



© Andrew Testa-Panos for the Open Society Foundations

## EU REFERENDUM, ÜBERMENSCH<sup>1</sup> ESCAPISM, AND ANGLO-AMERICAN-EUROPEAN SOLIDARITY

*Someday we ought to make a list of those great debates that serve as great distractions. An EU referendum offers no solution to the issues that plague the world, and would only make things worse. Every sensible and informed American would agree. The special relationship between our two countries would only sour on the EU referendum, unless America elects its own distraction.*



by Michael Kennedy

**T**he United States is the most powerful actor in the world, but even it is caught in webs of entanglement that make the kind of rhetoric underlying the EU referendum seem like schoolhouse bravado.

There is one agent in the world, however, who shows what such bravado can yield. The advocates of the EU referendum should find inspiration in Putin's approach to global relations. We don't know if the solidarity of Europe and North America can maintain sanctions on Russia sufficiently long for an alternative to Putin's east-European practice to emerge, but there is no doubt that Putinesque Russian positions in defining a new world order would be enhanced by a diminished European Union made by an EU referendum. Of course the advocates of the EU referendum don't care about that, but they should also recognize that the United Kingdom's special relationship with the USA will be a more immediate casualty. The European Union's significance for the USA is far greater, in economic, diplomatic, and military terms, than Britain's.

In the end, there is no upside for the USA in an EU referendum. When President Obama declared his support for the UK remaining in the EU, he was, simply, being empirical. But the EU referendum is not based on realistic thinking, or even ideology. It may have been David Cameron's calculation to increase his bargaining power in the EU's internal reform, but its attraction rests, in the end, on what fuels Donald Trump. He is America's EU referendum.

Donald Trump expresses the outrage many ordinary citizens across Europe and America feel at their authorities. He is a kind of Übermensch giving the frustrated license to declare those with whom they disagree to be stupid. The EU referendum and Trump are expressions of the same frustration: if only we could be independent of entanglements, we would be free to be rich and to be ourselves.

Those promoting Übermensch escapism use the refugee crisis in the EU, and migrants in the USA, to mobilize fear, and to distract citizens from inequalities among their number. In the USA, Bernie Sanders is mobilizing an honest and dignified alternative to fear, just as so many EU citizens exemplify a solidarity based on love for

humanity. There is an alternative.

David Cameron is no Trump, nor is he Putin. However, it is characteristic of those who pretend entanglements to be only restraints that their outrageous behavior can destroy them and others. Cameron risks his nation and his party, just as Trump risks the Republican Party with his excesses and Putin the whole of Russia.

Übermensch escapism is the danger about which we ought to worry. If nightmares come true, where Trump and the EU referendum define our futures, I may return to my old cigarette lighter to find a flicker of hope in the world. I would rather be working on a world of Anglo-American-European solidarity. That depends on an exit from the EU referendum.

<sup>1</sup> Concept of superhuman in Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy.

**Michael Kennedy** is Professor of Sociology and International and Public Affairs at Brown University.