



richardheinberg.com

MuseLetter #298 / March 2017 by Richard Heinberg

This month's MuseLetter kicks off with an article looking at the cultural ecology behind the current political battles in Washington, as well as their global context. The second piece focuses on what we might do to address the situation.

“Traditionalism” through the Lens of Cultural Ecology

A battle is raging in Washington for ultimate power, and while it's being defined by personality (specifically, one “yuge” ego), it also hinges on political philosophies. The common terms *liberalism* and *conservatism* have lost their usefulness in navigating these boiling political waters. *Traditionalism* is a word that has been used to emblemize the recent rightward ideological surge in the U.S. and much of the rest of the world, but it remains widely unfamiliar and poorly defined.

In this essay, I'll explore the significance of traditionalism using a conceptual tool I've sometimes called *cultural ecology*. Ecology is, of course, the study of the relationships between organisms and their environments; cultural ecology is therefore an inquiry into the ways that society shapes itself in response to geography, energy resources, and other factors of the environment. In my view, the current rise of traditionalism can best be understood in light of these kinds of contextual factors. I'll discuss cultural ecology and our current global context first, traditionalism a little later on.

Cultural Ecology and the Current Global Context

My own understanding of cultural ecology is derived largely from the work of anthropologist Marvin Harris, who investigated in detail how societies were transformed by their shifts from primordial hunting-and-gathering to agrarianism, and how they adapted themselves to various geographies (anthropologist Leslie White and geographer Jared Diamond also made important contributions along these lines). In the last couple of centuries, a shift as profound as the agricultural revolution of 10,000 years ago occurred as societies came to base their economies on the use of fossil fuels. Now, as the fossil fuel era starts to wane, wrenching changes in the social, intellectual, political, and religious foundations of modern society should be anticipated.

Fossil-fueled society came to full flower during the twentieth century.

With unprecedented amounts of energy available economies grew rapidly, and the expectation of further and unending growth became a core feature of economic and political theory. Consumerism evolved as a set of economic arrangements to ensure and manage growth. With growth came the notion that unending progress was to be expected also in the social, scientific, and political realms. Capitalism—the private ownership of what Karl Marx called the “means of production,” along with mechanisms for constant reinvestment in the expansion of those means—was never so much a coherent ideology as a set of cobbled-together agreements and institutions. Since capitalism’s tendency (as Marx observed) was to produce ever greater economic inequality along with worsening boom-bust cycles, efforts were made to restrain those tendencies through redistributive taxation and social programs, along with financial, labor, and environmental regulations (which were seen by many as signs of social and political progress). Immigration and globalization served to reduce labor costs, but were also regarded as evidence of progress toward a more egalitarian, multicultural ideal. The acceptance and resettlement of refugees from political strife or natural disasters represented a national expression of humanitarianism.

This was the milieu within which liberal and conservative political discourse took place; that discourse questioned relative degrees of power and benefit enjoyed by social groups (e.g., workers versus managers versus owners of capital) but seldom challenged the shared allegiance to growth. Within a growing economy, there was always more for (nearly) everyone, even though some were able to obtain a much higher percentage of the increasing overall wealth.

The fossil fuel era is now failing. Unless society migrates rapidly away from carbon-based fuels, climate change will increasingly batter the economy in a hundred different ways. But even ignoring climate change, there is still the problem of depletion: oil, coal, and natural gas are finite resources extracted using the low-hanging fruit principle. While large amounts of these resources remain, each further increment extracted offers declining energy returns on the energy invested in producing them. Economists should recognize this as an instance of the law of diminishing returns. The situation with respect to oil is approaching crisis: while production rates are high, costs to producers overall are soaring (the recent drop in production costs for certain types of U.S. tight oil notwithstanding), and the higher prices needed to cover those costs can’t be sustained because they tend to frustrate economic growth and kill demand for motor fuel. The petroleum industry is between a proverbial rock and hard place, with [debt increasing and profit evaporating](#). Alternative energy sources will need to be introduced at [eight to ten times](#) the current rate of solar and wind build-out to avert either a climate or a depletion crisis. In any case it is [highly doubtful](#) that renewable or nuclear energy could support the consumer economy we have come to rely on. Since energy is the basis for all economic activity (a fact mainstream economists have been slow to grasp), the end of the fossil fuel era effectively means the end of growth.

Just as a growing economy encouraged the development of the ideological and social constructs of the twentieth century (described above), a stagnating or contracting economy is likely to favor a very different and uglier politics whose main themes are:

- longing (and promises) for the return of a lost condition of abundance
- expressions of grievance
- blaming of identifiable social or political groups for the loss of abundance, and
- calls for the exclusion of *others* who are deemed to be competing with “us” for increasingly scarce resources.

This could be a description of what would, in ordinary political discourse, be termed far-right nationalist populism. *Traditionalism* serves as one of several standards for that strain of politics.

Inside Bannon’s Brain

Let’s look a little more closely at the ideological particulars of traditionalism. It would probably be futile to search the words of Donald Trump himself for signs of a coherent philosophy, because the man does not write books or articles (only tweets), and [speaks below a sixth-grade level](#). However, some meaningful insight into ideological Trumpism can perhaps be gleaned from White House chief strategist Stephen Bannon.

The website Politico recently [explored Bannon’s reading list](#), describing him as a “voracious reader who devours works of history and political theory.” His favored readings “tend to have one thing in common: the view that technocrats have put Western civilization on a downward trajectory and that only a shock to the system can reverse its decline. And they tend to have a dark, apocalyptic tone. . . .”

One of Bannon’s influences is said to be [neoreactionary](#) blogger [Curtis Yarvin](#), who writes under the pen name *Mencius Moldbug*. Yarvin is a leader of a movement called [Dark Enlightenment](#), that rejects egalitarianism and multiculturalism along with the progressive view of world history. Dark Enlightenment implies a support for strong, centralized political leadership along with libertarian economics and socially conservative views on gender roles, race relations, and immigration.

Another Bannon favorite is Nassim Taleb, author of the 2014 book *Antifragile*, which proposes managing systems in a way that benefits from random events, errors, and volatility.

The term *traditionalism* crops up specifically in the work of Italian philosopher Julius Evola (1898-1974). In a [recent New York Times article](#), Jason Horowitz explored Bannon’s fascination with Evola, “a leading proponent of Traditionalism, a worldview popular in far-right and alternative religious circles that believes progress and equality are poisonous illusions.” Evola’s book [Revolt Against the Modern World](#) speculated that the near-universal myth of a lost Golden Age was actually a collective memory of a time when religious and temporal power were united, and society was ruled by spiritual warriors. He believed that the modern world represents a serious decline from that society.

In my first book, *Memories and Visions of Paradise: Exploring the Universal Myth of a Lost Golden Age* (1989, revised edition 1995), I explained how the idea of a lost Golden Age has long been

associated with various forms of millenarianism—the notion that the current world is degraded and approaching a cleansing crisis from which a revived paradisiacal condition will emerge. Millenarian movements (of which many variants of Christianity and Islam are clear examples) often spring up during times of secular decline or crisis, and typically take the form of a cult led by a charismatic visionary aiming to “Make the world great again!” The leader is sometimes a benign character (like British socialist Robert Owen, who started an American commune in 1825), though often more malign (like Hitler).

In my view, if there ever was a Golden Age, it was probably not a time of rigid hierarchy; the myth is more likely a deep cultural memory of our shared origin in egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies, when we lived embedded in nature rather than separate from and dominating it. Hunting and gathering was a hard way of life, but psychologically rewarding nevertheless. Evidence suggests humans left it behind not out of a hunger for technology and progress, but because of population pressure and resource depletion. Evola’s avowed fascism, racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-feminism, and his vision of a hierarchical society ruled by a spiritually superior caste are, in my view, based on a profoundly delusional understanding of history and anthropology. But in this respect traditionalism is far from unique: most millenarian movements invent highly fanciful idyllic pasts and possible futures.

In any case, the longing for a cleansing fire is clearly present in Evola. Perhaps Bannon—who has said he wants to “destroy” the state—is especially attracted to Evola’s belief that creating change is “not a question of contesting and polemicizing, but of blowing everything up.”

In short, cultural ecology predicts that a historical moment of change such as ours would provide the ideal growth medium for social and religious movements that glorify a largely imagined past, anticipate a cathartic renewal (which they may seek to precipitate), and promise followers a privileged position in the coming order. And that’s pretty much what we are seeing.

Traditionalism Beyond Trumpland

Not surprisingly, perhaps, some of the basic features of traditionalism are also evident in Vladimir Putin’s Russia. Recall that Russia went through its own end-of-growth crisis in the 1990s after the collapse of the USSR. It’s entirely understandable, therefore, that the current Russian leader has gained great popularity by calling for a return to idealized ancient values. [In a 2013 speech at the Valdai conference in Russia](#), Putin warned,

“We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. They are denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual. They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.”

In [a 2014 speech at the Vatican](#), Steve Bannon called Putin a kleptocrat, but spoke approvingly of his philosophy: “We the Judeo-Christian West really have to look at what [Putin is] talking about as far as traditionalism goes—particularly the sense of where it supports the underpinnings of nationalism.”

One of Putin’s influences (though the extent is disputed) is Aleksandr Dugin, a far-right Russian political philosopher, who has himself professed admiration for Julius Evola. Dugin writes prolifically on geopolitics as well as political philosophy, and has asserted that, “Only after restoring the Greater Russia that is the [Eurasian Union](#), we can become a credible global player.” He has helped Putin forge alliances with nationalist movements in Europe, including Marine LePen’s National Front in France, Golden Dawn in Greece, Germany’s Alternative for Germany (AfD), the Ataka Party in Bulgaria, and Hungary’s Jobbik Party. Putin’s friend Viktor Orbán, now Prime Minister of Hungary, has promised to turn his country into an “illiberal democracy” modeled on Russia. After a February 2 meeting with Putin, Orbán declared that “It’s in the air; the world is in the process of a substantial realignment.” Orbán is virulently anti-Muslim; he sees Islam as a “rulebook for another world.”

Traditionalism demands an enemy, and the fear and loathing of Islam is a key feature of far-right populism in both Europe and the U.S. Here’s Steve Bannon speaking (again at the Vatican) on the dangers of what he calls “jihadist Islamic fascism”: “I believe the world, and particularly the Judeo-Christian West, is in a crisis. . . . There is a major war brewing, a war that’s already global. . . . Every day that we refuse to look at this as what it is, and the scale of it, and really the viciousness of it, will be a day where you will rue that we didn’t act.”

Geert Wilders of the Dutch populist Party for Freedom is the current frontrunner in Holland’s upcoming elections; he has proclaimed that “Islam and freedom are not compatible” and argues for strong anti-Muslim measures, without which the nation will be “colonised and Islamised.”

The expectation of an ultimate cathartic clash between a traditionalist Christian West and jihadist Islam is of course enthusiastically shared by the most radical Islamist movements such as the Islamic State and Al Qaida—which themselves represent yet more brands of millenarianism.

The description of the relationship between Islam and the West as a “clash between civilizations” appeared first in a 1957 speech at Johns Hopkins University by British orientalist Bernard Lewis (he later amended the phrase to “clash of civilizations”). Harvard professor Samuel Huntington popularized the idea, which now makes its way toward center stage in world politics. With both Trumpists and Jihadis as advocates, it may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Other Possibilities?

Societies in decline or crisis don’t always elevate far-right leaders and

social movements. For example, the medieval Joachimites and Brethren of the Free Spirit (whose followers endured plagues and wrenching poverty), and the 17th century Ranters in Britain (where small farmers were losing their land to the wealthy) promoted a radically egalitarian vision of human relations. Much more recently, a period of economic contraction and crisis in the United States produced one of the country's most left-leaning presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Indeed, it could be argued that Barack Obama was an FDR-like figure tasked to address the global financial crisis of 2008, but that his too-tepid response (or the fact that the crisis was too deeply-rooted to yield fully to Keynesian formulae) then opened the way for far-right Trumpism.

Traditionalism therefore may characterize only one phase of the cultural and political aftermath to the end of growth. While for the foreseeable future (and in certain nations or regions) circumstances may favor strong leaders who demonize racial or religious groups and promise a restoration of forsaken values, their regimes may disappear as quickly as they arrived on the scene. Politics may fragment, with formerly united regions choosing to follow separate paths. In a time of such ferment, most socio-political forecasts are foolhardy. However, I'll venture one: the least likely outcome for America is a return to the liberal, secular, consumerist order that characterized the post-WWII decades.

Currently, large swathes of America (accounting for over half its total population) are proving highly resistant to the Trumpist mental virus, and much the same could be said with regard to most of the European far-right movements. Further, the likely practical administrative failure of the Trump regime might immunize the nation—or at least large chunks of it—from any other rightist millenarian leader or movement for the foreseeable future.

A far-left millenarian movement could arise in response, given a sufficiently charismatic standard-bearer. In the decades since 1980 the West has gotten used to recurrent crops of fairly ineffectual and innocuous movements on the political left, but a more militant egalitarianism is entirely feasible (think Lenin, Trotsky, Mao, or the Red Brigades) and could potentially prove as dangerous as any other brand of extreme millenarianism.

Fortunately, our future options need not be limited to choosing between competing brands of millenarianism. Individuals and communities can simply concentrate on practical efforts to bring the greatest good to the most people (and other species) over the longest time by rethinking and redesigning production and consumption patterns in anticipation of the failure of existing consumerist institutions. The word "good" in the previous sentence is of course open to definition and redefinition, but even a meager understanding of ecology and psychology would suggest that it should point to values like diversity (permitting the flourishing of many kinds of species and cultures), happiness, health, autonomy, and sustainability. Identify existing efforts pushing your community in those directions. Start new efforts along those lines, and work to build the resilience of your community to economic and social disruption. Millenarianism is a collective psychological expression of stress and powerlessness. The antidote is to act. In a time of division,

unite. In a time of demonization, reach out.

##

Want to dig deeper into the topics I explore in these blog posts? Post Carbon Institute has just released a new online course called [Think Resilience: Preparing Communities for the Rest of the 21st Century](#). Learn more at education.resilience.org.

Disengage from the spectacle

Behold today's edition of Empire's End—the biggest, best-ever 24/7 reality TV show! It's been decades in preparation, with a budget in the trillions, a cast of billions! Its hero-villain is far more colorful and pathetic than Tony Soprano or Walter White. One day he and his team of oddball supporting characters appear to be winning bigly; the next, they're crashing and burning. We're all on the edges of our seats, alternately enraged, horrified, thrilled, or brought to tears in uncontrollable laughter. Who could bear to miss a minute of it?

Still, maybe at least some of us are better off severely limiting our consumption of American national news just now. It's not that events in Washington won't affect us. They most assuredly will. Rather, I'd argue that there are even more important things to attend to, over which we have far greater agency.

I've invested as much attention in the outrage-of-the-day distraction machine as anyone, spending scores of hours reading news reports and analyses, and I've written at least a half-dozen essays about our current tweeter-in-chief. And I'm here to tell you that full immersion in the news cycle is just not healthy.

Some readers may find this conclusion too cynical. I propose it only after a great deal of thought, and on the basis of two premises.

First Premise: We are at the end of the period of general economic growth that characterized the post-WWII era. [I've written extensively about this](#), and there's no need to repeat myself at length here. Suffice it to say that we humans have harvested the world's cheap and easy-to-exploit energy resources, and the energy that's left will not, much longer, support the kind of consumer economy we've built. Further, in order to keep the party roaring, we've built up consumer and government debt levels to unsustainable extremes. We've also pumped hundreds of billions of tons of greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere and oceans, putting the entire biosphere at risk. Yet our current economic and political systems require further, endless growth in order to avert collapse. Almost no one wants to discuss this situation—neither politicians nor economists. Therefore the general public is left mostly in the dark. Still, everyone senses a change in the air: despite jiggered statistics, workers know that their wages have stagnated or fallen in recent years, and members of the younger generation generally expect to earn less than their parents. This generates a persistent low-level sense of fear and dissatisfaction, guaranteeing a significant political shift such as we

are seeing.

Second Premise: The new and current U.S. regime is adopting an essentially fascist character. When empires decline, people often turn to leaders perceived as strong, and who promise to return the nation to its former glory. In extreme instances, such leaders can be characterized as fascist—using the word in a generic sense to refer to authoritarian nationalism distinguished by one-party rule, the demonization of internal and external enemies (usually tinged with some form of racism or anti-Semitism), controls on press freedoms, and social conservatism. Here's the thing: Once a nation turns decisively toward fascism, there's rarely a turning back. Fascist regimes ruthlessly hobble and destroy all opposition. Typically, it takes a foreign invasion or a complete economic-political-social collapse to reset a national government that has gone fascist.

Now, put these two premises together. Those who get the second premise but miss the first tend to conclude that, at least until the new regime neutralizes significant opposition within the government, there is still something we can do to make everything turn out okay—in the sense that life would return to "normal." Just defeat the fascists, no matter what the cost. But the end of growth ensures that, beyond a certain point, there will be no more "normal." We're headed into new territory no matter what.

Taking both premises into account, what are the likely outcomes?

It's possible that the Trumpist insurgency will succeed in rooting out or suppressing opposition not just in Congress and the media, but also in Executive-branch departments including the CIA and FBI. In that case we may see at least a few years of authoritarian national governance punctuated by worsening financial and environmental crises, all against the backdrop of accelerating national decline. It's just a guess, but the regime may have only two more months to somehow overcome resistance within the intelligence community; if it can do so, then the task of undercutting the judiciary and the media can be pursued at a more leisurely pace over the next year or two. But thanks to Premise One, short-term success probably will not lead to a regime that is stable over the long term. Eventually, no matter how vigorously it suppresses real or perceived enemies, the U.S. federal government will collapse as a result of war, economic crisis, or the simple ongoing erosion of biophysical support systems. At that point a possible trajectory for the nation would be to break apart into smaller geographically defined political entities.

However, the short-term success of the current regime is not yet guaranteed. It is still entirely possible that establishmentarian Democratic and Republican members of Congress, working with with renegade CIA and FBI mid-level officials and mainstream media outlets, could mire the new leadership in a scandal that is too deep to survive. Or, if Republicans lose control of Congress in 2018, articles of impeachment could be brought against Trump. This would not, however, guarantee a return to status quo politics in Washington. Not only does Premise One guarantee that the old status quo is no longer tenable, but also on its own terms the political system is now too broken and the nation too divided. In this scenario, pro-regime and anti-regime elites might just continue to escalate their attacks on

one another until the whole system crashes—as I explained in [a previous essay](#), citing the conclusions of ecologist [Peter Turchin](#), which he based on his comparative study of over a dozen ancient and modern societies in analogous circumstances.

It's just a guess: if the regime is successful in the short term, we might get a slower crash; if it fails, we might get a faster one. In any case, there's no national team to root for that is capable of restoring the *status quo ante* Trump, at least not for long, if that is even desirable. Under either scenario, competent local governance might provide significantly better living conditions than the national average (more on that below), but the overall picture is pretty grim. A few years from now I expect that we'll be in very different territory socially, politically, and economically. This is not a conclusion that I relish, but it's one seemingly demanded by history and logic.

Nevertheless, what we do in the meantime could make a big positive difference to people and planet, both over the short term and also over the long term. Here are some specific things you can do:

1. Disengage from the spectacle. Learn what you need to know in order to assess immediate threats and general trends, but otherwise avoid spending long periods of time ingesting online, print, radio, or televised media. It's bad for your mental health and takes time away from other items on this list.
2. If you haven't already done so, make a personal and family resilience plan in case of a temporary breakdown in the basic functions of government (everyone should do this anyway in view of our vulnerability to earthquakes or weather disasters). Where should you be living? Are you growing any of your own food? Do you have some food and water in storage? Have you reduced your energy usage to a minimum, and installed solar PV (with short-term battery backup) and hot water solar panels? Do you have some cash set aside?
3. Work to build community resilience. If and when national governance breaks down, your local community's degree of social and biophysical resilience will make all the difference for you and your family. Biophysical resilience relates to local food, water, and energy systems. A socially resilient community is one in which people are talking to one another, institutions for resolving disputes are trusted, and people look out for one another. Identify organizations that are building both kinds of resilience in your community and engage with them. These could be churches, civic government, non-profit organizations, food co-ops, energy co-ops, health co-ops, neighborhood safety groups, local investment clubs, or Transition groups. Get involved with existing organizations or start new ones. Yes, it takes a lot of time. But friends are more important than money in the bank—especially in times of social and political upheaval.
4. Direct some of your resilience-building efforts toward long-term and nature-centered concerns. This might take the form of conservation work of various kinds. [In my last essay](#), I discussed assisting the migration of forests in the face of climate change. Carbon farming and providing wild bird and insect refuges are other options—not (only) because they're enjoyable hobbies but because they help maintain the biophysical resilience of the ecosystems we depend on. Again,

this is work that proceeds best in the company of others.

5. Take some time for the conservation of culture—arts and skills that are their own reward. Connecting with others in your community by enjoying or playing music together, singing, dancing, or making visual art deepens relationships and gives life more dimension and meaning.

While the legal and social functions of liberal democracy persist, vigorous and sustained protest efforts could help rein in the fascist tendencies of the new American government. Participating in protests could enable you to get to know other members of your community. On the other hand, protest could further fragment your community if that community is already deeply divided politically—and it could eventually get you in a lot of trouble depending on how things work out, since protest under fascist regimes doesn't produce the same result as protest in a liberal democracy.

Don't obey the new leaders when they call for actions that undermine democracy and justice; instead, choose to actively disobey in ways that actually matter in the long term. Refuse to define yourself in terms of the regime. Yes, at certain moments in history it is necessary to take a stand one way or the other on a particular issue (such as the issue of slavery in mid-nineteenth century America), and in the days ahead some issue may require you to plant your flag. But this historical moment may be one when many real heroes and heroines choose to engage in ways that are not scripted by any of the elites.