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Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right

by Jane Mayer. 2016. New York: DoubleDay.

Book Review by Rubén Martínez

The wealthy have always had disproportionate political influence in society, the United States of America included. In *Dark Money*, Jane Mayer presents a compelling account of how wealthy ultraconservative business leaders organized themselves over the past several decades to impose their political ideologies of anarchism on the rest of the nation. Led by Charles and David Koch in recent years, members of the group have joined politicians with similar political beliefs to carry out their policy agenda, which, prominent conservative William F. Buckley Jr. once called "Anarcho-Totalitarianism." These billionaires, however, prefer the label "libertarians" to that of "anarchists," believing that the latter term is too often associated with "terrorists." Still, they are anarchists nonetheless and are considered the radical right-wing faction of the Republican Party.

The book consists of an introduction and 14 chapters organized into three parts, each part focusing on a specific period defined according to the activities of the anarchist leaders. The Introduction identifies the key players, so to speak, and sets the context. Part One focuses on the period from 1970 to 2008, when philanthropy was co-opted as a key participant in the war of political ideas and the free-market political machine, the Kochtopus, was assembled. Part Two focuses on the period from 2009 to 2010, when the Kochtopus engaged covertly in electoral and policy politics, including paving the road to Citizens United, the Supreme

Court decision that unleashed big money in electoral campaigns. Part Three focuses on the period from 2011 to 2014, after the Kochtopus had substantially influenced the outcome of the mid-term elections through campaign donations and the establishment of the Tea Party which resulted in a Republican-dominated congress. At a general level, Mayer's book provides a detailed account of how wealthy libertarians have reshaped contemporary American politics and American society.

The nation's turn toward anarcho-totalitarianism, which is based on radical anti-government and anti-democratic principles intended to ensure that capital has free rein in the economy, is rooted in the anti-socialist ideas of the first part of the 20th century. The intellectual heroes of anarcho-totalitarianism are the Austrian economists, Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, and Murray Rothbard, and American thinkers, Milton Friedman, Ayn Rand, Robert Nozick, Robert LeFevre, and several others. Barry Goldwater was the first libertarian to rise as a major candidate seeking the U.S. presidency, but it was Ronald Reagan who welcomed the anarchists to the White House, granting the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Friedman. A few years later, George H. W. Bush followed by granting it to Hayek.

Much of the volume focuses on the Koch brothers, given their key role in organizing the Kochtopus. She traces their father's (Fred Koch's) path to early fortune by contracting with Stalin and Hitler to design and

construct oil refineries. Exclusion efforts by the oil industry exposed him to “corporate cronyism” and a “crooked [law] clerk,” and these experiences led him to view collaboration between big business and government as a corrupt system. Fred Koch, a stern and rigid man, indoctrinated his four sons with anti-government ideas. Years later, he was among the founders of the John Birch Society, an ultraconservative, extremist organization that was virulently anti-communist, racist, and anti-government, and which still exists today. Of importance is the emphasis placed by the Society on stealth and subterfuge, today the “trademark” approach of the Kochtopus.

It is not surprising then that the sons of Fred Koch, namely Charles and David, would reflect his political influence. Indeed, in the early 1960s Charles was affiliated with the Freedom School near Larkspur, Colorado. Founded by Robert LeFevre, a radical libertarian who claimed supernatural powers, the Freedom School, which later became the unaccredited Rampart College, sought to produce the next generation of libertarian intellectuals. It offered a curriculum on “freedom and free enterprise” and presented the robber barons as heroes. By 1966, Charles was a major funder, an executive, and trustee, and through him the School maintained ties to the John Birch Society.

Perhaps the most important influence on the Koch brothers and their political activities has been a confidential memorandum submitted to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce by Lewis F. Powell Jr. in 1971, before he was appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court in 1972. Titled “Attack on American Free Enterprise System,” the memo presents the argument that a minority of college and university liberal faculty members and students, among others in society, were undermining the system of free enterprise. Supporters of free enterprise, Powell argued, must organize themselves to counter the influence of left-wing and liberal faculty members and students. This could be done by establishing media outlets, think tanks, and ties to like-minded faculty. The threat to the enterprise system, Powell argued, is also an attack on individual freedom. In short, based on libertarian ideas, the memo presents more than 20 pages of recommendations on how to counter the ideology of the critics of free enterprise. Overall, Powell argued for an ideological war and provided the strategy by which to win it.

The Koch brothers, Mayer argues, set about to implement the ideas presented by Powell, which awakened many other conservative millionaires and moved them to action. Richard Mellon Scaife, for example, a supporter of the American Enterprise Institute, supported the founding of the Heritage Foundation, an ultraconservative think tank. Joseph Coors was also stirred by the memo and sought to bar left-wing speakers, faculty and students from the University of Colorado. He also provided funding to the forerunner of the Heritage Foundation.

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Once these and other wealthy ultraconservatives became politically active, their efforts began to coalesce, especially as the Koch brothers sought to strengthen and expand their political network among those willing to use their wealth and resources to promote an anarchist agenda, one framed by the very wealthy and which has been imposed on American citizens.

What then is the aim of the Kochtopus and how does it carry out its work? According to Mayer, it is to promote the political views of conservative billionaires who seek to minimize the influence of government in the economy so that they can pursue their commercial interests. They are opposed to social programs, corporate taxes, labor unions, and government regulation. Operating in stealth mode, the Kochtopus has greatly impacted elections to state and national political offices. It has also gained a significant beachhead into institutions of higher education, where it promotes the indoctrination of students by funding selected research centers, academic programs, and faculty members. At the same time it has sought to undermine Mayer’s work by accusing her of plagiarism in her article titled “Covert Operations,” published in 2010 by *The New Yorker*, in which she exposed the political activities of the Koch brothers. If only for that reason her book should be of interest, much like a banned book draws one’s interest. But for those individuals interested in the members of America’s plutocracy and how they carry out their anarchist political agenda, the book is a must read. 