

# Solidarity and Sentimentalism at the European Commission

by Theodore Dalrymple



Ursula von der Leyen

It is sometimes easier to coin slogans than to avoid using them. When I read the headline of an interview with Ursula von der Leyen, the newly appointed President of the European Commission, entitled “In Europe, we must stop speaking in slogans,” I thought, “That is not a bad slogan.”

I then recalled the old Logical Positivists, whose main idea was that, to have meaning, a sentence must either be about a verifiable empirical state of affairs or be true by definition. The trouble is that the sentence in which this idea was propounded was neither about a verifiable empirical state of affairs, nor was it true by definition, and was therefore, *ex hypothesi*, meaningless. The Logical Positivists wanted to do away with metaphysics altogether, just as van der Leyen wants to do away with slogans; but metaphysics, like

slogans in politics, are unavoidable. Down with metaphysics, down with slogans!

Of course, a newspaper interview is hardly the forum for profound political reflection or finely-honed argument. All the same, the mixture of cliché, slogan, and evasion with which van der Leyen answered the questions did not bode well. On the few occasions she said something verging on the concrete, it was mistaken.

She was asked, "In the matter of immigration policy, how can the differences [between the European countries] be reduced, given that the gulf between them has grown?" Here is her answer:

*The last four years have taught us that simple answers don't take us far. All that one heard was either "Close the borders and migration will stop," or "we must save everyone on the Mediterranean." We have seen that the phenomenon of migration has not stopped, and that there is a limit to the ability to integrate [the migrants]. Therefore a global approach is necessary. We must invest massively in Africa to reduce the pressure to migrate. At the same time we must fight against organised crime so that we ensure that the Schengen agreement [which allows free movement of people between countries party to it] can function because we protect our external borders [i.e. the borders of the European Union].*

This evades most all of the difficult questions about immigration. Her answer is grammatically-correct and pleasant-sounding, but with a kind of superb indifference to practicalities, she fails to tell us how either the push or pull that drives migration is to be lessened, apart from "massive investment in Africa."

She does not tell us who is going to bankroll this massive investment. Is it to be financed via the forced contributions of European taxpayers and to be administered by European

bureaucrats? The history of “massive aid investment” on the part of Europeans in Africa has not been happy. The Scandinavian governments “invested” heavily in Tanzania, for example, because its dictator was a cuddly Christian socialist, a kind of Olaf Palme with political prisoners, but in so far as their “investment” had any effect at all, it was to reduce (an already very low) output per head, and to keep the dictator in power without having to change his policies. The Scandinavians belatedly admitted this, but it took two decades for the penny to drop.

If the “massive investment” is not to come from government, with its almost infallible ability to turn investment into liability, who is it to come from, and for what purposes? The answer, of course, must be the private or corporate sector. But why is it, then, that the private or corporate sector, supposedly ever on the search for commercial opportunity, does not already make such investments? How is it to be persuaded to do so? Is the purpose of its investment to make a profit or to reduce migration?

Cliché seems to have entered the very fabric of the new President-elect’s mind. She is an elegant and intelligent woman who no doubt means well, but surely it must have occurred to her that it is a little late in the day for investment, however massive, to halt the pressure that has led a third or more of sub-Saharan Africans—who will soon be three times more numerous than the Europeans—to want to migrate to Europe.

Besides, it is not the poorest of the poor of Africa who arrive clandestinely in Europe; rather, it is those who can, or whose family can pay either the air fare, giving them the chance to overstay their visa, or pay people-traffickers (often several thousand dollars) to smuggle them in. Furthermore, many migrants enter under family reunification schemes inscribed in European law.

A rising standard of living in the emigration centers of sub-Saharan Africa brought about by “massive investment,” were it to occur (which is far from certain), would, for quite a number of years, more likely increase than decrease the migratory pressure, in so far as more people would then have the means to undertake the migration. If this is not absolutely certain, it is at least a distinct possibility, but this thought does not in the slightest inhibit the new President from using the language of the imperative—a way of thinking that might result in the compulsion of reluctant countries to pursue a futile policy at great cost. Moreover, it is very difficult to see how any effective or selective migration policy could be carried out without a closure of borders.

Taking up the point, the interviewers asked whether the Italian Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, was right to arrest non-governmental organizations that rescued migrants in the Mediterranean and brought them to Italy.

Mrs. von der Leyen’s answer was as follows:

*It is an obligation for people to rescue the drowning. What Italy wants above all is the reform of the dysfunctional system . . . . I understand that the countries of the European Union with external frontiers do not want to be left to face the challenge of migration alone. They deserve our solidarity.*

This is what a friend of mine calls a *mashed-potato* answer, one that does not address the question asked but succeeds in conveying a vague and non-committal aura of benevolence. *Our solidarity*: who could possibly be against it? But what would it mean in practice, *our solidarity*? It would mean spreading out all of the illegal migrants who have arrived in Italy, for example, among the other countries of Europe, whether those other countries want them or not (and, incidentally, whether

or not the migrants themselves want to go to the countries allocated to them, an obvious point that I have never once seen mentioned in this connection). In these circumstances, solidarity might not last very long, and indeed might turn into its very opposite: extreme hostility. Note also that the very word *solidarity* suggests something that those in favour of mass migration are at pains to deny: that the migrants, far from being an asset to the country they have migrated to, are a burden on them.

In her above answer, the President-elect (for purely political reasons) disregarded entirely the evidence that Mr. Salvini's policy has been a great success, at least from the point of view of preventing illegal immigration into Italy and deaths by drowning of those trying to reach it. He has, in effect, saved incomparably more lives by his firmness than have all the NGO's put together who try to save the drowning. On the contrary, by encouraging people to try to reach Italy, the self-righteous NGO's, which make mock of national laws, have in effect underwritten hundreds, if not thousands, of additional deaths. It is one thing to save the drowning whenever you find them, but another entirely to go looking for them. In fact, the NGO's are a perfect illustration of Oscar Wilde's definition of the sentimentalist: one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it. The costs are imposed on others.

What is "They deserve our solidarity," uttered without the slightest indication of what such solidarity actually entails, if not a slogan? In fact, there is very little other than slogan, cliché and evasion in the President-elect's interview, with a leavening of humbug.

Nevertheless, to complain of this is perhaps futile or even dangerous. The problem in Europe is that opposition is also by slogan, cliché, and evasion, often with a leavening of true nastiness.

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