

Russia: Just Call It Fascism

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Alexander Dugin's fraudulent 'fourth way'

Much has been [written](#) about Alexander Dugin, the Russian firebrand often called “Putin’s Brain” by both his defenders and his critics. Dugin was born into a well-off Soviet family in 1962, and spent much of his youth rebelling against communism, flirting with everything from Satanism to fascism. Despite this, he greeted the end of the Cold War with ambivalence. Witnessing the humiliation of Russia by the United States left him with a deep resentment that pervades all his work. It’s the resentment of one who considers himself a superior man held back by decadent forces that somehow manage to eke out victory after victory. After a short career as an influential member of the National Bolshevik Party, Dugin published *Foundations of Geopolitics* in 1997, the first of many polemics against America, Atlanticism, liberalism, and, worst of all, McDonald’s. Since then, he has become an icon of the far Right in Russia and across the globe. His manifesto *The Fourth Political Theory*—a schizoid mix of Heideggerian-Deleuzian ontology, postmodern relativism, anti-liberal fist-pounding, and megalomaniacal geopolitics—has become the unofficial [handbook](#) of postmodern reaction. As [chronicled by](#) Benjamin Teitelbaum, Steve Bannon even made a special pilgrimage to pay homage to the master—despite the fact that Dugin has often described the United States as the cutting edge of “global idiocy.”

Michael Millerman, the author of *Inside “Putin’s Brain”: The Political Philosophy of Alexander Dugin*, has the dubious honor of having done more to popularize Dugin’s ideas among English speakers than anyone else. Millerman received his PhD in political science at the University of Toronto, writing a [controversial thesis](#) that was later turned into the monograph *Beginning with Heidegger: Strauss, Rorty, Derrida, Dugin and the Philosophical Constitution of the Political*, published by the far-right Arktos Media. In my [review](#) of that book for *Merion West*, I criticized Millerman for defending Heidegger and Dugin without drawing attention to their glaring moral and political failings. Millerman’s latest book repeats this error, treating Duginism with an alarming lack of critical scrutiny. Unfortunately, there is a growing demand for books that popularize modes of far-right and fascist thinking that were supposed to have been buried after Auschwitz, but *Inside “Putin’s Brain”* stands out: it is one of the more ambitious whitewashing efforts I’ve ever read.

Millerman insists on treating Dugin as a “political philosopher,” where the “relevant points of reference are people like Plato, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.” And not just *any* political philosopher, but one who describes himself as a “mythical Merlin” figure engaged in “supra-human contemplation” and who is at the same time the founder of an empire. Dugin’s grandiose aspirations are a touchy subject for Millerman, who insists that it is “all too easy for unimaginative, hollowed out professors of philosophy and political science to scoff at such an image. But the fact is that the philosopher-founder is a well attested topic in political philosophy.” What the “professors” are in fact scoffing at is the suggestions that Dugin belongs in such auspicious company. Indeed, it is too flattering to compare Dugin even with other far-right icons such as Carl Schmitt or Martin Heidegger; he’s clearly a minor-league intellectual figure, somewhere between Julius Evola and Olavo de Carvalho.

Still, it is fair to call Dugin a political philosopher if all one means by that is someone professionally engaged in the discipline regardless of the plausibility or attractiveness of his work. The title is not necessarily an honorable one. One can be a maniac and a political philosopher simultaneously, as Dugin demonstrates. At various points in his book, Millerman describes philosophy as an “auspicious activity.” At the conclusion of *Inside “Putin’s Brain”* he excuses his lack of engagement with the practical implications of Duginism, including Dugin’s support for the war in Ukraine, on the strange grounds that “nothing [Dugin] could say about oil prices” would be as important as his commitment to the “big questions and giving them their due.” In short, discussing the real-world implications of Dugin’s ideas would besmirch his dignity as a philosopher.

But Millerman is wrong. Any honest philosopher would readily acknowledge that a huge part of assessing a political philosophy is examining its practical implications. The chief topic of Plato’s *Republic* is only secondarily the metaphysical doctrine of the forms; justice takes priority, including questions about the responsibility of philosophers in and to the city. Emphasizing justice isn’t, as Millerman implies in *Beginning with Heidegger*, some excuse to constrain far-right thinking in the name of liberal prudence. Pre-Socratic thought may have begun in wonder and metaphysics, but philosophy only grasped what Paul Tillich would call its “highest concern” when Socrates began to contemplate questions of justice and goodness. One cannot simply bypass ethics on the way to metaphysics, or construct a metaphysical political philosophy that has nothing to say about what should be the first concern of any political community: justice. This is especially true when your metaphysical speculations are as fantastical as Dugin’s are.

Unsurprisingly, Millerman doesn’t want to scrutinize the practical or moral implications of Dugin’s philosophy too closely. One finds very few references to the wars of aggression that Dugin has [defended](#)—wars that have brought about immeasurable human suffering. Millerman does acknowledge that the war in Ukraine has led to a growing number of commentaries on Dugin, many of which are, in his judgment, the “hysterical ravings of overzealous liberal lunatics.” Millerman thinks that Dugin’s Western critics lack imagination; they focus on little things like war crimes and lose sight of the really important issues, such as Dugin’s theoretical dalliances with postmodern French theory.

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The two most important books for understanding Dugin as a political philosopher are his *The Fourth Political Theory* and *Martin Heidegger: The Philosophy of Another Beginning*. The titles of these books tell us a lot about where Dugin belongs in the history of right-wing thought. One mistake people make about the Right is to assume that it is simply committed to defending the status quo, or to managing change more cautiously than liberals do. Some variants of conservatism do indeed fall into this paradigm, but not all. From the violent counterrevolutionary movements of the eighteenth century to Trump’s depiction of foundational American institutions as corrupt and broken, the Right has long had a more insurrectionary side. For a revolutionary reactionary like Heidegger, for example, conventional conservatives lack any real nerve or daring in their efforts to save “Western civilization” by turning back the clock to some idealized version of the recent past. For Heidegger the history of Western thought can be understood as a long descent into nihilism that started with Plato’s fatal decision to conflate “being” with ideas, and so with the “being of beings.” This error led eventually to the modern Cartesian view that external “beings” were in fact simply matter to be manipulated by conscious subjects for their benefit, with no one’s viewpoint or desires privileged over anyone else’s. This turned the whole world into what Heidegger called a “standing reserve.” And he believed that these metaphysical errors had bled into modern politics. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he dismissed liberalism and communism as “metaphysically the same.” Both, he believed, are egalitarian, humanist doctrines committed only to material flourishing, mostly

arguing with each other about technical matters like which economic system will create better refrigerators. It fell to people more metaphysically sensitive—people like Adolf Hitler—to save the West by forcing a new beginning, by going back to the energy and vision that philosophy possessed before it was corrupted by Platonism. This would require a rejection of modern egalitarianism, democracy, and freedom for the inauthentic “mass of people.” A more authentic philosophical elite would have to take charge. Dugin is especially attracted to this idea. In his book on Heidegger, he echoes the Heideggerian sentiment that the masses are “insignificant swarms.”

There, other mountain peaks are clearly visible, whereas the insignificant swarms in dark valleys below are indiscernible in the present much like long ago. A true thinker knows as little about the details of society in which he lives as he does about those of the times long gone. Yet the voice of Being is audible to him, as it emanates from the ancients clearer and louder than the itching on the part of the senseless masses, both ancient and modern.

Dugin reworks Heidegger’s elitism to make it serve the purposes of his own Eurasian nationalism. Megalomania may convince far-right thinkers that they soar high above the rest of us, but that’s only because falling feels a lot like flying until you hit the ground. Much of Dugin’s political philosophy is directed against liberalism and liberal society, but he rarely bothers to discuss liberal political philosophy on its own terms. Search his books for knowledgeable discussions of Mill, Rawls, or Korsgaard and you’ll usually come up empty. At most you’ll find a few summary clichés and rote references, often accompanied by rapid-fire denunciation. While Dugin is willing to take some communist ideas seriously, all he is willing to take from liberal philosophy is its endorsement of “freedom,” which he reconceptualizes beyond recognition. But liberalism itself, he insists, must be “defeated and destroyed,” along with everything else that comes from the West. As he writes in *Eurasian Mission: An Introduction to Neo-Eurasianism*:

I share the vision of René Guénon and Julius Evola, who considered modernity and the ideologies derived from it—individualism, liberal democracy, capitalism, and so on—to be the causes of the coming catastrophe of humanity, and the global domination of Western attitudes as the final degradation of the Earth. The West is approaching its end, and we should not let it pull all the rest of us into the abyss along with it.

So what is Dugin’s alternative? His constructive proposals, such as they are, recombine various elements of what he calls the three major political traditions of the twentieth century: communism, fascism, and liberalism. It is perhaps worth noting at the outset that all of these had their origins in the dreaded West. As already noted, he borrows the rhetoric, if not the substance, of “freedom” from liberalism—and even that, one senses, is a debt Dugin wishes he could avoid. From communism he appropriates some of the Marxist critiques of capitalism and market society, along with a critique of American imperialism. But he chucks the integral materialism, scientific epistemology, and the egalitarian humanism Marxists share with the liberal tradition, which, as Eric Hobsbawm [points out](#), always ensured that most socialists felt a greater affinity with liberalism than with reaction. Finally, from fascism he takes the myth of a transcendent people, a cyclical view of time in terms of decline and rise, and much more. Dugin wants to dispense with fascism’s racism and its flirtation with biological determinism, but not with its ultranationalism or militaristic imperialism. In *Eurasian Mission*, he makes it very clear that the road from fascism to his “fourth political theory” is far shorter than the road from either liberalism or communism.

From the beginning, these syncretic efforts are intellectually opportunistic: Dugin irreverently plunders whatever ideas and arguments happen to be available in these earlier traditions because he is incapable of saying anything truly original. To his credit, he’s creative at coming up with novel terminology. In *The Fourth Political Theory* he toys with a number of labels for his new politics. One of his favorites is “Eurasianism,” which draws from the “Conservative Revolution” of 1920s and ’30s

Germany as well as the “fundamental conservatism” (a.k.a. “traditionalism”) of the self-described “superfascist” Julius Evola. If so-called “third-way” politics is notoriously vacuous, Dugin’s fourth way is a not-very-convincing disguise for one of the three ways he claims to be superseding (hint: it’s not communism). Yet Millerman insists that we take Dugin at his word:

An obstacle to...study has been the impression that Dugin’s self-presentation as a political theorist is little more than a façade meant to present as legitimate an underlying illegitimate, unphilosophical neo-fascism. However, a commitment to sound analysis should caution us against sharing that judgment. It could only be a conclusion, not an *a priori* position, that Dugin’s concepts and projects are best understood as fascist. Taking Dugin’s self presentation as a political theorist on its own terms is a better way to begin.... The cover art for the Russian version of [*The Fourth Political Theory*] illustrates the point. It depicts a square divided into four parts. One part shows a hammer and sickle, another fasces; a third, the dollar sign. The fourth part shows a question mark. The fourth political theory is marked by the question mark, in contrast to the hammer and sickle, fasces, and dollar sign.

But in this case the old advice is sound: do not judge a book by its cover. A diagram is not an argument, and sometimes a question mark is not really a question mark.

‘Many of the people Dugin lumps into “Eurasian” civilization don’t seem to buy into his “special truth.”’

Even if we take Millerman’s cleaned-up version of Dugin’s “right-wing populism” at face value, we would still have to reject it as implausible and unjust. In his great book *Conservatism*, Edmund Neill observes that a common practice of right-wing thinkers is to develop “symbiotic opposites to progressive concepts in order to rebut them.” There are two clear examples of this practice in Dugin’s work: first, his relativistic particularism; and second, his approach to democracy.

One of the more surprising features of Duginism is its willingness to flirt with cultural relativism as a means of opposing liberal universalism. He’ll often insist that contemporary postmodern leftists like Foucault and Derrida have shown that all kinds of universalism—including humanistic doctrines like liberalism and communism—are in fact very much the contingent intellectual products of a particular civilization. Each civilization has its own “episteme” that cannot be legitimately exported. Dugin will therefore [insist](#) that Russia has its own “special truth,” which the West cannot fully comprehend or criticize from its external perspective. He then goes on to argue that we should welcome the emergence of a multipolar geopolitics of different civilizations, each oriented by their respective characters and truths.

Of course, Dugin himself has never been shy about critiquing the West from *his* external perspective. Or about (rightly) condemning American imperialism one minute and enthusiastically cheerleading Russian imperialism the next. The problem here is not just personal hypocrisy but logical incoherence. A Western liberal could simply reply to Dugin that it is the common conviction of her own civilization, its “episteme,” that everyone in the world should one day adopt the Western worldview—that the particularism of the West just is an endorsement of liberal universalism. And how can Dugin, as an outside observer of the West, criticize Western civilization without abandoning his own relativism? When he rejects the West because of its “untruth” or decadence, as he frequently does, is he not imposing his own “episteme” beyond its proper boundaries?

What’s more, many of the people Dugin lumps into “Eurasian” civilization don’t seem to buy into his “special truth.” This obviously includes the thousands of Russians who are bravely resisting authoritarian tyranny in their own country, and we should always remember that the first victims of a dictator like Putin are his own people. But it also includes the efforts of countries like Ukraine to

move closer to the West. Dugin insists that these popular movements are

almost always aimed against those societies or those political regimes that actively or passively resist the global oligarchy, challenge its interests, and try to maintain some independence in matters of policy, strategy, regional affairs, and economic measures. Thus, “color revolutions” occur selectively, organized via mass media networks deployed by the globalist elite. These are a twisted parody of revolution, and serve only counter-revolutionary purposes.

But while Dugin talks a lot about the authentic “people”—the ones who subscribe to his “special truth”—these are mostly an abstraction, and very different from the real-life people who make up the actual political communities he pretends to be describing.

Dugin refuses to follow Foucault et al. to the obvious conclusion of their theory: if it is wrong for one civilization to impose its contingent vision of the truth on another, it is no less wrong for one group of people within a civilization to impose its vision on another group. Why, then, is the Russian state in a position to impose its very peculiar version of the truth on its citizens? If Dugin applied his relativism consistently, he could not support the use of state power to persecute sexual minorities or countercultural movements. Indeed, the postmodern relativism Dugin endorses would seem to end in the radically individualist idea that each person’s private episteme is his or her own and no one can legitimately impose their own episteme on anyone else in the name of some higher cause.

That brings us to Dugin’s attitude toward democracy. In his *Eurasian Mission*, he claims the “the Eurasianist concept of ‘democracy’ (*demotia*) is defined as the ‘participation of the people in its own destiny.’” But what kind of participation are we talking about? Not, evidently, the processes of representation and collective deliberation that we usually associate with democracy. Instead, participation in “destiny” seems to mean a passive acquiescence to the grand political projects envisioned by people like Dugin. As Millerman puts it:

It is neither elites nor masses that make the decision for the project of authentic existence, but Dasein [“being there”] itself as a whole.... Yet it is the single ones (the philosophers, historians, and leaders who lead the people to its destiny) who carry out that project. A people only truly has a destiny when it chooses to live authentically.

In short, “Eurasianist democracy” doesn’t mean democracy as anyone since the ancient Greeks would understand it: rule by the people. It means an abstract “people” (*narod*) choosing as one to live authentically. What exactly it means to live authentically is decided by elites who act not in their own interests—perish the thought—but on behalf of “Dasein itself.” These elites are the spokesmen for the true destiny of the people, one so profound that they alone are deep enough to see it. But what if the actual human beings who make up the “people” want to choose a different destiny for themselves? Too bad: the elites are under no obligation to indulge the “senseless masses.” Dugin writes that “the Western system of formal, electoral democracy...will be replaced by an organic democracy which mandates creative participation by the best representatives of the communities in the national government. This type of democracy [is] democracy by the citizenry, not by the mob.”

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In *The Jargon of Authenticity*, Theodor Adorno points out that this kind of obscurantist rhetoric has proven endlessly valuable in justifying domination, whether by the market or by fascists. Market actors justify the hegemony of capitalism by appealing to the expression of individual authenticity through conspicuous consumption, and end up creating a mass of homogeneous consumers. Fascist

ultranationalists demand authentic commitment to great projects by the people, and end up imposing conformity through terror and violence. The same process can be observed in Duginism. It begins by fatuously demanding a crusade against the imperial power of liberal universalism in the name of authenticity. It ends with Dugin cheering on a war where sixty-year-old conscripts die in the Donbas to defend Russia against imaginary conspiracies led by shadowy Western oligarchs.

Dugin isn't just a "right-wing populist." He's a fascist. He believes that decadent liberal materialism constitutes a nihilistic threat that can be overcome only by ultranationalists engaged in a "global revolutionary struggle" against the West. "Only this war is legitimate, just and moral. Only its rules and purposes are justified and worthy of respect. Anyone who is not involved in this war on the side of the Revolution is already helping the global oligarchy to maintain and strengthen their power." Elsewhere he writes, "War is our homeland, our element, and our natural, native environment in which we must learn to exist effectively and victoriously."

Millerman denies that Dugin is a fascist. He points out that Dugin condemns biological racism and even rejects nationalism because a "people (*narod*) and the nation are different." Dugin prefers to think in terms of civilizations, not states. But this is entirely consistent with fascism. As Roger Griffin rightly notes in his book *Fascism*, not only did twentieth-century fascists often insist that a mythologized "ultranation" exceeded the boundaries of the nation-state; but they would also appeal to this myth in order to legitimate their wars of expansion and violence. Indeed the constraints of the nation-state were precisely what fascists rebelled against in their genocidal crusade for a new European order and lebensraum.

While in the interwar period the fascist 'ultra-nation'...was overwhelmingly identified with the nation-state as the context and framework for national rebirth, even then myths of imperialism, pan-Slavism, pan-Latinity, a New European order, a Greater Germanic Reich and a rejuvenated Western civilization occasionally extended the core entity at the heart of the fascist's imagined community far beyond the historical and geographical contours of the political nation state.

Dugin envisions a renewed and expanded Russia serving as the cornerstone of a proud Eurasian civilization. Strategically allied with a colorful cabal of authoritarians, white nationalists, fundamentalists, and other charming characters, this civilization will go to war with the decadent West, defying its universalist pretensions. Indeed, it already is at war with the West as far as Dugin is concerned, since the Ukrainian conflict is just one front in this greater struggle.

Dugin likes to talk about destiny. The destiny of twentieth-century fascism was to cause immense suffering before being consigned to the trash heap of history. The question now is how much suffering twenty-first-century fascism will cause before it meets the same end.

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