

Koch Brothers v. the Left in Palm Springs

There's a good chance that readers of this page already have some idea who David and Charles Koch are, and what's happening this weekend, as the sugar daddies of the Tea Party throw a little party of their own in Palm Springs. Invitees include a pack of their billionaire friends, plus prominent pundits, Republican Party officials and lawmakers, a number of whom benefited from hefty Koch contributions this last campaign cycle.

Together they'll strategize how to get rid of every regulation or politician that stands in the way of wealthy people becoming wealthier; namely, taxes, healthcare reform, environmental and financial protections, Obama and what little remains of the social safety net. Citizens United will undoubtedly energize the annual end-of-weekend ritual when all the donors—40 percent of them new—whip out their checkbooks to underwrite these adventures in subverting democracy with an eye to their bottom line.

But there will also be, for the first time in the soiree's eight year history, media attention, including a fair number of prominent bloggers, a panel discussion including such luminaries as Robert Reich and Van Jones and a demonstration organized by Common Cause. That's actually pretty great, as Kert Davies, Director of Research for Greenpeace, reminded me. For years one of the Koch brothers' greatest achievements was the fact that no one knew who they were or what influence they had in DC.

Now, thanks to some fine investigative reporting, we know that the brothers—the fifth-richest folks in the United States—are radical right-wingers whose dad served on the John Birch Society's governing body. Lee Fang of Think Progress tagged them early on as primary funders for the allegedly populist Tea Party, whose coast-to-coast “spontaneous” uprisings against Obama and taxation, were carefully orchestrated by staff. A March 2010 Greenpeace report uncloaked Koch Industries as a “financial kingpin of climate science denial and clean energy opposition,” and unveiled their underwriting of organizations like the Mercatus Center, Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute, whose pseudo-academic “research” and “reports” lobby for the wealthy and powerful from behind the protection of tax-exempt, nonprofit status. Jane Mayer's August 2010 New Yorker portrait, “Covert Operations” finished ripping the mask off of the brothers mostly known on the East Coast as generous patrons of the arts, and directly connected them to what was happening in DC. (Note: for the uninitiated, this fabulous timeline cartoon provides the least painful account of the Koch family's political history from the '30s through today.)

What worries me is that the left's response in Palm Springs may still be too “insider baseball,” the kind of stuff that riles up the already converted but has no discernible effect on a public still in thrall to the simple us-versus-them mentality of the Tea Party—a dynamic in which one is always, simultaneously, right and wronged. So I turned to some of the journalists and advocates who have been covering the Kochs, energy and the Tea Party for their views.

Greenpeace's Davies, though cautious, felt buoyed by the momentum on the left's side: "I think it's possible to keep drawing scrutiny to the Tea Party Congress by teaching voters to look for the corporate billionaire-backed tentacles behind the scenes. We can also put pressure on those congressmen by finding ways to ask them, very publicly, what they owe the Kochs. And I think it's huge that Cato and other front groups are now being talked about as 'Koch funded' think tanks which should diminish their power in the media." Kate Sheppard, who reports on the environment and energy issues for Mother Jones, also believes that the left has a winning issue with the Kochs: "Most Americans understand that we probably shouldn't keep depending on oil, even if it's just that they don't like what they're paying at the pump."

Fang shared some of my concerns, noting the Tea Party's power as a catch-all. "In the wake of the war and the financial crisis in these last few years, people who are disillusioned by big institutions are drawn to the Tea Party as intrinsically anti-institution. Democrats and the left haven't caught on to this psychological shift."

But John Amato of Crooks & Liars felt less concerned about having a complete picture, or a message that could rival the Tea Party's. "Let's just get through the day," he said. "Info that Supreme Court Justices Anthony Scalia and Clarence Thomas are attending meetings like this is pretty good for now in terms of challenging the impartiality of the court. Why kind of activist judges speak behind closed doors at secret political meetings? We're raising awareness, saying billionaires are actively lobbying and pouring money in to change legislation to make money for themselves."