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Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy 2.0

The Kochs host public-policy seminars, fund political groups and back candidates. Are they really such a danger to the republic?

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Jane Mayer, a *New Yorker* magazine staff writer and former Washington reporter for this newspaper, introduces “Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right” by comparing current-day America to the Gilded Age of the 1890s and bemoaning the ways in which rich people today are trying to “remake America” to advance their interests. Inevitably, she quotes *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman: “We are on the road not to just a highly unequal society but a society of an oligarchy. A society of inherited wealth.” That claim may have a familiar ring. Populists have been deploring the power of the rich since the birth of the republic. In 1907, Teddy Roosevelt railed at “malefactors of great wealth.” His fifth cousin, Franklin, laced his 1933 inaugural speech with a promise to drive the “money changers” out of whatever temples they occupied. The formula works well.

Ms. Mayer is highly selective about which super-wealthy dabblers in politics she wants to expel. Warren Buffett, whose \$62 billion fortune ranks second only to that of Bill Gates (\$76 billion), is not one of her targets. Rather she quotes him in support of her thesis, to the effect that the rich are winning the class war. Tom Steyer, the West Coast hedge-fund billionaire environmentalist, gets a bye as well. So does former Google CEO Eric Schmidt (\$11 billion), a big campaign contributor to Barack Obama, and Steven Spielberg, who has generously shared from his \$3 billion nest egg to aid the goals of Bill and Hillary Clinton. A host of think tanks and political websites depend on liberal deep pockets, but their donors do not figure in “Dark Money.” Politically active, left-of-center oligarchs are apparently wonderful people, not dangerous ones.

Ms. Mayer mainly dislikes foes of big government. Her list of the rich and dangerous begins with figures whose heyday has passed, such as Richard Mellon Scaife and John M. Olin. For decades, their philanthropies supported conservative journals, scholars and think tanks, much as the Bradley Foundation does today, another organization that earns her contempt. But most of “Dark Money” is aimed at just two people, Charles and David Koch. The brothers, tied for fifth on the Forbes list with \$41 billion apiece, are most notably backers of the Cato Institute, a Washington free-market think tank. They also host public-policy seminars, fund political groups and back candidates either directly or by way of the Koch Industries political action committee.

Ms. Mayer argues that they and their “ultra-wealthy allies on the right” have become the “single most effective special interest group in the country.” The Kochs might answer, “We should be so lucky.”

Ms. Mayer’s writes well, as befits any member of the team that produces the New Yorker’s highly readable prose. Her explorations of the family histories of the Kochs and their philosophical allies in the Scaife-Mellon clan are detailed and satisfying to the human thirst for juicy tidbits. We learn in intimate detail, complete with psychological analysis, of the family feud that split the Koch brothers into two warring camps, with Charles and David on one side and Bill and Freddie on the other.

But some readers might grow weary of Ms. Mayer’s breathless style, which suggests that every paragraph unmask some secret of the giant right-wing conspiracy. She even claims that Charles Koch as a child once said that his fair share of a treat was “all of it,” which of course was a tip-off of his later acquisitiveness. She associates the brothers’ father, Fred Koch, with Hitler and Stalin. He built oil refineries in the Soviet Union and Germany in the early 1930s. She describes economics seminars for federal judges in Key Largo, Fla., sponsored by the Olin Foundation years ago, as a combination of “Maoist cultural reeducation camps and Club Med.” She can’t seem to account for the fact that Ruth Bader Ginsburg and other impeccably non-conservative jurists attended them.

Ms. Mayer might herself benefit from an economics course. She writes that Richard Nixon imposed economic controls on oil and gas in 1971 to “address the energy crisis.” The Nixon price controls helped to *cause* the energy crisis. She chides the Kochs for opposing President Obama, noting that their fortunes have tripled since he came to power. Ms. Mayer doesn’t seem to understand that the fortunes of wealthy people on both left and right were ballooned mainly by the asset inflation engineered by the Federal Reserve. Small savers have been the victims.

Authors who argue that rich people can buy elections don’t get much support from history. The “oligarchs” behind Mitt Romney are still smarting from his defeat. In the 1930s, business titans could not buy victory for the anti-New Deal candidates who ran against Roosevelt. More than a century ago, during the Gilded Age, Congress managed to pass the Sherman Antitrust Act, to the sorrow of John D. Rockefeller and other one-percenters.

It can be argued that the cynicism behind the politics-for-sale claim, even when displayed by a talented writer like Ms. Mayer, reflects a distrust of the American democratic system—as if “the people” are commodities to be purchased and not autonomous beings who can think for themselves. The cynicism also denigrates the work of activists and scholars who join up with Cato, the Manhattan Institute, Heritage, Brookings, Hoover, the Sierra Club, the World Wildlife Foundation, Common Cause—or whatever organization one might choose—because they believe in what those bodies stand for, not because they are the mindless slaves of some rich donor.