

# DAILY CANNIBAL

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You just can't trust the rhetoric, whether it's left, right, or libertarian.

An illuminating historical essay by Yasha Levine about Harry Koch, the founding oligarch of the family now led by the right-wing activist billionaire Koch brothers, appeared on the *Texas Observer's* website the other day. It describes how Koch *grand-père* made his fortune during the late-19th-century government-sponsored railroad boom.

Seems the U.S. government at the time thought reliable transportation around the country was a good idea and went about granting federally owned land for the purpose. Koch, an enterprising newspaper owner in Quanah, Texas, was in a good position to take advantage. Levine's piece focuses on a) Koch's biography and b) what a jerk he was, to wit:

“In 1897, while the country was still in the grips of one of the worst economic depressions in its history, Harry Koch penned a long, gushing account of a luxurious trip to a convention thrown for boosters and businessmen in Galveston. Between detailed descriptions of all the oysters eaten and champagne bottles emptied at swanky parties, Harry expressed shock and outrage that the street railway union organized a strike during the convention and forced attendees to temporarily move about on foot.”

Icky indeed. But witness the response from the left, for example from Jonathan Schwartz's A Tiny Revolution blog, to that business about the government-sponsored railroad industry: “In Shocking Twist No One Could Have Foreseen, Kochs' Family Empire Founded on Government Handouts.” Not only was that not the point of Levine's article, but equating government sponsorship of a nation-building transportation network the century before last with the “welfare state” programs right-wingers object to today makes about as much sense as Michele Bachmann when she tries to make a point about something.

Not even the airheads trying to knock off Mitt Romney in the Republican primary race would be likely today to come down against that long-ago railway effort, were they to give the matter a minuscule amount of thought (well, leaving aside Ron Paul). The government stitched this country's huge land mass together, first with railroads, then by building the highway system (which still bears the name of President Eisenhower). The government got us into space and onto the Moon. The government (through DARPA) seeded the development of the Internet and the Web. The list goes on. Such basic development projects have little to do with whether unemployment benefits should be extended or Medicare funding trimmed.

But never mind all that – a good headline for a blog post is the paramount need.

Turn, now, to the Koch-founded Cato Institute’s Steve H. Hanke, who is quoted by Levine demoting “democracy”: “Contrary to what propaganda has led the public to believe, America’s Founding Fathers were skeptical and anxious about democracy. They were aware of the evils that accompany a tyranny of the majority. The Framers of the Constitution went to great lengths to ensure that the federal government was not based on the will of the majority and was not, therefore, democratic.”

Hanke may be a respected academic, but his accusation of propaganda itself bears more than a whiff of it. Even as a schoolchild I remember being taught that we are not technically a democracy but a republic – the Founders set up only the House of Representatives – *one half of one* of the three branches of government – to be directly elected by the populace; clearly the forces aligned against direct democracy were strong.

But assertions (and assumptions) that democracy remains a high ideal in this country are far from “propaganda.” In fact there’s been an increasing *actual* tendency *towards* democracy. Witness the 1913 conversion of the Senate, by the Seventeenth Amendment, into a popularly elected body. Witness the extension of the franchise to blacks, to women, to 18-to-20-year-olds. Witness the rise every four years of a fresh clamor to eliminate the Electoral College, seen by many as vestigial and unfair. That’s not to say there wasn’t/isn’t ugly politics involved in these and other developments, but they all tend towards more direct representation.

Whatever their practical merits, moves towards democracy come from the natural human desire for one’s voice to be heard, not from some insidious “propaganda” spread – by whom? Liberals? Democrats? Occupy Wall Street? George W. Bush with his supposed intention to “spread democracy” to foreign lands? Hanke’s purpose and the Cato Institute’s is to establish their libertarian point of view as a principled stance opposed by sneaky propagandists. If in order to do this they need to suggest that democratic principles are null and void in our “democracy in a republic” (as many newly naturalized citizens are required to describe it), then so be it.

The point bears repeating: However smart the speaker or the writer, and whatever the political point of view, you just can’t trust *any* damn thing you read. Keeping that in mind is the only defense against the propaganda battering our poor addled heads from all sides.