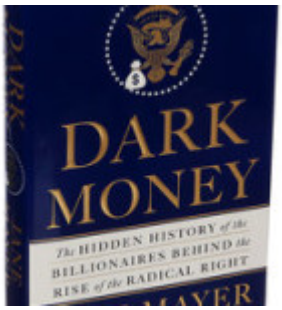
It’s Darker Than You Think



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.