

The Irish Echo

A new kind of conservative leader

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Ross Douthat is confused. Hopelessly so. Well, that's the charitable explanation.

Most specifically, I'm referring to his New York Times column this past weekend in which he fudges the issue of how Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán defines himself and what he actually is.

It's not that he's come to defend Orbán or to critique him, and that's the problem.

Back in 2016, the conservative Douthat suggested in the run-up to the RNC that the GOP's top leaders find some way of removing Trump from the frame, then take the hit for that election cycle and move on.

Likewise, the National Review devoted an entire issue early in 2016 to attacking Trump and generally making the case for his unsuitability for high office. Alas, the TV reality star sunk his fangs deep into the neck of the Republican base, and the conservative movement is stuck with him, even though he was once utterly beyond the pale for its intellectuals on a number of levels, not least on issues of basic decency.

Now conservatives, except for the increasingly marginalized never-Trumpers, must tiptoe around all of that. So they write columns that contain lines like these from Douthat: "On the one hand, there's the fear that Trumpian populism will someday gain enough power to make its critics fear for their livelihoods. On the other, there's the fear that progressivism already exerts this power in the United States..."

So, whatever Trump is, the Democrats (aka "the left"), progressives and liberals must always be worse. This is despite Charlottesville in 2017, the Trumpian insurrection of Jan. 6, 2021, the kidnapping plot directed at the governor of Michigan (and the subsequent failure of Trump to show a shred of solidarity with and sympathy for an elected official who was the target of terrorism) and the big lie of a stolen election, which nobody with half a brain believes and is entirely designed to undermine the legitimacy of free institutions in the interests of authoritarian populism.

The context of the above comment was his citing a tweet by principled never-Trumper David Frum: “I visited Hungary in 2016. Again & again, I witnessed a gesture I thought had vanished from Europe forever: people turning their heads to check who was listening before they lent forward to whisper what they had to say. They feared for their jobs, not their lives — but still ...”

The broader backdrop to *Douthat’s column* of Aug. 7, “Why Hungary Inspires So Much Fear and Fascination,” was the visit of Fox News’ Carlson Tucker to that country, and headlines like CNN’s “Why Trump conservatives are embracing Hungary’s autocracy.”

Douthat doesn’t allow for the fact that fearing for your job and livelihood could be a different proposition in Hungary than in the U.S. But most of all, he seems to think it’s an open question as to whether the West and the EU, of which Hungary is part, should be concerned about someone like Orbán. Again, he couldn’t really be as bad as those dreadful Democrats, could he?

The columnist cites out a poll for the right-libertarian Cato Institute that would suggest that 62 percent of Americans fear expressing an opinion in the current political climate. So, having played their own part in labeling Trump as beyond the pale, conservative intellectuals now feel the pain of those who might be embarrassed about expressing support for him.

“[J]ust by having everyday conversations in professional-class America,” Douthat writes, “I’ve experienced more versions of the speak-quietly move — or its ‘don’t share this email’ equivalent — in the last few years than I have in my entire prior adult life.

“This fear is different from the fear that Frum discerned in Hungary, in the sense that nobody in the United States is afraid of criticizing the government. The censorious trend in America is more organic, encouraged by complex developments in the upper reaches of meritocratic life, and imposed by private corporations and the ideological minders they increasingly employ. If this is left-McCarthyism it lacks a Joe McCarthy: If you pushed your way into the inner sanctum of the Inner Party of progressivism, you would find not a cackling Kamala Harris, but an empty room.”

(Actually, the Red Scare predated McCarthy and Douthat’s account leaves out the fact that people went to jail on trumped-up charges, under the Smith Act, and the Hollywood Ten served prison sentences for contempt because they could see no other honorable way out.)

“For anyone on the wrong side of the new rules of thought and speech, though,” the columnist continued, “the absence of a McCarthy figure is cold comfort.”

The key word here is “new.” For as a conservative and faithful convert to Catholicism, Douthat would not generally have a problem with the old rules of thought and speech being imposed. Back in 2005, the editor of the Jesuit weekly *America* was forced out, allegedly by the Vatican, for being too liberal. Conservatives didn’t rush to his defense, you can be sure. Doesn’t this sort of shake-up happen in every sector of society?

At the heart of the matter here is Douthat's failure to see that Orbán is not business as usual. A leader who says "The nation cannot be in opposition," according to the German-born Princeton professor of politics *Jan-Werner Müller*, is not a constitutional politician. Orbán claims to embrace "illiberal democracy," but Müller suggests illiberal democracy is still constitutional democracy, while the Hungarian leader is an authoritarian populist, which is something quite different. Populism at best promotes a "degraded" form of democracy and is in essence fascism lite.

Young people revolted in the 1960s in Northern Ireland, West Germany, Italy, France and elsewhere against repressive laws, discrimination based on class and ethnic background, lack of economic opportunity, sclerotic one-party rule and the sometimes heavy hand of authority – against, in other words, illiberal democracy. In France, electronic media was pro-government; in the U.S., it was privately owned, but blandly uncritical of the status quo. But none of these regimes advanced a populist authoritarian ideology.

The treatment of Blacks in northern U.S. states – in terms of redlining, and endemic discrimination and exclusion generally -- fit into the illiberal democratic model, an extreme version of it perhaps, whereas the Jim Crow South was more in the authoritarian populist camp. (Not surprisingly, Gov. George Wallace gets mentioned by Müller and others a lot these days, particularly as a model for Trump.)

Two interesting columns put the Carlson in Hungary moment in historical context. *Jamelle Bouie* in the Times recalled that National Review founder William F. Buckley Jr. found something to like in a range of things most Americans today find abominable, such as Apartheid in South Africa and General Franco's rule in Spain. *Anne Applebaum* in the Atlantic discussed George Bernard Shaw's trip to Soviet Union, in which he found nothing objectionable about Stalin.

However, it should be said that Shaw didn't want the hammer & sickled version of the red flag flying over the Houses of Parliament, while Buckley was careful to couch his praise of unpalatable regimes with the usual qualifications.

The Carlson visit, though, has happened at an odd moment in American politics. We have a situation where a mainstream scholar of international politics at Tufts University, Daniel Dresner, could compare the GOP to Hezbollah in that it's a "political party that also has armed wing to coerce other political actors through violence." He was quoted in a recent *Doyle McManus* column in the Los Angeles Times entitled "Why Republicans are suddenly reluctant to condemn political violence."

Said McManus, "Rep. Andrew S. Clyde of Georgia has likened the forced entrance of the Capitol to 'a normal tourist visit.' Arizona Rep. Paul Gosar complained last month that the FBI was 'harassing peaceful patriots' by investigating the events. Twenty-one House Republicans voted against awarding a medal to the Capitol Police for attempting to defend the building; several said they objected to calling the riot an 'insurrection.'

“Last week, Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin defended the protesters too. ‘The vast majority of the crowd, they were in a jovial mood,’ he said. ‘They weren’t violent.

“And retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, who served briefly as Trump’s national security adviser, recently told an audience that a Myanmar-like coup ‘should happen here.’ He later denied having said that, but it was captured on videotape.

“These are not good signs for the Republican Party,” McManus concluded.

And it’s hardly a good sign that some would prefer not to see them at all and instead are focused on something even more terrifying than a “cackling Kamala Harris” -- an empty room.