

The European Union and the United States of America Gabriel Moran

The European Union has suffered from a flaw ever since its origin. For many people the model for the design of the union was the United States of America. There were periodic calls for a “United States of Europe,” starting with Victor Hugo in 1851. Winston Churchill in 1946 said “If we are to form the United States of Europe, or whatever name it may take, we must begin now.” Europe chose the “whatever name” for its union, but a comparison to the United States of America never died out.

Churchill and more recent proponents of a “United States of Europe” did not seem to notice that there is no “United States of (continental) America” which would parallel a United States of Europe. The country that has the name “United States of America” is not the United States of Argentina, Brazil, Canada and the rest. What does exist is the United States of Virginia, New York, Massachusetts and the rest, precariously held together by belief in the *idea* of America. A closer parallel to the European Union would be the United Nations (which logically should be called the United States). The UN wisely did not issue its own currency.

If the European Union was flawed by paralleling it with the United States of America, there is a danger now of a misunderstanding in the opposite direction. The move by the U.K. and the threat by other countries to exit the European Union is being compared to the Trump phenomenon in the United States. There are obvious similarities in the emotional appeals now used in Europe and the United States. But there is also a profound difference in the two cases. The movement of nations in Europe to leave the European Union can be described as “nationalism.” Asked to choose between a British and a European identity, many Britons said they did not want to be ruled from Brussels, that is, by a supra-national union. Similar sentiment is expressed by French, Spanish or Greek populations; they say they want “to take back our country.”

In the United States, Trump and his followers make the same cry of “we want to take back our country.” But from whom? If one uses Europe as the model, it might seem that they are saying that they wish to take back the United States from America. Actually, they never say “take back the United States”; they say “take back America.” However, the question is then no clearer: take back America from whom? The use of “nationalism” for what is happening on both sides of the Atlantic is misleading.

In opposing Trumpism it is important to distinguish between the United States, a nation whose unity is fragile, and America, an idea that has positive meaning for nearly all U.S. citizens. For that reason, “America” is subject to manipulation by a demagogue who wishes to exploit the feelings of fear, loss and anxiety that affect much of the population. Contrary to Trump’s call, it is the United States that needs to be made, if not great again, at least a functioning nation-state. America has always been great, an idea of liberty and justice for all.

Trump has been criticized for saying “America First” because it echoes Charles Lindberg’s movement before World War II. But everyone in the United States thinks America is first in the world. No one will stop Trump by implying a policy of “America second.” The question is how to relate the United States and United States policies to the idea of America, and how to make the United States embody the beautiful sentiments connected to “America.” The political left in the United States that fails to make this distinction is ill-equipped to ask the question, let alone answer it.

There may seem little difference between fear of “the others” and nationalism. The two are difficult to distinguish in the U.K. vote or in French debates. But the crucial difference in the United States is that a rhetoric said to be “American nationalism” is dismissive of the nation and its government. The cry is that government (that is, the government in Washington) is too big. Cut taxes; cut programs of national needs. Apparently, governments in Albany, Springfield, Tallahassee and their 47 relatives can efficiently take care of everything.

The U.S. Congress is not doing its job. That is the big problem that needs fixing but the problem will not be fixed by someone who thinks that what is needed is to make America great. At the end of her book, *Hard Choices*, Hilary Clinton says that the most important question to ask a presidential nominee is: “What is your vision for America?” I think the question should be: “Do you accept the existence of the United States?” And after that, “Do you have a way to get the country out of the gridlock that prevents joint actions to improve conditions in the United States?” The Congress is filled with people who fight for their district or state while celebrating the glories of “America,” but they do not seem to care about the United States and solutions to national problems. That attitude cannot be called nationalism; it is the denial of a national unity.

The United States, starting with oceans on either side, has some of the most secure borders of any country in the world. Yet, Donald Trump draws a picture of hordes of immigrants pouring unchecked over the borders. He cannot be talking about the U.S. borders. The fear he is able to arouse is that the borders of “America” are porous as indeed they are. Being American seems in flux. In the past the “true American” was a white male of European descent; now who can say?

We need to take back the United States from the confusing rhetoric that obscures the serious problems that the nation faces. Presidents who were intent on solving the nation’s problems understood how to describe the nation. Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address does not contain the term America; he speaks of the union and the need to save the nation. Franklin Roosevelt’s First Inaugural Address does not use the term America. He spoke of the nation and practical solutions to its problems. In contrast, George W. Bush’s First Inaugural Address contains the term America twenty times but makes no reference to the United States. It should have been clear then that the country was in for bad times with someone who thought he was becoming the president of America. And the United States would only be worse off with someone who speaks as if he is running to be king of America.