



Mean Girl

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February 2, 2016

Those who hate too much become like the people they hate, and so it is with Jane Mayer, whose *Dark Money*, a 450-page screed of unrelenting venom, portrays a vast right-wing conspiracy controlled by a small number of libertarian donors. Like the John Birch Society of days gone by, Mayer sees a cabal of dark forces that secretly dominates American politics. And like Joe McCarthy, people two or three degrees of separation from her villains are tarred with their brush. Fifty years ago Richard Hofstadter said that the Birchers and McCarthyites exemplified the “paranoid style” of American politics, but now it’s the Mayers who have debased American politics.

This is a low trust country, compared to most of the First World, and hate-mongers like Mayer bear a fair amount of the blame. In high trust countries, cooperation is repaid with cooperation, but in low trust countries defection is met with reciprocal defection. In both cases, a law of what historian René Girard called mimetic rivalry is at work, calling forth an identical payback, whether for good or ill. The high trust society flourishes, the low trust one buys poverty with enmity.

In Mayer’s world, there are no honorable opponents, no one on the other side motivated by anything other than the basest of motives. The Tea Party? Nothing more than the puppets of the Charles Koch Institute. Princeton’s Robbie George? Merely “a savvy, right-wing operative.” George Mason’s Henry Manne? “marginal and eccentric.” Did George Mason’s Jim Buchanan win a Nobel Prize in economics? If so, “liberal economists were aghast.” It’s a measure of Mayer’s politics that when she refers to economic liberty she puts it in quotation marks. Best of all, the famously independent Cato Institute is merely “ostensibly nonpartisan,” which will raise a laugh from the Republican establishment. All this is politics at the level of Keith Olbermann, a long, unremitting, hate-filled sneer.

In reading her diatribe, I was amused to realize that I would have been dead-center in her sights, had I been important enough to be noticed. I was a John M. Olin Fellow at the notorious University of Chicago Law School, and for more than ten years directed a program for judges which Mayer describes as “a cross between Maoist cultural reeducation camps and Club Med.” I was very thankful to receive support from Olin, Scaife, Bradley, and the donor she is pleased to call the Kochtopus, but the many federal judges who attended the programs might wonder if there was anything Maoist about programs on David Hume, the Founders, the *Federalist Papers*, Tocqueville, Lincoln, American poetry, evolutionary biology, and standard price theory. Here

are some things that were never discussed in my programs: global warming, health care reform, partisan politics generally. As for Club Med, our venues were a distinct step down from the hotels where federal judicial Circuit conferences were held.

Mayer's world is one of dark forces and private venality, but what she doesn't get is just how one seeks donor support. No one ever received a dime by saying they'd do the donor's bidding. Instead, one tells the donors what one wants to do, and either gets or doesn't get supported. Nor did any donor ever suggest what might be covered at one of my programs. Privately, they might possibly have wondered why I offered a program on Sophocles, but I never heard a word of criticism from them.

In Mayer's world, the tainted money is always from the right, and left-wing donors emerge with a kindly pat on their heads. Of the overwhelming leftward tilt of the Ford Foundation and other long-term donations not a word is said, nor is anything heard of the left's capture of higher education. Instead, the only danger comes from the scandal of Republican money in politics. Any judge who fears a threat to liberty from the hyper-partisan campaign finance reform movement has only to read her book to have his worst suspicions confirmed.

Mayer is evidently a person whose mind has never risen above the arrogance and hatred peddled on the thoroughfares. She is the monomaniacal bore who has but one idea, and that a nasty one, which she repeats endlessly. It is a measure of just how degraded our culture has become that she is taken seriously as a writer