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# The Koch Brothers' Self-Exposé

Jonathan Chait March 28, 2011 | 11:09 am



The right-wing libertarian billionaires Charles and David Koch have been the subject of enormous controversy recently. Liberals have fiercely attacked them, and conservative and libertarians have defended them with equal passion. Now we have Matthew Continetti of the *Weekly Standard* joining in with an **8,000 word cover story**. Continetti is the author of “The Persecution Of Sarah Palin,” and in this piece he reprises his role as ghost author for a popular conservative victim-hero. Because the piece so faithfully transmits the Kochs’ own views – in no way does it substantively differ from the story the Kochs themselves would write – it’s a fascination transmission of their self-conception.

Unsurprisingly, the Kochs view themselves as brilliant, public-spirited entrepreneurs who have suddenly become victims of a vicious smear campaign. The Kochs have been active in influencing public policy for many years, and they managed until very recently to escape any scrutiny whatsoever, a state of affairs they clearly view as normal and fair.

The premise of Continetti’s article is that liberal critics of the Kochs are “conspiratorial.” (“whenever you turned on MSNBC or clicked on the *Huffington Post*, you’d see the Kochs described in terms more applicable to Lex Luthor and General Zod.”) It’s certainly true, as **Ezra Klein** has noted, that many liberals overstate the Kochs’ influence. They are an important piece in the conservative movement, but just one piece among many. Scott Walker may have received \$43,000 from the Kochs, but the Kochs are bit players in the Wisconsin drama, which is primarily the story of a Republican governor trying to advance his party’s interests, not responding to the Kochs’ money. But the Kochs are powerful figures on the right, and Continetti attempts to sweep up all criticism of their influence as rabid conspiracy-mongering. Over and over Continetti dismisses not just the most heated attacks on the Kochs but *any* critical reporting on the Kochs as liberal paranoia.

And while the Kochs see themselves as innocents wronged, they do not see themselves *only* as innocents wronged. They see themselves as powerful figures striding across the stage of history. And so Continetti recounts – indeed, he burnishes to a fine sheen – the Kochs’ role in founding the Cato Institute, Citizens for a Sound Economy, and other groups. Obviously, there is some tension between the competing mandates of lionizing the Kochs for their influence and dismissing critics of their influence as paranoid loons. Forgetting that he is supposed to be laughing at the nutty liberals who exaggerate the power of these meek, retiring intellectuals, Continetti reports things like this:

Soon the meetings were held twice every year, and by the winter of 2011 they were attracting around 300 people. The Kochs hosted big-name speakers: Antonin Scalia, Eric Cantor, Clarence Thomas, Paul Ryan. “We’re not a bunch of radicals running around and saying strange things,” said David. “Many of these people are very successful, and occupy very important, respected positions in their communities!” At the end of each seminar the participants would pledge money to conservative groups. One attendee told me the Kochs were among the best political fundraisers he’d ever seen. “They’re almost as good as AIPAC,” he said, referring to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

Continetti does posit the existence of a shadowy, well-financed conspiracy, but he portrays it as existing in *opposition* to the Kochs:

By the time the Tea Party was getting started in 2009, the left-wing counter-counter-establishment was a juggernaut, investing vast energy in destroying the reputations of its favorite targets: Sarah Palin, Michele Bachmann, Rush Limbaugh. Inside this Death Star were legions of twenty-something writers, most of them fresh out of college, tapping furiously at their keyboards, discoursing on the subtleties of macroeconomics and the depravity of American conservatives....

What happened to the Kochs was a classic example.

The Kochs, then, are victims both of conspiracy theorists and an actual conspiracy. They support the very finest tradition of democratic advocacy, and their critics deal only in invective and smear.

Continetti’s piece describes the vilification endured by the Kochs in terms that convey the Kochs’ deep sense of self-pity:

Cohlmlia is director of corporate communication for Koch Industries. Every day when she arrived at work, the first things she’d read were emails with subject lines like “This is the result of the hate you’ve been spewing,” “Corrupt Polluting Scum,” “I am boycotting Koch Industries,” “Treason,” and “Eat s—t you jerks.”

Koch Industries has a target on its gargantuan back. The brothers are the latest victims of the left’s lean, mean cyber-vilification machine.

Is this clear? The Kochs and Koch-financed groups are merely a collection of largely like-minded people using research, argument, polemic and other tools to advance their political viewpoint. The liberal version of this, by contrast, is a “Death Star.” *Your* side is composed of passionate citizens expressing their genuine concern for the country. The *other* side is a vilification machine. Nobody associated with the Tea Party would ever send a mean email!

Continetti likewise conveys the Kochs’ view that the fact that they dramatically grew the business they inherited from their father essentially makes them self-made men, and that their skepticism of climate science is a product of their superior scientific mind, and completely unrelated to their fortune in the dirty energy business. The Kochs are apparently the sole exception to the libertarian theory of virtuous selfishness.

The most fascinating revelation is how simplistic the Kochs’ world view is. They are basically just garden-variety Dittoheads:

“He’s the most radical president we’ve ever had as a nation,” he said, “and has done more damage to the free enterprise system and long-term prosperity than any president we’ve ever had.” David suggested the president’s

radicalism was tied to his upbringing. “His father was a hard core economic socialist in Kenya,” he said. “Obama didn’t really interact with his father face-to-face very much, but was apparently from what I read a great admirer of his father’s points of view. So he had sort of antibusiness, anti-free enterprise influences affecting him almost all his life

That’s not surprising. What’s surprising is that the Kochs *cannot imagine why anybody would disagree with them*:

The left’s inability to understand where the Kochs were coming from puzzled Charles and David. Wasn’t it obvious that small government and free markets resulted in a better world? “Why don’t we teach in schools things that make society more prosperous, and more peaceful, and people will respect each other more? It’s a strange thing, isn’t it?” said Charles. “It’s unbelievable how they distort what your message is!” said David. The Kochs thought their aim was to increase the standard of living for everyone. The way to do this, they believed, was by applying to society the same methods that had grown their company.

To Charles, the call for bigger government was egalitarianism run amok. Liberals, he thought, fetishized equality of condition at the expense of personal liberty. “They cannot stand that some people are better off than others,” Charles said. “I think part of it fits Mencken’s definition of a Puritan: someone that’s miserable because he knows that someone, somewhere, is enjoying himself. He cannot stand that. And I think they all slept through Economics 101.”

Right! They think Obama’s plan to restore Clinton-era tax rates, implement the old Republican health care plan and John McCain’s climate plan is Kenyan socialism stemming from a deep hatred of the rich. How could anybody disagree? Isn’t this merely a straightforward application of introductory economics?

I think they actually believe this. Which is to say, it is very easy to overestimate the sinister character of the Kochs. These are basically just a couple of not-terribly-sophisticated thinkers who happen to be sitting on a huge pile of money.

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