

Self-Anointed v. Resentful

by Theodore Dalrymple

Most people vote in elections for the candidate they dislike the least, and perhaps this is as it should be: positive enthusiasm for candidates and politicians in general is likely to give them an inflated idea of their own importance and thereby promote the politicization of life.

But in no election has an electorate been called upon to make a choice between two candidates whom it so actively despises—or so it appears to most people on this, the European side of the Atlantic. True, in France, Jacques Chirac won an election overwhelmingly against Jean-Marie Le Pen because Chirac's opponents to the left voted for him on the belief that "better a crook than a fascist"; but compared with either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, Chirac was a statesmanlike moral giant—though a crook nonetheless.

As Hamlet said, that it should come to this! The wonderment in Europe is that two such candidates should have arrived at the top of the heap. Clinton would be the choice of most Europeans who are interested in the election, believing, by no means justifiably, that she would be less dangerous for the rest of the world than the volatile and unpredictable Trump, who is regarded, somewhat melodramatically, as a proto- or sub-Mussolini. *Private Eye*, the British satirical weekly, even published photos of Musso and Trump taken from the same angle—from below the chin looking up—and the physical resemblance was indeed remarkable.

The question that many Europeans ask is whether this appalling but also fascinating election has any longer-term significance beyond itself: is it an aberration or the shape of things to come? Will the next election throw up two candidates just as repellent, and is a race between two types of disreputable

persons all we can now hope for? Is this election an interlude or a trend?

There is no doubt that there is an underlying smugness about the European attitude to the American election. It couldn't happen here: no serious politician of Trump's crassness would reach his exalted level. Not only does such assurance forget our history, but it also disregards the subterranean discontents under the calm and well-ordered surface that could well one day erupt into something far worse than Trump's clownish rodomontade. And our political class already shares Clinton's invincible and ruthless self-righteousness. Being Hillary Clinton is like love: never having to say you're sorry.

We face a similar choice in Europe as that between Clinton and Trump: self-anointment and therefore entitlement to rule (Clinton) on the one hand, and inchoate and resentful protest (Trump) on the other, with a liberal admixture of suspected financial impropriety, past and to come, in both.

Will the next election be different and better or, as some pundits (not without malicious glee) have claimed, does this election represent the end of the road for American democracy? Apocalyptic visions are always pleasing but rarely right. And if the truth be told, we have enjoyed the war of revelations and counter-revelations about the candidates. If you sling enough mud, some of it is fun.

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