



Tucker Carlson's Unpatriotic Nationalism

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A strange spectacle has been unfolding among some factions of the American right in recent years: The more Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán suspends liberal democracy and turns autocratic, the more they admire him. But Fox News's top-rated host, Tucker Carlson, took matters to a whole new level earlier this month when he declared that he found it "embarrassing to be an American" during a trip to Hungary.

In 2008 when Michelle Obama, stumping for her husband's bid to become the Democratic presidential nominee, noted that she was, "for the first time in my adult life . . . really proud of my country," many conservatives went berserk. Rush Limbaugh called her comment "unhinged." The Tennessee Republican Party took out ads featuring Michelle's remark interspersed with interviews with Tennesseans explaining all the ways they're proud of their country.

Yet outside of Never Trump circles, no similar outrage ensued among conservatives over Carlson's remark. But it is not their hypocrisy that is worrying but that they seem to have given up on America itself.

Carlson is down on America because, unlike Orbán's Hungary, it has allegedly lost its will to defend its cultural, linguistic, and religious traditions against the forces of mass immigration and woke liberalism and is therefore in danger of losing its national identity. But liberal democracy is the sine qua non of American identity and, indeed, of the post-Enlightenment West. How about defending that?

The term "liberalism" has a complicated history and is used in contradictory ways. In one sense of the word, "liberalism" refers to a regime of limited government that accepts the sovereignty of the majority, but not its right to rule in an unconstrained fashion. In that sense of the word, as Marc Plattner wrote in an excellent 2019 essay, "various protections of the rights of individuals and minorities constrain majority rule, and these protections are grounded in a constitution and the rule of law." That understanding of liberalism goes by various names, but for the purposes of this essay let's call it "Enlightenment liberalism." In the United States, another familiar sense of

“liberalism” is progressive policies—robust welfare or “social safety net” provisions, income redistribution, multiculturalism, social justice—favored by the political left.

If Orbán were using Enlightenment liberalism to fight the excesses of progressive liberalism, it would be one thing. However, he deliberately conflates the two, as Plattner notes. And in his opposition to progressive liberalism, he goes on to subvert Enlightenment liberalism and its protections for individual rights and limits on his own power.

Orbán first came to power in 1998 embracing Enlightenment liberalism. As a young man, he studied at Oxford University, ironically on a scholarship provided by an outfit funded by billionaire George Soros whose Budapest-based Central European University Orbán subsequently shut down. Yet, notes Johns Hopkins SAIS’s Charles Gati, during his first term Orbán was a strong proponent of European integration, a staunch anti-Communist, a defender of free enterprise, and an atheist to boot—in other words like a liberal democrat. But everything changed after his humiliating 2002 defeat, which he never accepted.

During his eight years in the political wilderness, Orbán crafted a narrative that was 180 degrees opposed to his original thinking. Hungary joined the European Union in 2004 when he was out of office, so he had no skin in that move. He used the global financial crisis four years later to stoke anger among Hungarians against the EU and America for coddling and bailing out big banks that were inflicting so much suffering on his country. This critique was perfectly calibrated to feed into Hungary’s longstanding grievances against Western powers that after World War I took away two-thirds of Hungarian territory and divvied it up among newly minted countries in the Treaty of Trianon, consigning tens of millions of ethnic Hungarians to live in neighboring Romania and Ukraine where they were not the dominant ethnic group.

Orbán’s narrative of persecution catapulted him back into office in 2010 where he has managed to remain by playing up his image as the David sticking up for Hungarian national identity and sovereignty against the Goliath Western powers hellbent on crushing both. To be sure, EU bureaucrats have their share of technocratic conceit like banning exports of bananas that have “malformation or abnormal curvature.” But there is a difference between the EU’s admittedly arbitrary administrative edicts and its basic requirement that member states remain liberal democracies. In exchange, citizens of member countries get to work and trade with few restrictions in the broader Schengen area. And in Hungary’s case, get subsidies worth 6 percent of its GDP, \$30 billion just for infrastructure building.

But Orbán has not lived up to his end of the bargain.

During his eleven uninterrupted years in office, he has dismantled the institutions of Hungary’s liberal democracy and has tilted the playing field decisively to lock Fidesz, his political party, in power. As soon as he assumed office in 2010 he used his large parliamentary majority to overhaul the Hungarian Constitution to make it impossible for civil groups to challenge the constitutionality of laws. He has used this power to turn the parliament into a “law factory”

where the “production lines . . . operate at unbelievable speed,” notes János Kornai, Hungary’s preeminent economist. Between 2010 and 2014, 88 bills were passed within a week of being introduced in parliament, 13 of them in less than a day.

He also reduced the retirement age for judges resulting in the premature departure of a good chunk of them, including 20 percent of the country’s supreme court, allowing Orbán to appoint loyalists. He also packed the constitutional court—charged with judicial review of laws passed by parliament—expanding the number of justices from 11 to 15. A subsequent constitutional amendment outlawed any speech violating “the dignity of the Hungarian nation or of any national, ethnic, racial or religious community.” This law along with other measures allowed Orbán to shut down NGOs and other outfits critical of his increasingly authoritarian rule. To boot, 90 percent of the press is now in the hands of Orbán loyalists who depend upon his government’s patronage for their survival.

But several of Orbán’s most serious changes have been to Hungary’s electoral system—all calculated to squeeze every ounce of advantage for himself. He kicked off his litany of “reforms” with the old gerrymandering trick, redrawing voting districts to ensure Fidesz dominance. He ended Hungary’s runoff system and replaced it with first-past-the-post elections. Most crucially, he has greatly expanded his constituency by offering dual citizenship to ethnic Hungarians in Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine so that they could vote in Hungary’s elections. Meanwhile, he has erected barbed-wire fences to keep Muslim asylum seekers out of the country. Orbán proudly admits that Hungary is now an “illiberal democracy” although in reality it is not even a democracy. Rather, it is a majoritarian stamp on strongman rule.

There’s much more to say about Orbán’s record—interested readers might want to RSVP for this Mercatus/AEI Zoom panel discussion I’m hosting tomorrow at 11 a.m. EDT, featuring panelists from Hungary speaking about life under Orbán—but for now it’s enough to note that nearly every independent international outfit that tracks political and economic freedom, whether the center-left Freedom House or the libertarian Cato Institute, has downgraded Hungary. Yet if the EU or domestic groups raise the alarm about Orbán’s autocratic behavior, he brands them as woke, progressive liberals whose advocacy of gay and immigrant rights is an existential threat to Hungary’s socially conservative Christian identity.

Continental Europe with its history of monarchies and imperial rule lacks a strong tradition of Enlightenment liberalism. But America has such a tradition and conservatives have been among its guardians. As Hayek famously noted, “what in Europe was called ‘liberalism’ was here the common tradition on which the American polity had been built: thus the defender of the American tradition was a liberal in the European sense.”

Inevitably, then, to become a conservative in the European sense means abandoning American traditions. But why are American conservatives turning their backs on what makes America America?

One major reason: Because they feel that playing according to liberal democracy's rules is a loser's game in the culture war. The *American Conservative's* Rod Dreher, who has been camped at an Orbán-funded think tank in Budapest since the spring and was responsible for facilitating Carlson's jaunt, admits as much. "The unhappy truth is that liberalism as we Americans have known it is probably dead," he wrote in a piece comparing Carlson's Hungary trip to President Richard Nixon's trip to China, except that Nixon was an advocate of liberal democracy to an authoritarian country and Carlson is an apostle of authoritarianism to America. "Our future is almost certainly going to be left-illiberal or right-illiberal."

But the fact is that whatever the excesses of left-liberalism (and they certainly exist), to the extent that it is fighting for human rights and social justice, it is trying to atone for America's past lapses from its own liberalism while extending its promise.

The conservative hue and cry over Michelle Obama's 2008 remark forced her to reiterate her pride in America. But don't expect any similar clarification from Carlson. Patriotism—genuine affection for America's core liberal principles—is simply an impediment to his neo-nationalist quest.