

The roots of Tucker Carlson's rage

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Leftists are celebrating what they regard as a vintage, chateau-bottled “gotcha”. A recording has emerged of Tucker Carlson, the conservative Fox anchor, losing his temper when accused by a Dutch historian named Rutger Bregman of furthering the interests of the rich.

Carlson is a high-value target for liberals, with his plausible manner and his boy-next-door good looks. But what really excites the critics is the idea that they have exposed “The Big Lie Behind Right-wing Populism,” viz that the whole thing is a racket run by the super rich.

The footage comes from Bregman, Fox having understandably declined to air it. The interview begins cordially enough, with the right-wing presenter and the left-wing writer coming together to condemn the Davos elites. But it swerves when Bregman accuses Fox News of having the same agenda as the plutocrats and Carlson of being “a millionaire funded by billionaires”.

Carlson, who expects to be the one asking the questions, is at first almost too stunned to speak. When he does recover his voice, it is to rage at the young Dutch leftist: “Why don’t you go fuck yourself, you tiny brain. You’re a moron. I tried to give you a hearing but you were too fucking annoying.”

Most of us have lost our self-control at one time or another, and I’m sure Carlson regrets it now. But we shouldn’t make the mistake of thinking that, because Bregman came out of that encounter on top, he won the argument. For there was a flaw in Bregman’s logic, a flaw so widespread on the Left as to be almost ubiquitous. He conflates being pro-market with being pro-business.

It’s an understandable conflation, I suppose. The two principles often overlap, and the fact that they are supported by two different sets of people may not be immediately obvious from the outside.

Understanding often depends on a measure of sympathy. An atheist might be baffled at the idea that tiny differences in doctrine could drive religious people into schism. As a conservative, I never properly got my head around the tangle of Trotskyist groups that spent the Cold War fuming against each other over variations in their understanding of Karl Marx. By the same token, it can’t be easy for those on the center Left to understand quite how different libertarians are from big-government conservatives.

Still, if you’re going to go on the attack, you ought to do your homework. Bregman’s only substantive allegation against Carlson was that he had worked for the libertarian Cato Institute, which receives some money from the Koch brothers. His logic, if I understood him correctly, was that because the Kochs are rich, everything they fund must be oligarchic.

In fact, you won't find a more effective anti-corporatist outfit than Cato, which spends its time railing against monopolies, bail-outs, and crony capitalism. True to its principles, Cato campaigns across the board for libertarian causes, from drug legalization to an end to military adventurism.

The Kochs sympathize and choose to spend their money on promoting their ideas rather than on themselves — just as, say, George Soros does on the other side. And they do so as libertarians, not as industrialists. The Marxist idea that people think mainly in terms of class interests is garbage. No one, in the real world, says to himself, "I am a factory owner, and will therefore promote the interests of other factory owners."

Had Bregman wanted to mount a more serious attack on Carlson, he might have asked what made him abandon his Catonian worldview for the more populist one that now infuses his shows. Having been a Ron Paul libertarian, Carlson is now much more critical of immigration and laissez faire economics. For what it's worth, I think the presenter has honestly changed his mind. He is not, after all, one of those conservatives who suddenly shifted his views to accommodate Trumpism and is one of relatively few Fox presenters prepared to criticize the president. But a case could at least be made that Fox has taken a different line since 2016.

That, however, would have required some engagement with how the other side thinks. Few commentators are prepared to make that effort, preferring instead to press their opponents into an undifferentiated mass of sociopaths or paid shills. It is amazing how common this narcissism is. "I disagree with Person A, and also disagree with Person B, therefore A and B are interchangeable."

By all means attack free-marketeers, my lefty friends. But at least try to do so on the basis of what they are actually saying. The shout of "billionaires" isn't an argument. It's a playground shriek.