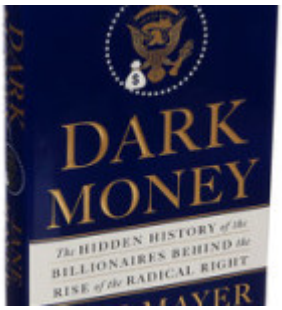
It’s Darker Than You Think



You’ve got to be taught
From year to year,
It’s got to be drummed
In your dear little ear
You’ve got to be carefully taught.
– Rogers/Hammerstein

It’s not dark yet, but it’s getting there. – Bob Dylan

I recently ordered the book pictured above, a in-depth investigation of how the radical right has gained power over the past 30 years. Alongside the essential trilogy by Rick Perlstein (reviewed favorably by an obscure blogger here), Jane Mayer’s *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right* fill in the blanks on one of the pressing questions of our time:

How in sulphuric hell did an utterly discredited economic and social philosophy come to have such a dedicated cadre of fanatical devotees, even though it works directly against the interests of many of its more fanatical followers?

The hell happened?

Set aside the flimsy tissue of melodramatic horseshit that is the scribbling of Ayn Rand. For better or worse (better), not many impressionable youngsters are going to slog through her horrible writing and plotting to have their brains turned to mush and their hearts to stone. And for better or worse (worse), a certain type of bookish youth is always on the

lookout for a book that sets them apart as some kind of forward-thinking intellectual.<fn>Someone who looks like me resembles that remark.</fn> And if Rand is the *prop du jour*, bad tidings inevitably ensue.

> *There are two novels that can change a bookish fourteen-year old's life:* ***The Lord of the Rings*** *and* ***Atlas Shrugged****. One is a childish fantasy that often engenders a lifelong obsession with its unbelievable heroes, leading to an emotionally stunted, socially crippled adulthood, unable to deal with the real world. The other, of course, involves orcs. — John Rogers<fn>fwiw, Rogers was also the creator/showrunner of the under-appreciated teevee show Leverage, which is well worth your binge-investment.</fn>*

But Rand alone is not enough to explain the spread of the "greed is good" mantra that is driving policy debates over things like health care, taxation, income inequality, campaign finance, &c. Too many people who wouldn't know Salma Hayek from Friedrich Hayek are parroting the Randian gospel. An Irish pal of mine told me about a great Old Country turn of phrase re: child rearing: "Well, she didn't pick that up off the floor."

Nope, they've got to be carefully taught. And that's where *Dark Money* comes in. Perlstein did a great job of describing who the behind-the-scenes architects of the radical right were, and what they were trying to achieve politically. Mayer digs into the funding and the strategies, which boil down to a long-term effort to re-package ideas from the lunatic fringe and move them into the realm of 'of-course-that's-true' assumptions.

Lunatic fringe? A tad over the top, you say? Nope. Any resemblance between the current radical right movement and the John Birch Society is strictly intentional.

The Koch Brothers are front and center here, but it's not just

those toffs ponying up millions of dollars to change the way America thinks. They have a lot of filthy rich friends, too. But the Kochs are the prime movers, and they have for at least 30 years pursued a strategy of re-branding their policy preferences as something benevolent and compassionate, despite the fact that they are at root a grab bag of fuck-the-poor depravity.

Over the years, the Kochtopus<fn>I wish I'd thought of that one.</fn> has funneled hundreds of millions of dollars into not just political campaigns, but into issue advocacy, junk research institutes, think tanks, and, crucially, buying what they can of the higher education infrastructure. Here in my little hometown, the Kochs have funneled millions into buying off the Economics Department and large parts of the business and law schools. Their money comes, not with strings, but with ropes attached. Any deviation from the neo-Libertarian doctrine is punished with cessation of funding. You can be sure that faculty hires are carefully assessed to ensure that no offense is given to these "generous" benefactors. It is hardly necessary for Charles Koch to denounce a specific faculty or administration candidate; any shrewd dean or financial officer understands all too well how their bread gets buttered and the consequences of biting that hand.<fn>A mixed metaphor. Mea culpa.</fn> And this desperation of universities to secure outside funding is a direct result of conservative efforts to defund education, thus making it reliant on the highest bidder. It's a clever little chicken and egg game they play.



Nice university you got there; be a real shame if something happened to it.

Here at FSU, the introductory economics course now teaches that "…Keynes was bad, the free market was better, that sweatshop labor wasn't so bad, and that the hands off regulations in China were better than those in the U.S."<fn>p. 365</fn> Never mind that the ascendancy of free-market fanaticism that took root under Reagan – and that has rampaged to this day – has been proved a failure in almost every way. (See for example, the financial health of Kansas, Louisiana, Wyoming, and North Carolina under extremist governors and legislatures.) The dogma that Keynes "failed" is an article of faith that is being taught as fact to college freshmen, despite the fact that most serious economists believe the opposite to be true.

Some of these tender minds embrace the ideas. Here at last, a way to learn the greed-is-good ethos without slogging through interminable monologues about railroads and steel production that Rand uses the way Barbara Cartland panders heaving breasts and glory-of-his-manhood fantasies. Nope, this is served up in tasty morsels under such names as Well-Being Studies and Economic Liberty. Who could be against well-being? Stupid liberals, that's who!

Some of these tender minds progress to graduate programs, where they can receive generous financial aid…so long as they understand the bread-buttering equation. And then, the school will teach you how to write op-ed pieces extolling the virtues of ~~greed~~ well-being and liberty, which they will help you place in the local fishwrapper, thereby building your resume as an intellectual on a par with Jonah Goldberg and George Will. But only if you got your mind right.



You got your mind right, Luke?

Ah hell, they don't need the Captain to beat 'em with a stick. Being a water-carrier for the .01% can be a pretty lucrative gig. And I truly believe these propagandists to be sincere in their arguments.

> *It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it. – Upton Sinclair*

The most effective chains are the ones we choose to wear.

I wish I could echo the Captain and say that we've witnessed a

failure to communicate. But the assembly line has been extremely effective in setting the terms of debate. The puzzle of why Americans vote against their own interests so often isn't much of a challenge: we've been carefully taught, over the years, to believe that lowering taxes on the wealthy benefits the common wealth (it doesn't); we've been taught that environmental regulation is unnecessary, that businesses will preserve the environment out of the goodness of their hearts (they won't); we've learned that the minimum wage and labor solidarity destroy ambition and make people into slaves (ffs). And so on.

Worst: we've been taught that if we are not wealthy yet, we could be if only we work hard and bootstrap ourselves into prosperity. The stench of bullshit becomes overwhelming.

Bernie Sanders has been instrumental in bringing this con into focus. The game is indeed rigged, and good on him (and the Occupy Movement) for generating broader awareness of this fundamental truth. Why we have to re-learn this obvious lesson remains a puzzlement. Sinclair nailed this con as early as 1917.

> *"…the priests of all these cults, the singers, shouters, prayers and exhorters of Bootstrap-lifting have as their distinguishing characteristic that they do very little lifting at their own bootstraps, and less at any other man's. Now and then you may see one bend and give a delicate tug, of a purely symbolical character: as when the Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Bootstrap-lifters comes once a year to wash the feet of the poor; or when the Sunday-school Superintendent of the Baptist Bootstrap-lifters shakes the hand of one of his Colorado mine-slaves. But for the most part the priests and preachers of Bootstrap-lifting walk haughtily erect, many of them being so swollen with prosperity that they could not reach their bootstraps if they wanted to. Their role in life is to exhort other men to more vigorous efforts at self-elevation, that the agents of the Wholesale Pickpockets'*

> *Association may ply their immemorial role with less chance of interference.” — The Profits of Religion: An Essay in Economic Interpretation*

In Sinclair’s day, bootstrapping was touted by peddlers of faith-based redemption; even if you did not rise, you were earning god’s blessing. These days, celestial faith is boiled down to a simpler equation: win at all costs, because if you are poor, it’s proof that you have failed to earn god’s favor. The poor deserve their lot. Losers.



A true expression of Libertarian belief would state clearly that it’s every man for himself, maybe a woman here and there, and that if you are dog food it’s because you deserve it. That would be a pretty tough sell, especially in a country where most people are struggling to survive. Better to wrap it up in a pleasing fairy tale, something that rubes and suckers will eat with a spoon. If you need to add a dollop of race hatred and sexism, well, whatevs, broken eggs and omelets, amirite?

Bottom line<fn>Since that’s all the really matters any more, apparently.</fn>: Read this book. I bought it out of a sense of obligation. I expected it to be a castor oil read, something that would go down rough but would be good for me in the end. In fact, *Dark Money* is a straight-up page turner. Mayer’s writes clearly and compellingly, and her research is thorough and even-handed. As the pro critics love to say…destined to be a classic.

Welcome, Bitter South!



Come on in, Bitter Southerners. Welcome to the Immune to Boredom vineyard, where The Writer toils day and night to amuse and delight you.

As if.

If you clicked over from the big Mardi Gras opus, please hang around a spell, maybe click the Follow button, maybe check out some of the existing posts that have amused and delighted tens and dozens of your fellow human persons over the past year or so.

Short story: I am an Unreliable Narrator seeking connection in a fragmented world.

Longer story: I love music, books, movies, food, drink, people, stories, culture of all kind (lo, mid, and high brows are all dandy). The blog is my outlet for smart-assery and deep-ish thinking. I am militant about the Oxford comma. I play guitar, try to be a decent parent/spouse/neighbor. I think that covers it.

I hope you'll stick around, or come back and visit from time to time. Door is always open.

As for the epic Mardi Gras article, some honorifical hyperbole and harumphage is in order:

- Mad huge thanks to the Bitter Southerner team for the opportunity to share a story and for the incredible

art direction and execution.

- Ryan Hodgson-Rigsbee knows how to point and shoot a camera box. Seriously, the guy has the eye for New Orleans. I'm honored to see my words next to his images.
- Tip of the band hat to Ben and the Panorama team for support and patience. Not many people make it upstairs at The Spotted Cat; the honor is mine. People: go buy everything they have to offer. You have my personal guarantee.
- Mazel tov to the Krewe du Jieux heroes who took me in even as they had no idea what I might say about them. I hope they don't regret their kindness.
- My tight bud and wingman Thelonious Morganfield gave me guidance, inspiration, and essential designated driving support as we conducted "research". I am most fortunate in my choice of friends.
- Mi familia. Words fail. I am the luckiest boy ever.

Thanks for checking in. And Happy Mardi Gras.

Jock-a-mo feena hey



Photo by Ryan Hodgson-Rigsbee. This cat knows how to captcha New Orleans.

Apologies for the radio silence, my multitudes. The Writer has been OCD-level consumed with an epic exploration of New

Orleans/Mardi Gras/Musical Gumbo since September. It was supposed to be a nice, little article about one of my favorite NOLA bands, The Panorama Jazz Band. In the end….well, let's just say that it took on a momentum of its own and became something a wee bit more….involved. Story gone got hold my chicken wire, put the good foot pumping, let the voodoo loose with the boozy whoop and a fatmouth beer.

Indeed, this ranks as "a very serious, thoughtful, argument that has *never been made* in such detail or with such care."<fn>Bonus points to anyone who catches the reference. No Googling!</fn> I'm busting buttons here.

Anyway, it's almost done, and it should appear on your nearest Internet device at The Bitter Southerner this coming Tuesday, Mardi Gras Day.

Today, I came across this Spotify playlist from the Rounder Records folks, and it is a cool collection of 18 very diverse tracks that paint a broader picture of NOLA music than most people typically imagine. Give it a spin to get a little *tu way pocky way* vibe going in your world.

Come Tuesday, please check out the very serious, thoughtful etc. magnum opus. I can promise that, even though the words may drive you to drink (you're welcome), the photography is gonna bullseye hit your cultural g-spot.

Return to regular i2blogging resumes soon. Til then, *mighty kootie fiyo*.

The Blue Check Republic



Good news, my pretties: there's free music in this post to quench your thirsty ears!

Last June, I ambled out to the countryside to Komplex Studio for an afternoon of convivial, improvisatory meanderings by two string ticklers under the watchful eyes/ears of an ace engineer. Shorter: I hung out with cool people and recorded loose jams for a couple of hours.

It was a lovely afternoon that was long overdue. And, thought I, that was that. I had a great time, but nothing I played felt special. Truth: I felt a bit embarrassed by my feeble noodlings.

But my pal Tracy Chow and her hubs Chan had designs. Six months later, I received a message:

> *Wanted you to hear and give your feedback/approval/disapproval. I can easily take it down or make adjustments.*

So I listened. And then again. And I am pretty knocked out by the production T/C put together here. They imagined the larger picture in ways that were invisible to me. And after a dozen or so listens, I gotta say this is one of the most satisfying recordings of my playing I've ever listened to.

And it's available here, for free (or if you'd like, for an optional donation to keep Komplex Studio in tall clover). It

falls pretty squarely in the ambient vein, but it has a great deal more structure and definition than I would have expected. All props to T/C for their imagining the greater whole and giving me the gift of golden ears interpreting my work in a way that makes me feel very proud.

And for helping me realize that the thing my playing needs more than anything else – including practice, of which there can never be enough – is collaboration with other people.

So as the year winds down (or up), I'm all about shocking a few new and revived music projects into life for 2016.

Long wished for by tens of people, the Jake Legg Trio is rising from the ashes with some local Tallahassee players. This is long overdue, but look for us soon. Natch, an active local trio also mean the Jake Legg Half Quartet will also be available for service.

As it has for the past 11 years, RoboCromp remains available to active duty. Cromp and I began playing together in 1989, far and away my longest musical partnership. And we're still in love. What does it sound like?

And yet another: an old pal from the glory days of the Center for Creative Aspiration lives an hour or so away, and we have planned some material to work on together. Distance is a pisser for rehearsal and consistent work, but if we can overcome that obstacle, this could raise some neck hairs among the unsuspecting, innocent listener.

Who knows what else lies in wait?

The Shadow do.

All in all, some good prospects looming. It's a good way to end/begin the year.