



The kids are alright: High school students can survive 'Koch indoctrination'

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Every liberal student should run, not walk, to the nearest business ethics class being taught under the cold stare of Charles H. and David Koch.

The course's troubled birth was revealed by [Hank Stephenson in the Arizona Daily Star](#) and put into broader context by my buddy [David Safier, in the Tucson Weekly](#). It goes a little something like this: an economics course is being taught in schools around Tucson and translates into credit for the University of Arizona's Philosophy course "[Ethics, Economy and Entrepreneurship](#)." Four Tucson Unified School District high schools offer this course but the Governing Board never approved it. There's an oops. And it is part of a national effort by libertarian-minded rich folks to "indoctrinate" kids with the righteousness of a free market unencumbered by taxes or community standards.

A grant from the John Templeton Foundation paid for instruction after the UA Philosophy Department's "[Center for the Philosophy of Freedom](#)" (because Center for the Philosophy of Nihilism is a bit too spot on in a Sid Vicious sort of way) developed the course. The Freedom Center gets Koch money.

I'm going to set aside the fact that TUSD biffed this so badly as to allow an unapproved course to be taught, other than to note the irony involved in proving the anti-government types' point that the public sector often can't get its head out of its ass.

Instead, I want to take on the ancient notion that kids are endlessly under threat of corruption by sedition that endangers society. Gangsta rap was going to cause urban blight and violence. Metal music would make teenage boys Satanic murderers. Jazz would make initiate dancing the Viennese would find offensive. If you played Led Zeppelin IV backward, see ...

Budding adults are far more morally and ethically sturdy than society ever gives them credit. What's more, when we teach history by tracing turnover from one national leader to the next or the challenges facing government to government, we maybe overstate the value of government and understate the value of economy and entrepreneurship. And by doing that, schools can overstate the importance of government solutions.

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Ideas aren't as dangerous as a society trying to throttle ideas. Challenge ideas the old-fashioned way: With other ideas. Maybe get an idea of what that original idea is, first, though.

A little bit of the study of entrepreneurship isn't going to hurt us, indoctrinate us or brainwash us. What's the threat? That we will give the right a chance to have their say and teach us their philosophy? I don't see the issue.

OK, I do see *an* issue or two.

There has to be a twist

The problem I have with the libertarian-minded isn't that they teach how to be a good capitalist, it's their belief in "market salvation."

The free market is effective. It's not perfect. But to listen to the "market-only" advocates, it is near-biblical as an ultimate arbiter of righteousness. Everything is made better through the unbridled and unrestricted desire for more money and more market share. It will salve woes and address all the challenges that confront society as a whole.

There's socialism, laissez faire capitalism and the mixed economy shared by most of the industrialized world. The Kochs want to unmix it and get government out of the free markets. Valid enough, I guess, but unrestrained and unencumbered free markets come with consequences — some of them hard on the regular person. That's a hard truth to sell.

Therefore, libertarians need scholarship to prove markets aren't just efficient but more moral and ethical. I get that.

Following you, I climb a mountain

Government plays the role of Satan, mucking up the works with unreasonable rules and unfair taxation that destroys the work ethic, while punishing those who took the successful path.

Wanna fix health care? Unleash the free market to heal us.

Wanna fix schools? Unleash the free market separate to teach us.

Wanna fix climate change? Climate change? That can't be real because the free market can't fix it.

Wanna fix bridge the wealth gap? It's fake news.

Society has a strange way of ascribing intellectual value to the counter-intuitive. Consider the proverb: "He who wishes to go east, should first go west."

Do you get the wisdom? It's based on the idea that sometimes when we head in the opposite direction of where we are think we want to go, we will wind up on the path we sought. The obvious isn't always the right answer.

One problem with that proverb. I just made it up. Whole cloth. Fake news. But for a second, you thought it was ancient wisdom because the we are inclined to believe that what is prima facie stupid is actually deeply profound.

In the market, there are a lot of people who just don't want to pay taxes so they fund research that proves we will only achieve the greater good and higher virtue by unleashing our self-interest and wanton gluttony. If you try to fix things (with my money), you will only make them worse.

The exodus is here

The center of this thought right now is George Mason University. The Institute of Humane Studies studies the philosophy and the Mercatus Center covers the economics that provide scholarship behind the push to roll back government. Or what I and many others call common investment and standards.

The institute awarded David Schmitz a 2003 alumnus of the year award and he now runs the UA's Freedom Center. So he would seem to be a sweet "plant" in the Koch conspiracy right here in Tucson.

Stephenson's story quotes TUSD Superintendent Gabriel Trujillo and UA faculty, describing the course's textbook as a glossy ad for unrestrained free markets that doesn't examine the downside of lawless capitalism.

That may be. I haven't read the material nor taken the class. I went to do online research about the Institute for Humane Studies to find the smoking gun. It lead me to a like-minded interview with Duke University libertarian prof Mike Munger. He was talking about his leanings and his efforts to "teach freedom."

I watched it ready to pounce and I kept watching ... well, that's an interesting point ... okay, a bit of an over-simplification there ... oh, I never thought about it that way ... that's kind of B.S. ... yes, absolutely right ... I'm having to think a lot here ... oh, please stop with that talk ... this guy is freaking interesting!

I get the whole connect-the-dots thing. I get the cartoon of conservative thought as preached on talk radio.

But I'm willing to give teachers the benefit of the doubt in teaching "controversial" ideas like "success can be achieved in the free market."

Preaching from my chair

My sophomore year at the UA, I figured a political science major should take POL 206, PUBLIC POLICY. So, I go off and buy the textbook by David Boaz and Edward Crane, published by the Cato Institute. The whole thrust of the course, was "government bad, business good." Yet somehow, I emerged the same leftist subversive but a smarter leftist subversive.

The Philosophy 101 textbook may be "fairytale capitalism," but I guarantee you it was no more so than a textbook prepared for the grim brothers at Cato Institute.

Understanding the foundations of conservatism by learning from actual conservatives teaching actual conservative thought challenges liberal ideas and forces self examination. Why do I believe what I believe? Is some of it just talk without foundation? Where does the other side have a point? What are they trying to accomplish? Does it truly conflict with what I would think society's goals should be?

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What's more, it makes it far easier to engage with conservatives if a liberal truly understands conservatism. And maybe, just maybe, a liberal's mind will change on an issue or two. That kind of evolution isn't brainwashing. It goes hand-in-hand with a little something called learning. Are the Koch Brothers trying to change the world by evangelizing their gospel with more than \$80 billion in the bank? Let's stipulate that point. Of course they are. But public schools have taught pluralism and social justice for a couple generations now and the country just elected Donald Trump president. I'm not sure Chuck and Dave have thought through their global domination.

If there's a problem with what the Kochs are doing, it's the problem of wealth concentration the un-democratic influence the wealthy are able to exert on cash-starved universities and democracy itself.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has donated what the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#) calls "an avalanche" of money toward getting more college graduates in America. Noble goal. It's just creating so much gravity that it is warping the discussion about higher ed.

Leaving billionaires to strategically "catalyze" change on universities or in society is to leave the changes in society to whatever blows the philanthropist's kilt up. Maybe he or she (likely a he) thinks college kids wear kilts. A half billion dollars later men on campus are feeling a heck of a draft.

Indoctrinate? Kids will do their own thing. My daughter's mom and I spent 20 years "indoctrinating" the imp with liberalism and she's out there sharing Facebook posts about "A War on Christmas." Her mom is a Buddhist, which is the hilarious part.