

THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM: INTERLUDE ON THE TWILIGHT OF CONSERVATIVE ELITE PUNDITS

The Origins of Totalitarianism: Interlude On the
Twilight of Conservative Elites

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The Origins of Totalitarianism: Interlude
Defining Elites

After defining the term elites (see previous
post), Arendt says that the elites did not
actively oppose the rise of fascism in Germany

and Austria, and in some respects were supportive. One problem I have (and I have several) is the lack of a direct explanation for the failure of the elites to confront the rise of fascism. The text raises one possibility. I suspect that immediately after WWI, most of the elites were sympathetic to the ideas of the Marxist left, and that many were actively interested. Then they saw that the Social Democrats directed the right-wing violence that killed and imprisoned the revolutionaries. That was enough to keep the fellow-travelers and the sympathizers away from left activism. They retreated to their writing rooms and their ateliers, and left the space of massive change to the right wing. They wanted "to see the ruin of this whole world of fake security, fake culture, and fake life." (P. 328) The elites weren't going to do anything about it, they just pointed and laughed as the mob solidified into the fascist movement.

Among the sins of these elites was their refusal to attack crackpot ideas.

To this aversion of the intellectual elite for official historiography, to its conviction that history, which was a forgery anyway, might as well be the playground of crackpots, must be added the terrible, demoralizing fascination in the possibility that gigantic lies and monstrous falsehoods can eventually be established as unquestioned facts, that man may be free to change his own past at will, and that the difference between truth and falsehood may cease to be objective and become a mere matter of power and cleverness, of pressure and infinite repetition. P. 333

That's uncomfortably close to Karl Rove's "we create new reality".

At the same time the elites were disengaging from the political world, they were pursuing their own esoteric ideas, ideas which further

distanced them from the mob. This ended badly for the intellectual elites. Some were driven out, some fled, and the rest found a way to accommodate themselves to the fascist states.

As I wrote in my previous post, the US has plenty of elites who are conservative, but if we limit ourselves to writers and philosophers, there has never been a serious conservative intellectual class in this country. There have been a few intellectual conservatives, although none spring to mind who would pass Hofstadter's test, including specifically William Buckley. If you disagree, perhaps you could read down Richard Posner's list of 600 or so public intellectuals and identify all the US people listed, living or dead. It is astonishing to think that the likes of Ann Coulter and Erik Erikson are included on Posner's list. And I confess I've never understood why bookstores shelve Ayn Rand among the philosophy books. There is certainly a class of highly conservative economists, but to me they lack any pretense of being intellectuals in Hofstadter's sense. Further, they do not self-criticize, they do not change their minds in the face of contrary evidence. This means they are ideologues, not intellectuals.

Using my definition from the previous post, Buckley and a number of writers and pundits and economists would certainly qualify as a member of the conservative elite. Let's focus on the pundits. Does anyone take them seriously? When was the last time any serious thinker took up a political issue raised by David Brooks in his NYT column, or the conventional nonsense he spouts on PBS? Just take a look, if you can, at this absurd column. It begins with a paean to the US system of capitalism and social welfare, and, of course, our crony capitalism: "nurturing disruptive dynamos like Bell Labs, Walmart, Whole Foods, Google and Apple". Then this:

It's amazing that a large part of the millennial generation has rejected this consensus. In supporting Bernie Sanders

they are not just supporting a guy who is mad at Wall Street. They are supporting a guy who fundamentally wants to reshape the American economic system, and thus reshape American culture and values. As he told ABC's George Stephanopoulos, he wants to make us more like northern Europe.

Why those Millennials are just downright unreasonable in questioning a system that promises that their lives will be much worse than their parents. They should all start businesses and get rich, just like Brooks did, and just like their parents did, or something. Brooks says nothing about the lived reality of Millennials. He refuses to face the fact that his favored Republican policies, tax-cutting, deregulating, war-mongering, and refusal to govern, have saddled them with massive personal debts and a stagnating economy that shipped all the decent jobs out to other countries. In his latest, Brooks has clearly lost it. It's an explainer of this op-ed in the New York Times from two years ago offering three views of marriage. And here I thought glorifying marriage was Ross Douthat's job description.

Douthat is a deeply silly man, mooning on about conservative values and governance in the face of the actual behavior of the Republicans in government. Here he explains how similar Donald Trump and Pope Francis are. Apparently if you want to change something Douthat likes, you are either a vulgar materialist or an intellectual ascetic. I'm waiting for Douthat to explain how Donald Trump has a classy marriage this time, and is therefore fit to be President.

The bizarre Thomas Friedman is shocked that Bernie Sanders said that the business model of Wall Street is fraud, which became obvious after those scumballs wrecked the economy and destroyed our retirement plans. Since the downturn also cost his wife's family a staggeringly large amount of wealth, he might have wondered how that happened.

Not one conservative pundit has called out the crackpot stupidity of national politicians on climate denial, denial of evolution, tearing down the separation of church and state, denial of pretty much any fact or lesson from science, or their truly insane theory of government, that if you ruin it things will be great. Instead, they embrace every stupid idea, or simply keep quiet. They cannot tell fact from chain emails. Why do these conservative pundits, and by extension the rest of the conservative elites, think this will turn out better for them in the long run than it did for the German elites of the 1920s?