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Trumpism may puzzle Americans, but Europeans have seen its like before



IT WAS a moment to make French nationalists spill their *pastis*. Marine Le Pen, a populist seeking the presidency of France, launched her campaign this month by praising American voters, saying they had “shown the way” by electing Donald Trump. After all, Mr Trump is a star of American reality television who subsists on Diet Coke, Big Macs and exceedingly well-done steaks. France uses legal quotas to keep Hollywood films and American TV hits at bay, and made a national hero of a sheep farmer (now an elected member of the European Parliament) for attacking a McDonald’s restaurant with a tractor.

Ms Le Pen has tactical reasons to embrace Mr Trump. As her National Front rises in the polls, she calls his election part of a global “awakening” that will next carry her to victory. But to a degree often missed in America, she is an ideological soulmate, too.

By American lights, Mr Trump is a puzzle. On the one hand he favours proposals loved by the right, pledging to lower taxes and deregulate business. On the other he backs ideas cherished on the left, as when he says government should offer health insurance “for everybody”, regardless of ability to pay. Pundits debate whether he is a “New Deal Republican” inspired by Ronald Reagan, a Nixonian centrist or more of a fist-shaking nativist in the mould of Andrew Jackson. Actually, though Mr Trump reflects all those influences and more, there is an easier way to understand him. Quite a lot of the time, he sounds European.

The parallels extend to his rhetoric. Take promises to detect and expel Muslim extremists. Mr Trump told an audience of soldiers on February 6th that America should admit only “people that love us and want to love our country”. Europeans hear echoes of a National Front slogan dating back to the 1980s: “Love France or leave it”. Compare Mr Trump to Ms Le Pen, or other populist-nationalist leaders such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Nigel Farage, the former head of the United Kingdom Independence Party who helped lead his country to Brexit, and areas of agreement abound.

Like America’s president, Europe’s demagogues describe a world in which strong nations must rise up against rootless, self-dealing transnational elites. They promise to lower taxes but also assure their (often snowy-haired) voters that they will preserve old-age benefits from cuts. They are typically authoritarians who

would spend more on crime-fighting and defence, and back something like “extreme vetting” for Muslims and refugees. They suggest that workers need protecting from legal as well as illegal immigrants. Most question whether climate change is as dangerous as experts say. Mr Farage and Ms Le Pen scold the European Union for provoking President Vladimir Putin, and cheer Mr Trump’s talk of closer Russian ties (indeed Russian bankers have, in the past, loaned the National Front large sums). Mr Wilders is warier of Mr Putin, though just as hostile to the EU.

Trump’s America: the old in the new world

Point out parallels between Trumpism and the European hard-right, and some Republican grandees shrug. Over breakfast in Washington clubs, or in Capitol Hill chats, bigwigs say that European socialism is very bad, of course, and that neo-Nazis are to be shunned. But calling someone a European conservative is not so alarming—at this point some may mention Margaret Thatcher, reverentially. In fact terms like “left” and “right” are misleading in Europe. French conservatives may be warier of free markets and keener on state intervention than Swedish social democrats.

A more relevant divide involves attitudes to competition. One European ideological bloc (which might be called Anglo-Saxon) sees competition as, on balance, a useful discipline, making companies and countries stronger and more attuned to the needs of consumers and citizens. Asked for the opposite of competition, that first camp might answer: a monopoly. A rival bloc sees competition as a threat to be managed or resisted. Asked for competition’s opposite, that second camp might answer: solidarity.

The divide is partly cultural, and America has broadly stood on the Anglo-Saxon side of it, even when putting up protectionist barriers to imports. The Founding Fathers wanted to build a country in which a stranger with a good idea would have the chance to make a fortune. It is telling that in the English language competition can be “fair” or “unfair”. Fairness is an abstract idea subject to objective tests—ie, are firms colluding or foreign countries dumping goods into markets at a loss? But in French, Spanish or Italian, competition is “loyal” or “disloyal”. That’s a more emotive concept. It conjures up images of an artisan in a hilltop town, betraying fellow-members of his guild or clan by producing cheaper bread or shoes. That has consequences: lots of Europeans expect politicians to shield firms deemed national champions from competition or to subsidise jobs in favoured industries.

Mr Trump is uncomfortably close to that second camp. His chief ideological adviser, Stephen Bannon, openly yearns for a more closed, clannish America. In a 2015 radio interview Mr Bannon grumbled about the number of Silicon Valley CEOs from Asia, saying: “A country is more than an economy. We’re a civic society.” Candidate Trump promised to be “very loyal to the country” and that “American hands will rebuild this nation”. In a post-election speech he laid out his credo: “The relationships that people value in this country are local: family, state, country,” he thundered. Similar language thrills many in ageing, anxious Europe. It resonates in Trump’s America—a world of rural counties and small, bleak towns that, on many measures, is more like Europe. Polling data show that Trump supporters have a median age of 57, almost nine in ten of them are white, and most do not have college degrees. Overall, Americans have a median age of 38 and attend college at steadily rising rates; about a third of them are non-white. Trumpian nationalism is potent stuff. It is also backward-looking and tribal. That’s not the American way. ■