

United States: Steve Bannon on the road to far right dominance - A Hegemonic Project for the Right

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Phil Hearse examines Steve Bannon's recent speech in which he explains how the hard right in the United States can stay in power "for 50 or 75 years".

Steve Bannon's October 20 speech to California Republicans got worldwide publicity because of his scathing remarks about George W. Bush. But that was just a couple of throwaway remarks and not the core of his presentation, nor the most interesting part. The former White House advisor set out a prospectus for how the hard right in the United States can stay in power "for 50 or 75 years". And that involves a rebellion against what he sees as the Republican Party establishment, in thrall to financial, corporate and media elites.

Bannon is hardly a serious right-wing intellectual in the mould of Carl Schmitt, but he is a serious political strategist, with a much more realistic outlook than the rabble of Nazis and other racist thugs who gathered in Charlottesville – people he decries as 'losers'.

While it's highly unlikely that American capitalism would need a force of German- or Italian-style stormtroopers in the foreseeable future – it already has copious amounts of paramilitary force to control the streets – Bannon outlines a series of political positions that resonate with the programme of previous extreme-right political movements. It is thought-out, sustained and – arguably – realistic. [1]

Bannon's positions can be summarised as follows:

- America is in crisis and this crisis is hitting the working class particularly hard (note that Bannon abandons the typical US discourse where the working class is rendered 'middle class'). Beneficiaries are corporate elites, financiers, high tech companies and their lobbyist and media sidekicks. The solution is not however wealth redistribution, but economic nationalism.
- Protectionism and being tough on immigration are the keys to getting jobs for American workers – getting jobs back from China and stopping immigrants taking jobs.
- America has to stop pandering to Chinese and European economic rivals through disastrous trade and other economic agreements.
- The reason why defence spending is so high and why Congress had to give an extra \$30bn supplement to the already \$600bn budget, is that the Europeans and other allies don't pay their fair share. The US has to get seriously tough with them.
- The key to driving through a programme based on economic and anti-immigrant nationalism is a strategic alliance, that will be difficult to hold together, of populists, economic nationalists,

evangelical Christians and small government conservatives. Bannon lays particular stress on the latter.

We'll come to the economic analysis below, but Bannon says something really significant near the start of his speech. We are not just an economy he says, we are a society (and by implication we need an ideological social programme). He said:

"We've had a very dangerous thing come as conservatives over the last 30 or 40 years — just another thing I know everybody in this room is not going to agree with. This kind of Austrian School of economics, this kind of Ayn Rand, you know, where everything was about the economy. What was most important six weeks before the election — gotta see what the unemployment rate is, it's GDP as everything.

"We are not an economy. We are a country. We have a social fabric and a civic responsibility. By the way, I'm a free market capitalist, as most of you are, right? That's the underpinnings of our society.

"But we are a civic society, it's more than an economy. An economic nationalism, looking out for our fellow men to make sure that manufacturing jobs that we allowed go to Asia come back to the United States of America."

Like the socialist Left, Bannon wants an all-encompassing outlook based on a vision of the social relations between people (in his case "fellow men"). Which is why, although he is a reactionary Catholic himself, he is happy to give plaudits to the Evangelicals. This implies a reactionary social agenda – anti-women, white supremacist, anti-sexual and gender minorities, anti-immigrant etc.

For the moment Bannon sees his Republican revolt being a long march through the institutions. They've got the presidency, they've got the Supreme Court, the problem is that the Republican majority in Congress is not sufficiently with the Bannon-Trump rebellion and too slow to anger corporate establishment interest. More on the strategy below, but let's look now at the economic analysis.

Bannon highlights a shocking fact. A survey at the time of the last hurricane showed that 50% of Americans do not have even \$400 to deal with an emergency. He says:

"During the last hurricane, I think it was on CNN and this was not fake news. Somebody did a study, and I think I'm quoting correctly, that half of the households in this country, in our beloved country, don't have 400 dollars in cash to meet an emergency. Four hundred dollars in cash.

"What would the people that fought in the American Revolution think about that? What would the people who died in Guadalcanal [2] think about that? That we have a country that has created 5 trillion dollars of wealth on the combined stock exchanges in equity value, right? But the people that have a high school diploma have not had a raise since 1970, and that half of the families in this country can't find 400 dollars in cash.

"If we do not take care of this problem — and I'm not about redistribution of wealth — but what I am about and what we have to be about is that people do not have to compete unfairly against foreign labor, whether that foreign labor is in China or whether that is illegal alien labor that comes into the United States of America."

This is the poisonous core of Bannon's argument, very familiar to anyone who knows about the BNP in Britain or the Front National in France. The working class are being ripped off, but the key cause is not neoliberal capitalism (Bannon insists: I am a free market capitalist), but Chinese labour and 'alien' foreign labour, ie 'illegal' immigrants. It's the big corporations, especially the tech corporations, who are complicit in this, benefitting from cheap labour. The echoes of this type of

theory with the 1930s extreme right are obvious. As a theory of why huge sections of the American working class have become impoverished over more than 20 years, Bannon's theory is ridiculous. But logical absurdity doesn't automatically disqualify anyone in the era of neoliberalism.

Bannon takes his anti-corporate rhetoric another stage further. It used to be the case, he argues, that the richest counties in the US were around the tech companies in Californian. Now they are around Washington:

"Seven of the nine richest counties in the United States of America surround Washington, D.C. For the first time since the invention of the Silicon ship, Washington, D.C., those seven counties have a higher per-cap income than Silicon Valley."

"Silicon Valley, which by the way has led the greatest revolution in technology in man's history, and had more great inventions. Now what does Washington, D.C., have? What they've got is basically a private equity fund of every year, what four trillion dollars that they divvy up."

"The consulting class, the lobbyists, the K street crowd, the donor class and the politicians the own, they have taken this country in a very, very dangerous — very, very dangerous — direction."

Here Bannon is not actually pointing the finger at finance capital; his reference to a four trillion-dollar hedge fund is about Washington politicians and their hangers-on and the yearly budget. While he points the finger at particular groups of capitalists he is reluctant to attack capitalists in general. Directly in the firing line are the Silicon Valley tech companies, which, as inveterate globalists, he puts at the head of the resistance to economic nationalism:

"The resistance is this permanent political class, this combination of lobbyist and consultants and corporatists and globalists elites. And the heart of the resistance, the beating heart of it is Silicon Valley. The folks up there think that they get a special deal, right?"

"Put these companies in Ireland or Luxembourg or the Canary Islands where they put them so they don't have to pay taxes, right? They want all the benefits of a free society. They want all the benefits of this rules-based international order, right? This thing that we have created since World War II, this inextricably linked combination of commercial relationships, trade deals, capital markets, that we the citizens of the United States underwrite. And our sons and daughters, whether they went to West Point, the Naval Academy or just went down to boot camp in Parris Island or in San Diego — they underwrite it. We underwrite the whole thing."

Which contains a lot of truth, it's just hypocritical coming from an advocate of free market capitalism. Singling out 'cosmopolitan capital' as a key enemy has of course a long history on the fascist right.

Bannon spent some time on the recent Alabama Republican primary, which pitted former state Attorney General Luther Strange against both Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore, an extreme right evangelical Christian, and Mo Brooks, a right-wing economic nationalist. The Republican establishment including Trump, worked hard to secure the nomination for Strange, but Moore, eventually backed by Brooks, won by a landslide. Bannon backed Moore and says Trump chose the wrong side because of misinformation. Bannon says of the Evangelicals:

"Let's talk about Alabama for a second. Now Alabama, I was on the opposite side of the football with the president. There were a couple of reasons for that. I think the president got some bad information. But I will tell you what: You see the power in Alabama of the evangelical Christian movement (ie Moore) and the populist nationalist that Mo Brooks represented. When they come together, you cannot beat them. And you can't beat them with money."

What Bannon is alluding to here is that when Brooks was eliminated in the first round, he turned his supporters to backing evangelical Christian Moore. This is part of Bannon's projected hegemonic hard right alliance in action.

Now as everyone knows Bannon was ejected from the White House, apparently by Chief of Staff John Kelly backed by Ivanka Trump and her husband Jared Kushner. This is the White House faction that represents, or at least wants to work with, the established Republican leadership. Trump is pulled in both directions. The difference between the sort of position represented by Republican Senate leader Paul Ryan, and that represented by Bannon, is that Bannon wants a right wing shift harder and faster, risking conflict with important sections of the capitalist class that Congress Republicans are reluctant to contemplate.

Bannon's project is based on a go-for-broke strategy that relies on the mass mobilisation of the diverse parts of the Trump base, and represents an attempt to overturn the current shape of US politics. He repeats his 'fourth great turning' point theory:

"This is the great Fourth Turning in American history. We've had the Revolution, the Civil War, Great Depression, World War II and now we've got what we are in today. And history, when they look back a couple of hundred of years, they'll say, "Did it start with 9/11, or did it start with the financial crisis or did it start with election of Donald Trump?" We don't know that yet. We don't know really what triggered this turning, OK?"

"But I'll tell you, the next five, 10, 15, 20, 25 years, we're going to be, this country is going to come through this, and it's going to be one thing or the other. It's either going to be the country that was bequeathed to us by the previous what, 12 or 13 generations? Or it's going to be something totally different."

Something different, and very nasty. In this speech Bannon didn't mention his adherence to the 'clash of civilisations' theory, what he describes as the Judeo-Christian basis of Western civilisation, in conflict with oriental Confucianism and Islam. But you can see how it nicely fits in with his praise for Evangelical Christians.

Bannon represents a sort of faux Gramscian theory of the right. This is our historical project, and here is our counter-revolutionary political bloc. Whether this bloc could hold together without significant backing from the capitalist class is an open question.

Phil Hearse

P.S.

* <http://www.marxsite.org/2017/10/steve-bannon-on-road-to-far-right.html>

October 22, 2017:

<http://socialistresistance.org/steve-bannon-on-the-road-to-far-right-dominance/10958>

Footnotes

[1] See full text of Bannon's speech here:

<http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-ca-steve-bannon-california-republicans-transcript-20171021-htmlstory.html>

[2] Guadalcanal was a prolonged and very brutal Pacific battle between August 1942 and February 1943. Refusing to surrender to overwhelming force or abandon the island, 19,000 Japanese died - many from malnutrition and disease - and around 7000 Americans.