggesting that we are doing ourselves no favor by ignoring all answers to the political question that differ from liberal orthodoxy. There may be in liberalism and democracy and capitalism much that is correct, but there is every reason to suspect that we have not yet discovered the final truth about either human beings or political man.

Fukuyama himself offered his own critique: his skepticism about the human material is what made him set his sights so low. It is not necessarily a criticism of Fukuyama to point out that there are many in the world today who aspire to something besides our world of comfortable autonomy and the possession of rights in the purely Lockean sense.

Among those who so aspire are many in the Slavic world, with its roots in Eastern Orthodox Christianity; or the Chinese sphere, with its Confucian heritage which is just beginning to awaken; and of course the Middle East. And that is just to name the groups the United States has identified as in dire need of a makeover.

### **Diversity and Liberalism**

The West, and specifically the United States, has before it a fateful choice: should it seek a “live and let live” co-existence of the liberal and non-liberal nations of the world, or should it try to make the rest of the world liberal at gunpoint, and in that way prove that history really has finally ended? Should we make the world safe for diversity, or should we make the world uniform for the safety of the United States?

In the Middle East the choice has already been made. It is to be made liberal and democratic at gunpoint. The enormous difficulties this has presented has convinced the American party of war, which appears to be in the majority, that it is time to double down and try harder, not only in the Middle East, but now in the Slavic world as well.

This raises a crucial question about diversity and difference. What is it that makes a nation *itself* and not something else? Is it the presence of borders? Is it running one’s own elections using one’s own manpower? Clearly, it is neither of these things, nor anything like them.

To be one’s own nation, to continue to exist in fact, means exactly to continue to realize over time one’s national idea, that is to say, as Ernst Renan put it

(*Qu'est qu'une nation?*, 1882, as quoted by Hannah Arendt) "to preserve worthily the undivided inheritance which has been handed down."

That nations frequently borrow cultural content from others is undeniable, and often laudable. But it is crucially important, as American historian William Appleman Williams once noted, *who* makes the choice of those borrowings. Are they adapted freely from the inside, or are they forcefully imposed? The failure to understand this latter distinction is what keeps bringing about *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (also the title of Williams's book).

When nations fully share the American liberal world view, these separate nations become, in a certain sense, no longer fully "separate." This is by no means necessarily a bad thing. The nations of northern Europe do not suffer for the most part from their close alliance with the United States, including in the cultural sense.

But here's the six trillion dollar question: is the United States willing to countenance the existence, on a permanent basis, of other great powers that do not accept liberal civilizational values as America defines them? I say other "great powers" because in the long run only a great power, or a protectorate of a great power, can assure its own continued existence.

The non-liberal status of Russia has been presented recently as a dire threat to the security of both America and the world. In support of this storyline, the Russian president has been associated with thinkers from Russia's past who are, supposedly, the source of a fanaticism that justifies speaking of Vladimir Putin and Russia (the two are melded together in the endlessly-repeated "Putin's Russia") in the same breath as ISIS.

But the ideas of this non- or not-entirely-liberal Russia are by no means all dangerous. To the contrary, they offer a fruitful avenue for rethinking some of our most cherished assumptions about the nature of politics and the nature of the international order.

### **Then and Now**

When communism was abandoned in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it became apparent to thoughtful Russians and outsiders alike that a new concept of the state, a new concept of man, and a new public philosophy would have to be created.

It was then, and remains today, an open question whether the new Russian identity would end up being an import from the West, something from the native vault of pre-Communist philosophical thinking, or perhaps a combination of the two.

As might be expected from the country that brought the world Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, when it comes to philosophy, Russia has got a deep bench.

In the months immediately following the February 2014 change of power in Kiev, and the resulting growing tension between Washington and Moscow, three Russian philosophers, only two of them widely known outside of Russia, came to be increasingly associated with the name of Vladimir Putin. The subsequent interpretation of these philosophers on the pages of several of America's most influential newspapers deserves to be considered in detail.

Maria Snegovaya, a doctoral candidate in political science at Columbia University, initiated the discussion with a March 2, 2014 [article](#) in the Washington Post. Putin's "pro-Soviet worldview," Snegovaya wrote, is poorly understood:

"To get a grasp one needs to check what Putin's preferred readings are. Putin's favorites include a bunch of Russian nationalist philosophers of early 20th century Berdyaev, Solovyev, Ilyin, whom he often quotes in his public speeches. Moreover, recently the Kremlin has specifically assigned Russia's regional governors to read the works by these philosophers during 2014 winter holidays. The main message of these authors is Russia's messianic role in world history, preservation and restoration of Russia's historical borders and Orthodoxy."

Mark Galeotti, writing in *Foreign Policy* ("Putin's Empire of the Mind," April 21, 2014) also found fault with these same three philosophers. "These three, whom Putin often cites," Galeotti writes, "exemplify and justify [Putin's] belief in Russia's singular place in history. They romanticize the necessity of obedience to the strong ruler, whether managing the boyars or defending the people from cultural corruption, and the role of the Orthodox Church in defending the Russian soul and ideal."

Finally, David Brooks, writing for the *New York Times* ("Putin Can't Stop," March 3, 2014), likewise expressed alarm about the influence of Solovyov, Berdyaev and Il'in. "Putin doesn't only quote these guys; he wants others to read them," Brooks wrote. Three main ideas unify Solovyov, Il'in and Berdyaev's work, Brooks wrote:

"The first is Russian exceptionalism: the idea that Russia has its own unique spiritual status and purpose. The second is devotion to the Orthodox faith. The third is belief in autocracy. Mashed together, these philosophers point to a Russia that is a quasi-theocratic nationalist autocracy destined to play a culminating role on the world stage."

Under the influence of these "guys," Brooks continues, "The tiger of quasi-

religious nationalism, which Putin has been riding, may now take control. That would make it very hard for Putin to stop in this conflict where rational calculus would tell him to stop." Brooks concludes that Russia can no longer be considered a "normal" regime and "a Huntingtonian conflict of civilizations with Russia" may be the result.

### **Analyzing the Analysts**

What are we to make of these analyses, all of them published in authoritative U.S. periodicals?

One thing is certain. These assessments represent an enormous and surprising reversal in the viewpoint of educated opinion in the West, particularly as regards Solovyov and Berdyaev (with Il'in, as already noted, being much less well known).

Up until these articles in March-April of 2014, I do not recall reading a single negative assessment of either of these Russian thinkers, at least not among Western specialists, nor a single one accusing them of being hostile to the West, nor a single one suggesting that they are friendly to Russian chauvinism or nationalism.

In *Russian Thought after Communism*, James Scanlan, a leading Western expert on Russian thought, described Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) as "by common consent the greatest and most influential of all of Russia's philosophical thinkers."

In a recent Cambridge University Press history of Russian philosophy, Randal Poole writes that "Solov'ev is widely regarded as Russia's greatest philosopher."

There are, it is true, a handful of dissenters from this nearly unanimous assessment of Solovyov. The contemporary Russian philosopher Sergei Khoruzhy considers Solovyov a very great philosopher, but a bit too *western* in orientation to deserve the title of greatest *Russian* thinker in the narrow sense.

Moreover, even scholars known to be generally hostile to things Russian, such as former Harvard professor Richard Pipes, nonetheless speak respectfully about Solovyov: "The Orthodox Church never found a common language with the educated because its conservative outlook made it pronouncedly anti-intellectual. One by one it pushed away from itself the country's finest religious minds: the Slavophiles, Vladimir Soloviev, Leo Tolstoy and the laymen gathered in the early 1900s around the Religious Philosophical Society" (*Russia Under the Old Regime*, 243.)

In short, Snegovaya's misapprehension of Solovyov could hardly be more thorough.

In what possible sense can Solovyov, who had no inkling of anything Soviet, be considered supportive of Putin's alleged "pro-Soviet world view"? In point of fact, the writings of this supposedly "pro-Soviet" philosopher exactly like those of Berdyaev and Il'in were banished by Soviet censors.

How can Solovyov be described as a "nationalist," when his magnum opus, *The Justification of the Good* (the book which Putin is said to have urged his governors to read), states precisely the opposite? It is hard to imagine a more absolute condemnation of national *exceptionalism* than that contained in Solovyov's definitive work of ethics:

"It must be one or the other. Either we must renounce Christianity and monotheism in general, according to which 'there is none good but one, that is, God,' and recognize our nation as such to be the highest good that is, put it in the place of God – or we must admit that a people becomes good not in virtue of the simple fact of its particular nationality, but only in so far as it conforms to and participates in the absolute good."

This same anti-nationalist theme runs through Solovyov's entire corpus. He argued bitterly against the Slavophile nationalists of his day. To learn of Solovyov's views on this subject, Snegovaya, who reads Russian, might have consulted the book *State, Society, Governance*, a scholarly volume of liberal social science co-published in 2013 by Mikhail Khodorkovsky (not known for his fondness for Putin). In this Russian-language compendium of essays by leading Russian liberal theorists, Solovyov is marshaled as an authoritative *critic* of Russian nationalism, including the nationalism occasionally voiced by Dostoevsky. [S. Nikolsky and M. Khodorkovsky, ed., *Gosudrastvo. Obshchestvo. Upravlenie: Sbornik statei* (Moskva, Alpina Publisher: 2013)].

In the article by Prof. Sergei Nikolsky, Solovyov is quoted at length precisely as an authoritative critic of Dostoevsky's disrespect for other faiths and nations and specifically for Europe. For the sake of balance, Nikolsky might have noted that elsewhere, for example in his "Three Speeches in Honor of Dostoevsky," Solovyov praises Dostoevsky in the highest possible terms and specifically denies that his political ideal is nationalist.

It is worth noting that Nikolsky, in this same article, attacks Il'in for his too rosy views of Russian Czarist imperialism. Nikolsky probably has a point here.

### **Criticizing the Church**

Finally, far from being a fanatical proponent of the Russian Orthodox Church, Solovyov harshly criticized the Russian Church, calling it "totally subservient

to the secular power and destitute of all inner vitality." As ringing endorsements go, this one sounds decidedly weak.

And again, all this is well known. Many, including even such prominent theologians as Urs von Balthasar, believe Solovyov renounced Orthodoxy and became a Catholic, so warmly did Solovyov praise the Catholic Church.

Solovyov, the supposed conservative Orthodox zealot, praised the Catholic Church, among other reasons, for what he saw as its independence from nationalist temptations, and for its readiness to act in the world.

"The East [meaning Eastern Orthodoxy] prays; the West [meaning Roman Catholicism] prays and acts: which is right?" asks Solovyov rhetorically in his famous *Russia and the Universal Church*. Mixing with the world is good if it is the world that changes, Solovyov continues. Changes in what sense? In some respects, in the same sense as that advocated by Western *progress*.

What the French Revolution destroyed treating men as things, chattel or slaves, deserved to be destroyed. But the French Revolution nonetheless did not institute justice, because justice is impossible without the truth, and first of all the truth about man, but the French Revolution "perceived in Man nothing but abstract individuality, a rational being destitute of all positive content."

As a result, the "free sovereign individual," Solovyov continues, "found himself doomed to be the defenseless victim of the absolute State or 'nation.' "

It is impossible to reconcile the Solovyov we find in his actual writings with Snegovaya's and Brooks's portrait of a religious chauvinist and Russian nationalist, one with pro-Soviet tendencies to boot.

The reference to messianism, coming from Brooks, also demonstrates a striking lack of self-awareness. But that particular example of the kettle calling the pot black has already been ably handled by [Charles Pierce](#) ("Our Mr. Brooks and the Messianic Mr. Putin," *Esquire*, March 4, 2014).

### **Philosopher of Freedom**

Berdyayev (1874-1948) wrote a great deal, and on a number of subjects changed his mind, but in as much as it was Berdyayev's *The Philosophy of Inequality* which Putin urged his governors read, it makes sense for us to start with that.

Do we find here a repository of 'pro-Soviet' views? Not even close. Instead, we find an emotionally-charged condemnation of everything the Soviet Union's founders stood for (the book was written immediately after the 1917 Revolution and Berdyayev was full of outrage and grief).

Berdyayev spends much of the book berating the Bolshevik movement for its exaggerated exaltation of a particular political form. But in truth, Berdyayev insists, political forms are always secondary to the human spirit. Whether a person is kind or vicious, devoted to justice or its opposite, has little to do with whether someone is a monarchist or a democrat, a proponent of private property or a socialist.

Why specifically “the Philosophy of *Inequality*”? Not because the philosopher is indifferent to exploitation and injustice. And still less because he favored tyranny he was to the contrary a tireless critic of despotism, which is the word he used to describe the Czarist order.

Berdyayev never completely abandoned his early interest in Marx, even after his conversion to Christianity around the turn of the century. He was by temperament a person more of the left than of the right, despite a lingering influence of Nietzsche.

What concerns Berdyayev is the inequality between what is higher or lower in the realm of spirit and culture. Berdyayev mostly approves of liberalism and finds in it something aristocratic or at any rate not revolutionary. By contrast, democracy and socialism, precisely because they have pretensions to fill all life with their content, can easily become false religions.

At times Berdyayev’s philosophy even overlaps with libertarianism, which likewise rejects any abuse of the freedom of the individual person for utilitarian ends.

Berdyayev’s religious views are difficult to characterize. He was a Christian, an existentialist and someone who believed in the absolute primacy of freedom, but not necessarily all three of these at once (they are not entirely compatible, but then Berdyayev was not always consistent). The writings of Dostoevsky were of enormous religious importance to him.

It is easy to misread Berdyayev because of his lack of system, and because he looks at the same concept from sometimes contradictory perspectives. Take for example Berdyayev’s paradoxical understanding of national uniqueness.

Dostoevsky, Berdyayev writes, “is a Russian genius; the Russian national character is stamped on all his creative work, and he reveals to the world the depths of the Russian soul. But this most Russian of Russians at the same time belongs to all of humanity, he is the most universal of all Russians.”

And the same can be said for Goethe and other national geniuses, who likewise are universal not by being more generic, but precisely by being more who they are; in the case of Goethe, by being specifically *German*.

Berdyayev's perspective here is particularly helpful if we want a world made safe for both unity and diversity. A global civilization that would level all differences is ugly, while a messianism that would exalt one nation over others is evil. [N. Berdyayev, *Sud'ba Rossii* [The Fate of Russia], (Moskva: Eksmo-Press, 2001), p. 353 and 361]

Christianity as such, however, is messianic, because it affirms what it considers a universal truth, the truth of Christ. But this truth has no coercive power.

Until early 2014, the view that Solovyov and Berdyayev represent particularly humane and attractive alternatives for Russia was not, as far as I am aware, doubted by anyone, at least, not by anyone who gave the matter any thought.

In the time of *perestroika*, when Russian philosophy was finally being rediscovered inside Russia, the likely positive influence of these philosophers was warmly affirmed. Bill Keller, writing for the New York Times, praised the Soviet magazine *Novy Mir* for focusing attention on "*the more Western-inclined* 19th-century Russian thinkers such as Nikolai Nekrasov, Aleksandr Herzen, and the Christian philosophers Vladimir Solovyov and Nikolai Berdyayev." [Emphasis mine]

These were the sort of thinkers, Keller emphasized, who would help encourage "a humane alternative to zealous Leninism and the darker Russian nationalism." By publishing such writers, Keller continued, *Novy Mir* was demonstrating that it "occupies a key centrist position, attempting to reconcile the Westernizers and the Russian patriots on a common ground of tolerance and democratic ideals."

### **The 'Liberal Conservative'**

The case of Ivan Il'in (1883-1954), whom Putin regularly quotes and whom Putin is known to particularly respect, is more complex. Some of Snegovaya's suspicions in his case are indeed accurate. Il'in has a conservative temperament.

It is fair to call him a nationalist, though one concerned with Russia alone, and with no messianic ambitions. As will be seen below, Il'in was not against authoritarianism. Il'in was, however, complex and worthy of much more careful consideration.

The suggestion that Il'in is a source of that famous "pro-Soviet" stance is easily disposed of. The Cheka interrogators who arrested and interrogated Il'in six times between 1918 and 1922 would have been very surprised at such a characterization.

According to Prof. Iu. T. Lisitsa, who has reviewed the records on Il'in from the KGB archives, Il'in "even in the hands of the Cheka, under threat of execution remained adamant, precise, and articulate in his opposition to the Bolshevik regime." [From "The Complex Legacy of Ivan Il'in, *Russian Thought after Communism*, in James Scanlan, ed., *Russian Thought After Communism: The Recovery of a Philosophical Tradition* (Armonk, New York, M.E. Sharpe: 1994), 183.]

The "pro-Soviet" characterization also does not jive very well with the fact that Il'in, along with Berdyaev and a host of other leading Russian philosophers, was banished from the USSR in 1922 for their anti-Soviet "agitation." Il'in's literary corpus is said to include over 40 books and essays, some of them written in scholarly, technical language, so it is not an easy thing to characterize his worldview, but a good place to start is Il'in's *Our Tasks*.

Not only is this a book which Putin likes to quote, it is also another of the books, along with Solovyov's *Justification of the Good* and Berdyaev's *The Philosophy of Inequality*, that Putin urged his governors to read.

The book *Our Tasks* is a compilation of journalistic essays written by Il'in between 1948 and 1954. Their overriding theme is the need to put an end to Soviet rule, defeat communism and plan for Russia's restoration and recovery from the devastating physical, moral and political woes visited on Russia by the Soviet system.

It is difficult to imagine a more uncompromising condemnation of Soviet ideology and practice than this collection of Il'in's essays. If anything, one might fault him for exaggerating the faults of the Soviet system. It must be remembered, though, that Il'in (who died in 1954) did not live to see the post-Stalin era, or even to hear of Khrushchev's speech condemning Stalin (in 1956).

And yet Il'in was not only a critic of communism, he was also a critic of Russia's past leaders when they were vicious (as in the case of Ivan IV) or incompetent, as in the case of Nicholas II. Like Berdyaev, Il'in was also, on occasion, bitingly critical of the Russian people, who he felt were politically immature and in need of a crash course in legal awareness.

After the fall of Soviet power, a fall he was sure would eventually take place, he was skeptical in the extreme that the character of the people living in Russia at that point would be capable of wise self-rule, which is why he urged, as a temporary expedient, a transition period of authoritarian government.

**'Soviet Man'**

Here is how, in *Our Tasks*, Il'in described the character of the "Soviet man" that the future Russia would inherit: "The totalitarian system imposes a number of unhealthy tendencies and habits among which we may find the following: a willingness to inform on others (and knowingly falsely at that), pretense and lying, loss of the sense of personal dignity and the absence of a well-rooted patriotism, thinking in a slavish manner and by aping the thoughts of others, flattery combined with servility, constant fear.

"The fight to overcome these unhealthy habits will not be easy. It will require time, an honest and courageous self-awareness, a purifying repentance, the acquisition of new habits of independence and self-reliance, and, most importantly of all, a new national system of spiritual and intellectual education. [I. A. Il'in, *Nashi Zadachi* (Our Tasks), sobr. soch. (collected works), vol. 2 (Moskva, Russkaya Kniga: 1993), 23-24.]

Il'in was indeed deeply concerned about the danger of Russia's disintegration and indeed was concerned about the defense of its borders, although, of course, not their restoration. To avoid such disintegration, Il'in urged Russians to not repeat what he considered the fatal mistake of the February Revolution its premature push for full democracy.

In this, as in many other respects, Il'in's policy recommendations overlap with those of Solzhenitsyn, who was profoundly influenced by Il'in. That Il'in is a major influence on Putin's brand of "liberal conservatism" was noted already in 2012 by the Canadian scholar Paul Robinson.

Unlike Solovyov and Berdyaev, in the early years of *perestroika* Ivan Il'in was poorly known both inside and outside of Russia, although Il'in had been quite prominent during the years preceding and following the Russian Revolution, including while he was living in exile.

His fame early in the Twentieth Century stemmed largely from a celebrated academic study of Hegel's writings, a work still lauded both in and outside of Russia as among the best ever produced.

Il'in burst onto the post-Soviet scene in 1991, when essays from *Our Tasks* were first published, including the prescient "What Does the Dismemberment of Russia Bode for the World?" In this essay, Il'in wrote that the rest of the world will, in its ignorance of the likely consequences, eagerly underwrite the breakup of Russia and will to this end provide lots of development assistance and ideological encouragement.

As a result, Il'in wrote, "The territory of Russia will boil with endless quarrels, clashes, and civil wars that will constantly escalate into worldwide

clashes " To avoid this fate, as mentioned earlier, Il'in urged for Russia a transition period of authoritarian rule.

This point is made emphatically by Philip Grier in his *Complex Legacy of Ivan Il'in*. Grier, it should be added, who is the former president of the American Hegel Society, is also the translator of Il'in's two-volume analysis of Hegel published by Northwestern University Press in 2011.

Although Il'in quite plainly admired the United States and Switzerland for what he saw as their mature democratic self-rule, it is not clear that Il'in was confident that democracy was tailor-made for a nation and culture of the Russian type.

What is absolutely clear, however, is Il'in's fervent devotion to rule of law and legal awareness, something that sets him apart from the Slavophiles whom he in other respects resembles.

### **A Russia, Liberal *and* Christian?**

There are very important differences between these three thinkers. Nevertheless, all three writers considered freedom essential to human culture and the human spirit, though they differed in emphasis. Undoubtedly, then, the worldview of all three is irreducible to a liberal formula even if their views include important liberal or modern elements.

All three agreed with the liberal world that all humans, regardless of nation, religion, or any other difference, are equally endowed with infinite dignity. But for them it was not a throwaway phrase when they added that this dignity is conferred on humans by God, which means, among other things, that a right to be absolutely secure cannot trump someone else's right not to be tortured (Il'in's absolute prohibition against torture, or anything even coming close to torture, in the above-mentioned book is excellent and quite timely).

There has been no space here to attempt more than a brief introduction to these thinkers. But it should already be clear that the tradition we have just described offers, if we would only engage with it, an opportunity: a chance to form a partnership with a Russia that, though different from our present state of mind, shares much of our own past, and perhaps suggests some ways forward as we negotiate an increasingly dangerous world.

As his reading list recommendations strongly suggest, "Putin's Russia" represents an attempt to reconnect with this tradition, however flawed that attempt may be. Take Putin's famous speech (to the Federal Assembly) in April 2005. Although Western commentators have ad nauseum berated him for showing his true colors and displaying nostalgia for the Soviet order, in reality, as the

entire text and the following excerpt makes clear, he did no such thing:

Putin said: "'State power,' wrote the great Russian philosopher Ivan Ilyin, 'has its own limits defined by the fact that it is authority that reaches people from outside. State power cannot oversee and dictate the creative states of the soul and mind, the inner states of love, freedom and goodwill. The state cannot demand from its citizens faith, prayer, love, goodness and conviction. It cannot regulate scientific, religious and artistic creation. It should not intervene in moral, family and daily private life, and only when extremely necessary should it impinge on people's economic initiative and creativity.'"

Is it naive to impute such idealism to Putin? Perhaps. But Putin is not in fact the issue, but Russia. We engage after all a country, not a single person in it, and the tradition we are describing has sufficient roots in the Russia that actually exists that, if we chose to engage with it, there would be the chance for an actual productive conversation, one capable of rebuilding trust and creating an order.

Critics say that Russia recently has become a nation filled with hate. But how are Russian citizens and President Putin himself to interpret the twisting (and what we have seen above is just the tip of the iceberg) of their own words and their most cherished traditions in such an apparently spiteful and even violent way?

Knowledgeable analysts have correctly noted that Russian nationalists such as Alexander Dugin consider the United States to be Russia's implacable enemy. Representatives of this "Eurasianist" camp are waiting in the wings if Putin falls.

America's efforts at "regime change" might even succeed at facilitating such a drastic change for the worse. And then, by means of that "curious logic" of the American ideology, we will once again, with "stubborn devotion without regard for specific, varying factors," have brought about yet another catastrophe.

### **A Brief Footnote on Ideology**

For all the United States' vaunted freedom, it exhibits surprisingly little freedom of maneuver when it comes to its foreign policy. Far from taking into consideration Russia's vital security needs, to say nothing of Russia's identity, U.S. ideologues have behaved as if both are either non-existent or fundamentally illegitimate. Such compulsive political behavior is the sure sign of ideological infection.

Brooks, Snegovaya and Galeotti apparently have all made use of the same basic

logic when they examined the philosophical sources of Putin's thinking. That logic went something like this: a) Washington considers Russia a problem, therefore, b) Vladimir Putin is a thug; and therefore, c) the Nineteen Century philosopher Vladimir Solovyov dreamed of restoring the Soviet Union to its former Christian glory and might.

Such sloppy thinking would not have happened were these three otherwise intelligent people not (one hopes temporarily) previously incapacitated by ideological blinders. Unfortunately, the same ideological thinking dominates nearly all of U.S. discourse vis-À-vis Russia, making a political settlement impossible.

After all, if America's political ideal is as nearly perfect as can ever be achieved in this "fallen world," then the thing is to carry on and win, thereby bringing the perfect good (that's us!) to everyone.

Why bother seriously familiarizing oneself with a competing system? Clearly Brooks and Co. made no such effort. It was enough for them to know that Russia's political ideal significantly *differs* from America's: therefore it is *illegitimate*, Q.E.D.

As Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "The curious logicity of all isms, their simple-minded trust in the salvation value of stubborn devotion without regard for specific, varying factors, already harbors the first germs of totalitarian contempt for reality."

That America does not actually live up to its own ideals, as I have written here previously, changes nothing for the ideologue. After all, every further increase in America's power brings closer the day when its actions (which are generally realist) and its speech (which is always democratic and idealist) can come into harmony. Then history can truly and finally come to an end.

And yet, in light of the above review of an important part of the Russian tradition, there is something we are now in a much better position to point out: Russia has also taken the trouble to have ideals.

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## Ignoring the GOP's White Racism

**Exclusive:** Conservative columnist David Brooks can't understand why right-wing Republicans are so determined to kill immigration reform, especially since the Senate-approved bill would boost the economy and cut the deficit. But Brooks ignores what might be called the white elephant in the room, Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry

Mainstream commentators endlessly dance around the obvious explanation for the Right's intense anger against "gub-mint" and indeed against any significant legislation that addresses the suffering of minorities and the poor, whether it's immigration reform, health care or food stamps. That unspoken word is racism.

Racism is the subtext for many of the actions of the modern Right and the modern Republican Party. The mainstream media may desire to dress up the motivations as some principled commitment to small government, but both historically and currently, the insistence on a tightly constrained federal government has been about maintaining white supremacy.

That was true when slaveholders such as Patrick Henry and George Mason fought ratification of the Constitution because they perceived that the document's concentration of power in the federal government stripping the states of their "independence" and "sovereignty" as specified in the Articles of Confederation would eventually doom slavery. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Right's Dubious Claim to Madison](#)."] ]

Slavery, after all, was not just some peculiar institution, part of the South's unique cultural heritage. It was the South's dominant industry. It was where the Southern aristocrats had invested their money.

So, after the Anti-Federalists lost their fight against ratification of the Constitution, they went to Plan B; they quickly reorganized behind the charismatic figure of Thomas Jefferson, another slaveholder, to essentially redefine the Constitution away from its clear intent and to insert new theories about states' rights, including the unconstitutional concept of state "nullification" of federal law. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[The Right's Made-Up](#)"] ]

'Constitution.'"]

Their political success in this constitutional revisionism with Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party putting Virginian defenders of slavery in the White House for 24 consecutive years from 1801 to 1825 allowed the "small government" Jeffersonian philosophy to overwhelm the old Federalists who were the original advocates of the Constitution's powers. The Federalists maintained some strongholds in the North but eventually faded from the political scene.

Throughout this pre-Civil War period, the maintenance of slavery was always twinned with an insistence on a constrained federal government, even to the point of the South opposing federal disaster relief for fear that the precedent could be used to free the slaves. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Source of Anti-Government Extremism."]

### **Going to Extremes**

Then, with the election of an anti-slavery president in Abraham Lincoln, the intensity of the South's commitment to those twin attitudes defense of slavery and hostility toward the federal government led 11 Southern states to take the extreme step of seceding from the Union, inviting a devastating war.

And, the South's bloody defeat did not extinguish those passions. If anything, the humiliation of losing the Civil War made the commitment even stronger.

When the federal government sought to restructure Southern society to give freed blacks education, an economic stake in the society and civil rights, the anger of Southern whites intensified. It was expressed in violent resistance to Reconstruction and in a cruel determination to reassert white dominance after Union troops withdrew in 1877.

After all, it takes real hatred to terrorize people because of the color of their skin, to lynch black men for almost any perceived offense, to rape black women to demonstrate their powerlessness, but that's what was done across the South.

White racism had a particularly ugly side because the fury was not justified as some reaction to genuine oppression; it was rather an act of oppressing. Historically, whites had economic advantages over blacks and other minorities. If the circumstances were reversed, you might understand the ferocity of the behavior. But here was the oppressor acting out some vengeful victimhood.

To some white Southerners, their behavior was justified by the intrusion of the federal government on their "way of life." You see, the federal government made them the "victims." After Reconstruction, the fierceness of this white

racism/victimhood especially resistance to the idea that black people deserved full citizenship rights continued for generations. It became a dominant feature of Southern life and spread to some areas of the North as well.

Even in my schoolbooks in Massachusetts in the 1950s and 1960s, you would find a sympathetic portrayal of slavery as mostly paternalistic and of the South's "gallantry" in the Civil War along with a contemptuous view of Reconstruction, i.e. Northern "carpetbaggers" and freed blacks running roughshod over the genteel whites of the South.

### **Resisting Civil Rights**

America's institutionalized racism was finally challenged by the civil rights movement, but that provoked another spasm of fury from Southern whites. Their anger against renewed federal intervention led them to spit on black school children, bomb churches and murder civil rights activists.

Again, the whites conjured up resentment over their victimhood, persecuted by the intrusive federal government once more. Eventually, this white backlash might have petered out except for the recognition among opportunistic Republicans that they could use Democratic support for civil rights as the wedge to pry loose the Southern states from their traditional orientation toward the pro-slavery Democratic Party, the old party of Thomas Jefferson.

So, Richard Nixon's "Southern strategy" used racial code words to signal Republican sympathy for Southern whites, a technique that was even more ably applied by Ronald Reagan who launched his national presidential campaign in 1980 with a speech on states' rights in Philadelphia, Mississippi, site of a notorious lynching of three civil rights workers. In his aw shucks style, Reagan also joked about "welfare queens" buying vodka with food stamps.

But mostly the Republicans sealed the deal with Southern whites by presenting the GOP as the party of "limited government," i.e. the ones who would keep federal authorities out of the South's "business," particularly its race relations. In that way, "small government conservatism" and "libertarianism" became the new code words for the maintenance of white supremacy.

Of course, the Republicans also reached out to some other interest groups, such as cultural conservatives by supporting new government restrictions on women's reproductive rights. But the intensity of the Right's activism especially as it is aimed at the first African-American president can be best understood as a renewed expression of white grievances, the desire to "take our country back."

Both the Civil War and the battle against integration also were rationalized by

their apologists of the day as principled stands against the overreach of the federal government, not as expressions of racism. To this day, many Southerners insist that the Civil War was not about slavery, but about "states' rights." They make that claim although slavery's perpetuation was explicitly included in the constitution of the Confederate States and the Confederate insistence on continuing slavery was a final sticking point in surrender negotiations in 1865.

So, the intensity of the Tea Party and other extremist groups can be understood as the latest eruption of the same race hatred that led to the Civil War, Jim Crow and the resistance to integration in the 1950s and 1960s.

### **Weeping for Insurance Industry**

These predominantly white groups again insist that their fury is about the federal government not about race or the color of Barack Obama's skin. But there is really no other way to explain why so many white folks would get into such a snit over, say, defending the health insurance industry against federal regulation.

Except for a few people who are lucky enough to work for companies that offer "Cadillac" insurance plans, I don't know anyone who thinks the current insurance system makes sense. It leaves families uncertain about what medical conditions are covered and to what extent they are covered and it ties up doctors with endless paperwork, including hiring staff to be kept on hold by insurance companies as they figure out how they can deny coverage for some medical procedure.

Yet, in 2009, when President Obama embraced a Republican-devised scheme for reforming the health-insurance industry and providing coverage to millions of Americans without health insurance, the Tea Party and the Right erupted in fury. The anger was so hot that the Heritage Foundation, which had dreamt up the scheme, and Mitt Romney, who had pioneered its use in Massachusetts, had to hastily disown what was then decried as "a government takeover" of the health industry.

What made no sense about the intensity of this reaction was that a group of white middle-class Americans would be so committed to the interests of widely despised health insurance companies that they would jump up and down at congressional townhall meetings and rush to Washington for tumultuous protest rallies.

Even after the Affordable Care Act was cleared as constitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court, the fury on behalf of the health-insurance industry has continued with the Republican-controlled House voting again and again to repeal

“Obamacare” and GOP governors doing all they can to sabotage its effective implementation. We have seen something similar with the Tea Party’s hostility toward food stamps and immigration reform.

Even as some Republican leaders and a few conservative columnists embrace immigration reform that offers a pathway to citizenship for some 11 million undocumented immigrants, the Tea Party rank-and-file furiously rejects the notion, particularly the idea of letting those mostly dark-skinned immigrants eventually become citizens with the right to vote.

### **Killing Immigration Reform**

Conservative New York Times columnist David Brooks is among those who find the House Republican rejection of immigration reform deeply troubling. In a column on Friday, Brooks noted that the Senate-approved reform bill meets all of the major requirements that reasonable conservatives might want: increasing economic growth, reducing the federal deficit, improving border security.

Indeed, Brooks seems genuinely baffled as to why the Right is determined to kill the measure, writing: “conservatives are not supposed to take a static, protectionist view of economics. They’re not supposed to believe that growth can be created or even preserved if government protects favored groups from competition.

“Conservatives are supposed to believe in the logic of capitalism; that if you encourage the movement of goods, ideas and people, then you increase dynamism, you increase creative destruction and you end up creating more wealth that improves lives over all.

“The final conservative point of opposition is a political one. Republicans should not try to win back lower-middle-class voters with immigration reform; they should do it with a working-class agenda. This argument would be slightly plausible if Republicans had even a hint of such an agenda, but they don’t.”

Brooks then backs into the proverbial elephant in the room, noting the ethnic component of the Right’s opposition. He writes:

“Before Asians, Hispanics and all the other groups can be won with economic plans, they need to feel respected and understood by the G.O.P. They need to feel that Republicans respect their ethnic and cultural identity. If Republicans reject immigration reform, that will be a giant sign of disrespect, and nothing else Republicans say will even be heard.

“Whether this bill passes or not, this country is heading toward a multiethnic future. Republicans can either shape that future in a conservative direction or,

as I've tried to argue, they can become the receding roar of a white America that is never coming back. That's what's at stake."

But "the receding roar of a white America" is, in a sense, what we have been hearing for most of the nation's history, as whites have engaged in genocide against Native Americans and kept African-Americans first in bondage and then in a *de facto* second-class citizenship. One could add to this ugly picture the discriminatory treatment toward Hispanics along the southern border and against Asian-Americans mostly in the West.

## **Jim Crow II**

Yes, it may be true that today's demographic numbers are making it harder for racist whites to continue to impose their will on the country, but it also could be argued that white supremacy has never been as endangered as it is today. Which would explain why today's white anger is so white-hot.

Just because a reactionary political movement might fail doesn't mean that it won't be tried. The battle to preserve slavery cost hundreds of thousands of lives in the Civil War; the KKK and other white paramilitary groups inflicted horrors on blacks for generations; even today, the Right's obdurate insistence on "austerity" in the face of the Great Recession has spread misery across the country, but especially in African-American and Hispanic communities.

So, one should not assume that the Republican Right will not try to create a Second Jim Crow Era by gerrymandering congressional districts, spending vast sums on propaganda, and suppressing minority votes through ID laws and other subterfuges. Nor should one blithely conclude that failure of this strategy is assured. Remember that the defeat of Reconstruction in the 1870s enabled the First Jim Crow Era to last nearly a century. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Bringing Back Jim Crow](#)."]

Even after the Jim Crow Era ended, the Right regained its political footing by wooing discontented whites to the Southern-strategy Republican Party. That political effort also has worked in parts of the North as Republicans and the Right have successfully mined white resentments toward affirmative action, "political correctness" and other initiatives seen as beneficial to blacks and minorities. Just listen to Fox News or AM radio with endless commentators, like Rush Limbaugh, stressing how white people are the real victims here.

The white racism may not always be overt but its roots are never far beneath the surface. And, like the roots of aspen trees running underground, the roots of racism connect to their more acceptable neighbors, the ideologies of "libertarianism" and "small government."

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

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