

Opinion **Life & Arts**

The right will want a United States of Europe

Conservatives will come to see a unified continent as the only defence against America and China

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'The essential oneness of Europe was a conservative theme before it was a liberal one' © Oli Scarff/AFP/Getty Images

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Auberon Waugh, son of the novelist Evelyn, died a quarter of a century ago this month. Never likely to match the old man sentence for sentence, he nonetheless plugged away at journalism. He had a respectable go at fiction too. And unlike his father, a straight-down-the-line conservative, he had at least one interesting opinion.

He was a rightwing pro-European. Almost everywhere, attitudes to Brussels tend to harden the further right you go on the political spectrum. Waugh Jr bucked that rule, seeing Europe as a potential fortress against American cultural influence and other modern barbarities. He liked the European project because he was reactionary, not despite it. The closest modern equivalent is Jeremy Clarkson, that unlikeliest of Remainers.

Expect much more of this in future. The right, above all the hard right, should favour a United States of Europe. And over time, I think it will, at least on the continent, if not in Britain. A unified Europe, a cause that has long been associated with liberals, will start to appeal to traditionalists as the only hope against brash, technologically ascendant superpowers to the west (America) and east (China). It will be framed as a matter of cultural survival.

There is pedigree here. The essential oneness of Europe was a conservative theme — think of “Christendom” — before it was a liberal one. Even the founding of the EU had a Catholic tinge. Robert Schuman, the “father of Europe”, is on course for beatification. A decade or so ago, Europeans who cherished their nation’s peculiarities could still tell themselves that Brussels was the chief threat to them. Now, there are scarier things than regulatory standardisation.

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It won’t be today’s hard right that embraces Europe. True, Marine Le Pen has softened her line on the EU to broaden her electoral appeal in France. Giorgia Meloni has been more co-operative with Brussels than was ever expected. Brits always overestimate the strength of Euroscepticism on the continent, hence the failure of Brexit to set off a domino effect.

But the Le Pen generation cannot make the psychological leap from tolerating European integration to extolling it. The next generation might. An online subculture of pro-European propaganda has flourished of late: some of it inspiring, some of it unnerving in its belligerence. It is to be expected of people who have grown up seeing their continent pushed around over tariffs, tech and Greenland.



Auberon Waugh said he longed to be ruled by a ‘junta of Belgian ticket inspectors’ © Clement Philippe/Alamy I don’t cheer this stuff on. “My” Europe is the technocratic one of Mario Draghi speeches and court rulings against anti-competitive practices. But my discomfiture is precisely the point. There is no longer only a liberal case for a unified continent, but one that is more about strength in numbers against external predators. When Waugh said that he longed to be ruled by a “junta of Belgian ticket inspectors”, China was still a marginal challenge and the US overwhelmingly friendly. Imagine his enthusiasm for that junta now.

A hard-right euro-federalist: such a thing, you will say, makes sense on paper but not in real life, like a Penrose triangle. Well, a decade ago, it was just as hard to imagine a pro-Kremlin US Republican. Or even a highly protectionist one. It is possible for a movement to not just change its mind, but exactly reverse it.

In fact, listen to the language of the hard right closely, and you will see that they are already part of the way towards a United States of Europe position. The current fashion for going on about “European civilisation” or “western civilisation” implicitly downgrades the nation state. (Which self-respecting jingo in the 1990s would have given a hoot about “civilisation”? The unit that mattered was the country.)

People have slid into this way of talking without quite realising its implications. If the culture that is under siege is at the continental scale, comprising hundreds not tens of millions of people, then so too should be the government that is tasked with protecting it. No one European state is big enough in this world of hostile giants. When the hard right does eventually join the federalist bandwagon, some of us won’t know whether to ask, “What kept you?” or jump straight off.

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