



‘Democracy in Chains’ Is So Wrong It’s Funny

Jon Cassidy

July 26, 2017

Duke historian Nancy MacLean’s new book *Democracy in Chains* is so wrong it’s funny.

The book’s ostensible subject is the economist James Buchanan, Nobel laureate and filthy capitalist running dog. Also, it’s about some sort of secret plot/public movement by libertarians to bring back plantation ideology. “From the start,” MacLean writes early on, “the notion of unwarranted federal intervention has been inseparable from a desire to maintain white racial as well as class dominance.” Her proof: old John C. Calhoun resisted the federal government, and if you squint at his writings just right, there is one vague similarity to Buchanan’s work.

Usually, a fraudulent work reveals itself gradually. First you notice things are a bit off, and then you wonder if the author just misunderstands the subject, before finally noticing some examples of bad faith that can’t possibly be excused.

MacLean flips that, revealing her dishonesty in the prologue, where she puts words in Buchanan’s mouth without ever admitting what she’s doing. It turns out she knows two tricks: 1) speculate, and present the speculation as historical fact; 2) chop a quote into three- and four-word chunks, and present them as meaning the opposite what they actually do.

Then she gradually reveals the extent of her ignorance about economics, Buchanan’s work in public choice theory, and libertarian thought in general. By the time you’re 50 pages into it, you have nothing to do but notice just how off everything seems.

Here we are with Buchanan on a visit to Chile under Pinochet, and MacLean’s got the text of a speech he gave. Surely it’s a smoking gun. Buchanan says they should adopt “a constitution that requires a balanced budget.” The villain! As if sensing that her readers are heading for the exits, MacLean reminds us that balanced budgets were the “sacred” principle of Sen. Harry Byrd, whose racism she has already established for us. Later, “the economy crashed,” she tells us, wrecking a “nation that once stood out as a middle-class beacon.” Chile, of course, has become the wealthiest nation in Latin America. So what could she think any of this means?

You lose interest in looking up the footnotes to see how she’s misrepresenting the subject. You just assume she is, because her method is obvious: paragraph after paragraph of mini-quotes you can’t trust. Still, you plod onward to discover the bits so hilariously wrong that it doesn’t even matter why MacLean wrote them. On page 198, for example, she presents us with Bill Kristol, founder of the *Weekly Standard*, who in her words is a “top libertarian.” It’s merely funny that

she thinks Ed Meese is a libertarian; that she adds in Kristol, whom movement libertarians regard as a warmongering neocon antichrist, is sublime.

On page 140, she nearly tops that with a comment on the naming of The Cato Institute. “The name was a wink to insiders: while seeming to gesture toward the *Cato’s Letters* of the American Revolution, thus performing an appealing patriotism, it also alluded to Cato the Elder, the Roman leader famed for his declaration that ‘Carthage must be destroyed!’ For this new Cato’s mission was also one of demolition: it sought nothing less than the annihilation of statism in America.”

I love all of this. There’s the weird jargon, which makes me want to go perform an appealing patriotism with the leftover fireworks I’ve got in my trunk. There’s the factual error — *Cato’s Letters* were published in England a half-century before the Revolution, but it’s well-known among folks who know about think tanks that this think tank was named after those papers. There’s the wink, and this has got to be a Lucille Bluth wink, as surely most folks these days would think of one of the Roman Catos before thinking of the works of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon.

But if you’re going to pick a Cato, how do you miss the Younger? We libertarians identify with his strict adherence to Republican principle, his incorruptibility, his resistance to the populism and eventual tyranny of Julius Caesar. For MacLean and her intertemporal chains of guilt by association, it should have been an easy connection to “Sic semper tyrannis” and John Wilkes Booth. That is her game, after all — marring us as Southern racists in spirit. The book could have been subtitled, “Six Degrees of John C. Calhoun.” Her few defenders insist she has something to say, but there is nothing so whole as an idea in this book; she contradicts all of her main points. The central political question she’s dealing with is, “When should the majority rule?” Her answers are all over the place.

But it’s the invocation of “Carthago Delenda Est” that I love the most. Cato the Elder was the Bill Kristol of his day, continually raising an alarm over the supposed Carthaginian menace. He once presented the Senate a fresh fig from Carthage, which he noted portentously was a mere three days away. If there had been libertarians then, a Nicaeus Gillespus, as it were, would have taken the fig as a symbol of the wonders of free commerce, which had allowed the Carthaginians to pay off their reparations to Rome from the Second Punic War in no time at all.

To MacLean, the quasi-isolationist peaceniks are the sort who would wipe Carthage from the earth and salt its ruins. To settle on such a singularly inapt analogy requires a mind that is heedless in general, that simply doesn’t notice context, that this thing goes with that. Her vague mind reveals itself not just in mixed metaphors — libertarians are “fifth columnists” trying “to carry out a revolution beneath the radar of prying eyes” — but in an outlook too trapped by anachronism to do a historian any good.

On page 8, as she is presenting us Calhoun and his pro-slavery views as the fountainhead of the modern liberty movement, we get a reference to the “cohort of the cotton gin, the technological innovation that turned plantation slavery into the most profitable capitalist enterprise the world had yet seen.”

Say what? Calhoun died in 1850; Marx published *Das Kapital* in 1867. Nobody in Calhoun's time conceived of the world in terms that hadn't yet been invented. A few French and British thinkers were formulating some of the ideas that would cohere into socialism, but Calhoun himself is notable for being the first American to conceive of society as a potential "conflict between labor and capital." That's why Richard Hofstadter called him the "Marx of the Master Class." MacLean notes this, but fails to grasp its meaning: nobody else in America thought this way yet.

But you give MacLean a pass here. I may avoid the term capitalism, preferring not to reify a Marxist critique, but she's entitled to see things that way. Maybe she's just describing things from her own perspective? *But no*, she insists on the following page, *I'm really this confused*: "Calhoun and his peers knew the cold reality that they were practicing a type of capitalism that would not pass democratic scrutiny much longer..."

No, they most certainly didn't. His peers didn't think that way at all, seeing the world in terms of commerce, trade, agriculture, industry, etc., while Calhoun meant it as a critique of the wage-labor of the North. His own realm, he insisted, was harmonious.

"The Southern States are an aggregate, in fact, of communities, not of individuals," Calhoun wrote. "Every plantation is a little community, with the master at its head, who concentrates in himself the united interests of capital and labor, of which he is the common representative. These small communities aggregated make the State in all, whose action, labor, and capital is [*sic*] equally represented and perfectly harmonized."

The problem isn't that MacLean's view is ahistorical, or that she is obligated to respect Calhoun's view as sincere and not merely venal; it is and she isn't. It's that this goes to the very philosophy that MacLean tries to connect to the modern libertarian movement.

Calhoun absolutely denied the existence of individual rights. Libertarians, of course, base their whole philosophy on rights. What superficial resemblance could she find in philosophies that are so opposed to each other? Heck, her own views are closer to Calhoun's than ours are. MacLean favors political rights, but she denies that economic rights are anything more than a pretext of would-be oligarchs trying to put "Democracy in Chains." Just like Calhoun, MacLean believes in a benevolent political master with complete, unrestrained sovereignty over those under his jurisdiction. It's just that Calhoun rested that authority with the slavemaster, while MacLean puts it with the state.

The question, then, is what does MacLean think she has found in Calhoun that has any bearing on the question of liberty in the modern world? The answer has to do with Calhoun's ridiculous idea of the harmonious plantation and its "common representative." In the underlying idea, which we'll get into in a second piece tomorrow, there actually is a similarity to an idea that concerned Buchanan, but MacLean doesn't even talk about it.

That's right. MacLean cites an article that makes this comparison, as it bolsters her claim that there is a link, but the one actual commonality between Buchanan and Calhoun is so abstract and underwhelming that she writes about it for exactly zero pages.

