

Tribalism and Economic Nationalism – Cut from the Same Cloth

I have no idea what goes on in Donald Trump’s head, but I can imagine a connection between his refusal to renounce the support of alt-right white identitarians and his rejection of globalism — that is, the freedom of people to trade across national boundaries and to move, consistent with individual rights, as they see fit.

When Steve Bannon says he hopes the Democrats will talk about nothing but racism and let the White House get on with its program of “economic nationalism,” he may be showing his clever side. Perhaps he sees the connection — and has a magician’s sense of misdirection.

For the record, globalism and government intervention have no necessary relationship, whatever the rest of the political universe believes. The most eloquent promoters of unencumbered world trade were Richard Cobden and John Bright, the 19th-century “Little Englander” anti-imperialists and peace advocates. No one has an excuse for conflating free worldwide commerce — including the movement of workers, that is, immigration — with either empire or elitist rule through multinational bureaucracies birthed by politicians. As Cobden said,

They who propose to influence by force the traffic of the world, forget that affairs of trade, like matters of conscience, change their very nature if touched by the hand of violence; for as faith, if forced, would no longer be religion, but hypocrisy, so commerce becomes robbery if coerced by warlike armaments.

Antiglobalism and anti-cosmopolitanism might flow purely from economic ignorance, but it is hard to believe that’s all it is for many people. Too often these attitudes suggest what Bryan Caplan calls “anti-foreign bias” combined with “anti-market bias.” Caplan defines *anti-foreign bias* as “a tendency to underestimate the benefits of interacting with foreigners,” and he defines *anti-market bias* as a tendency to “underrate the social benefits of markets.” (His book *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* has the details about these and other relevant, common biases.)

Why would anyone underestimate the benefits of interacting with foreigners? It might be because they are, well, *foreign*. Combine this bias with an ignorance of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” (spontaneous order) and a suspicion that exchange is zero-sum rather

than positive-sum, and you have the making of an economic nationalist. If you are already a committed economic nationalist, you will have an interest in spreading distrust of foreigners and markets to others in order to advance your program or be elected president of the United States. (Some apparent tribalists may “merely” be demagogues pandering to authentic tribalists.)

While I don’t think one has to embrace racism or tribalism to be an economic nationalist, an affinity exists between the two dispositions: “I can’t trust *those* people? Why would I want to trade with them?”

Moreover, the distrust of foreigners and markets could readily carry over to subgroups in the domestic population that *seem* foreign — that is, groups which don’t quite seem to embrace the “nation’s culture” with sufficient enthusiasm. Maybe some members of the suspect group have a primary language other than English, or practice a religion deemed weird, or don’t trust the police.

In other words, someone who starts with a bias against foreigners and the social cooperation embodied in what we call markets is a prime candidate for bigotry toward domestic “foreigners” too. And that person might well see kindred spirits in groups that exhibit more-pronounced versions of those biases, even when their members have a taste for violence. After all, danger lurks, so who could blame people for being tempted to defend their values directly?

Since social and economic change is inevitable — some of it introduced by The Other — those biases could also incline a person to lament the loss of a treasured past and harbor resentment against those who appear to be responsible for that loss. That person might, for example, see “the history and culture of our great country being ripped apart with the removal of our beautiful [Confederate] statues and monuments.” This could incline that person to be charitable toward groups trafficking in apocalyptic visions in which The Other threatens to destroy all that is held near and dear, “Western civilization” perhaps.

If Trump can believe that “the Chinese” are “raping” and “stealing” from us — by offering attractive consumer bargains — he could certainly believe that there are people among us who don’t really belong here and whose sheer presence jeopardizes our way of life. Maybe he’s not sure what he can do about this, but he might deep down be glad that someone is trying to do something.

I suggest that blood-and-soil-ism and economic nationalism are cut from the same cloth. Those who comprehend their destructiveness should teach others that the way to prosperity, social tranquility, and global peace is the original liberalism of Adam Smith, Frédéric Bastiat, Cobden, Bright, and their modern descendants.