

Rejecting Post-Political Europe

by Theodore Dalrymple

Public debate before elections or referenda is seldom notable for its high intellectual level or honesty, and that which preceded the recent referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union was no exception. On both sides names were called and nonsense spoken. Those for remaining in the Union implied that trade with Europe would cease if Britain left and even that war on the continent would be more likely. Those for leaving the Union played on fears of limitless immigration, though much of it (for example from Poland) has been good and even necessary for the country, and the inability or unwillingness of the British public administration to control the kind of immigration that is most feared, for example from Moslem countries, has nothing to do with Britain's membership of the Union. It has rather to do with a generalised administrative incompetence that ultimately is attributable to a culture of frivolity and to careerism in bureaucracies grown too large and convoluted to have any connection with their ostensible purposes.

Much of the pre-referendum argument turned whether on the people of Britain would be better or worse off if their country stayed or left, and especially whether the country derived more benefit from its membership than it paid for. This was an undignified debate, since it implied that if we got back in subsidies more than we put in, this would be an argument for staying. Perhaps this is not surprising in a country in which social justice has come to mean (as it has in most western countries) a large proportion of the population living at the expense of the remainder of the population.

But fundamentally the argument was, or should have been, about

politics. Was the European Union compatible in the long term with freedom and the self-determination of peoples, or was it on the contrary constructing a kind of giant Yugoslavia, to be kept together for a time by a combination of bureaucratic dictatorship and inertia, eventually to break up acrimoniously or even violently?

To answer this question it is sufficient to read the [interview](#) that the French Minister of the Economy, Emmanuel Macron, gave to *Le Monde* a week before the referendum. The sentiments that he expressed in it are not idiosyncratic but on the contrary completely orthodox for a member of the European Union's ruling political class, and have been repeated *ad nauseam*. The tone of the minister was peremptory and his argumentation very weak. He spoke more as a ruthless mediocrity than as the brilliant man he is reputed to be.

What did the referendum (which had not yet taken place) mean for the minister?

For me, it expresses the desire for a more efficacious Europe, the end of an ultraliberal vision of Europe that the British themselves have brought.

This is misinterpretation on an astonishing, even an heroic, scale; only a man blinded by some kind of ideology or prejudice could even entertain it for even a moment. According to Macron, British discontent with the European Union – which, incidentally, is less pronounced than in some other member countries – is due to insufficient political and bureaucratic interference in economic and social life. There has never been a demonstration, at least in the west, with 'Less freedom, more official regulation!' as its slogan.

Macron's use of the term 'ultra-liberal' to describe the European Union should be enough to disqualify him from any post involving thought, at which he is clearly not very gifted. When the French use the word *liberal* they do not mean

it in the American social sense, but in the original, economic *laissez-faire* sense. Irrespective of whether *laissez-faire* is desirable or not, no one with the slightest contact with reality could possibly describe any European polity as *laissez-faire*, let alone *ultra-laissez-faire*. Try starting a business or hiring a worker in France, for example, and see just how much you will be left to your own devices and discretion! Try going on to the street in England (that *laissez-faire* heaven or hell, according to Macron's notion) and sell something to passers-by just as you choose! You will be stopped far quicker than if you go round shop-lifting.

Had Macron used the word *corporatist* he would have been nearer the truth: and to corporatism there is no easy answer, though regulatory obstacles to entry into a market – no doubt some of them justified – encourage such corporatism. But Macron's vision, his utopia, is entirely corporatist, with the state always having the upper hand.

In the interview he speaks of 'the European adventure, as if a continent of hundreds of millions of inhabitants were engaged upon a mountaineering trip. 'If we allow Brexit to gnaw away at the European adventure...', says Macron: what then? Other countries, the majority of whose populations want to leave the Union, might also decide to leave, and that would be the end of his corporatist dream.

What is the solution, according to Macron? 'We are,' he says, 'closing the parenthesis of a Europe without a political project.' Who this 'we' actually are does not bother Macron in the least: for, in true Colbertian fashion, 'we' are the political class who, unlike the mere people, know what is best.

As for the project itself, what exactly is it? Strangely enough, though the term 'the European project' appears on innumerable occasions in the French press, it is never spelt out explicitly what it is, nor do any journalists ask those

who use the term exactly what they mean by it. 'The European construction' is another such term: what is being constructed is never stated and no explanation is ever demanded. It is as if a builder built a house without a plan: in fact the plan in the case of Europe is obvious. It is for a United States of Europe, minus most of the federalism.

Repeatedly in the interview, Macron calls for uniform conditions throughout Europe. 'This tension' he says, referring to the increasing desire of peoples that their countries should leave the European Union, 'is due to the incompleteness of Europe: we have not achieved the convergence of our social systems...' That convergence – the same economic and social policies regardless of the individual countries' particular situation and interests – is 'blocked by two taboos.' 'A French taboo, which is the transfer of sovereignty, and a German taboo, which is financial transfers and solidarity [between nations].'

In other words, the Greeks spend and the Germans pay, in return for the self-abasement of France which no Frenchman (quite rightly) wants. As a recipe for international understanding, and for the continuation of the peace that apologists for the Union claim is the only reason why Portugal has not attacked Estonia, or Belgium Croatia, this seems to me to be an unrealistic recipe, to put it no stronger.

But why the drive for union in the first place? Macron makes it quite clear that it is desire, and no doubt nostalgia, for power that is the motive. No European country, France included, is any longer by itself truly powerful on the world stage:

Europe must face the world... The best answer is Europe [in the sense of the Union]. There are today two blocs – the Asian and the American – and the risk is that they will speak face-to-face while forgetting us.

As geopolitical theorising, this is driven of positively Hitlerian proportions; but it is nevertheless current in the class of which M. Macron is a fine example, who use it as a plea for ever more centralised control exercised by themselves.

I would like to think that my fellow-citizens, in voting to leave the European Union, had in mind a rejection of M. Macron and his ilk, though I am not sure that they did. But many of them must have been aware of the bullying or menacing language of the European political class – Macron said in the interview that the European Council must issue an ‘ultimatum’ to the British – and it had the opposite effect of the one intended.

First published in the