



In Defense of the Koch Brothers (And Why Liberals Should Embrace Them)

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March 9, 2015

The Koch brothers are some of the most despised Americans in the world – especially coming from (but not always limited to) the American left. Among many other things, the Kochs (the richest New Yorkers alive) have been accused of fixing elections by uplifting their pet candidates of choice via insanely high political funding, pushing to destroy labor unions, funding fringe think tanks to spread right-wing, anti-science propaganda, and the list goes on. Everywhere I now turn, I cannot help but bump into some attack against the Kochs – usually coming from left-of-center in some article, blog, or column exhibiting the latest atrocities of these almost elephantine poster boys for the iniquitous American rich.

But is this criticism valid? Dare I even venture too far out onto the perilous enclaves of such an untenable catechism, at the risk of losing all reputation, friendship, and even trustworthiness? While it is a shame so much seems to hang in the balance by simply asking the question, “are they all that bad?” I still must take the steps necessary to do just that.

Someone’s entire reputation as a trustworthy or intelligent voice should not hang so irresolutely by the thread of groupthink or confirmation bias, but alas it seems more and more these days that in order to truly gain any respect as an intellectual or relevant political commentator, you must join all your fellows on the same radical leftist witch hunt against capitalism and success. In my view, such blind allegiance is not required, and it behooves one more to simply do one’s own research and come to distinct conclusions about any specific issue. In the case of the “evil” Koch brothers, one has to venture back into the past a bit to understand the tumultuous present.

Specifically, we need to understand why the brothers (four in all, but only the most prominent two will be the focus of this blog entry) are so hated by so many by examining the deeds of the father – in a very real sense, Charles and David, the two heavyweights of the siblings, have been ever haunted and followed by their old man’s suspect political affiliations and actions (in the same way Rand Paul will always be haunted by Ron, or Ron Reagan may always be unfairly compared to Ronald). Koch Sr., oil baron Fred Koch, was a founder and major financial funder

of the John Birch Society – the group infamous for accusing Eisenhower of being a communist conspiring toward starting World War III, raising groundless hysteria over fluoride in our water supply, and various other tinfoil hat quackery that most people – not the least of which, I’m sure, the Koch brothers – would be happy to sweep under the rug forever. But does this hereditary connection dictate the public’s view of the modern-day Koch family members? And if so, should it? To determine how much the sins of the father have tainted the brothers’ own images, it is imperative to examine the brothers on their own merits, separate from Fred’s rumbustious history on the fringes.

First, let us examine Charles – true, he is probably the most right-wing of the pair, and has a history of funding the Republican party and its candidates at various times, but does he really share the far out or even dangerous views of his father? In other words, does Charles Koch really stand for all the horrible things the leftists deride him for? If one considers unapologetically libertarian views to be “dangerous” or “fringe” (as many do), then yes. But we must keep in mind that such obstreperous thinking can and will only redefine a spectrum world as monochromatic. In other words, we mustn’t dumb down the world just so we can make it easier on ourselves to take political stances. Libertarians have it quite difficult in that they are not easy to pin down as either “left” or “right.” As a result, they are quite often misunderstood. I will expand on that point later after I have taken on both brothers individually.

Continuing on with Charles, let us address some of the more precise claims against his character: right-wing, corporatist, and anti-union. As I have already pointed out, Charles (along with his brother David) is a libertarian first and foremost. Though his father might have been something of a right-wing radical, we must be careful not to judge the son based on the father’s political affiliations. As for being a corporatist (which, by the way, implies that Charles Koch is in favor of treating corporations as people, thus giving them free reign to monopolize and buy up the markets without regulation or accountability), I think I will let Charles himself speak on the matter. When speaking in the Wall Street Journal about many of his fellow billionaires such as Warren Buffet and George Soros, Koch once stated that they “simply haven’t been sufficiently exposed to the ideas of liberty.” Koch even went to further say in that same piece that he despised big government, the corporations it aids, and the “political class.” Not quite three years ago, Koch wrote a full-blown opinion piece for the WSJ in which was stated the following:

“Government spending on business only aggravates the problem. Too many businesses have successfully lobbied for special favors and treatment by seeking mandates for their products, subsidies (in the form of cash payments from the government), and regulations and tariffs to keep more efficient competitors at bay. Crony capitalism is much easier than competing in an open market. But it erodes our overall standard of living and stifles entrepreneurs by rewarding the politically favored rather than those who provide what consumers want.”

That doesn’t read like a greedy corporatist to me. Rather, it reads as someone who is genuinely concerned about corporations – including those who may even be aided by the government – and

their overreaching power on the everyday consumer. Indeed, it is Koch Industries itself that serves as one of the prime producers of ethanol (one of the largest boondoggles in history, in my opinion), yet Charles Koch in this piece argues against things like ethanol subsidies – he is just that principled in his stance against government-aided corporatism that he himself is willing to take a financial loss.

But what about his anti-union stance? It has to be evil, right? I mean, where would we be if not for unions? Well, I would say that in the beginning, unions served a very real and invaluable purpose. But many of today's unions have been shown to be nothing more than money-generating machines without any tangible outcomes or benefits for their members to justify being a part of. Unfortunately, despite this evidence, workers of certain professions are to this day forced by law into joining their respective unions – they can't even opt out on an individual basis.

Considering these more modern forms unions have taken on, people like Charles Koch (and his brother) fight to strip this artificial power from said groups in an effort to make union membership more fair and voluntary. To myself, or anyone else well-versed in these matters, such a stance is not at all controversial. But for the far left pundits who love a fight, all they can see is the vapid outward appearance of “anti-union,” a dumbed-down, aggrandized depiction of what is actually going on. That is dishonest fear mongering at its worst, and it is equally wrong regardless of which political direction it comes from.

But these are just points based upon mere words from the mouth of the devil himself, right? Surely to figure out the true caliber of a man we must examine his actions and not merely his words. Fine idea, let's do that – Charles Koch is fairly well-known for his philanthropic efforts (in fact, Businessweek has named him among its top 50 American givers), making generous donations to various funds and causes he deems worthy. Though some of these causes include a handful of less-than-reliable political groups (such as the tax-dodging Americans For Prosperity), we must take a moment to distinguish between malicious intent and personal taste. While I may disagree greatly with some of Charles Koch's political views and/or associations, there is no substantial proof that shows he is intentionally wrecking the economy or political spectrum through such avenues. He simply leans a bit more to the right than I do, and a LOT more to the right of his most vocal opponents, and that in and of itself seems to infuriate them.

But what of the specific end results of this man's apparent evildoings? Well, let's go down the line: in the arts, Charles and his wife's Koch Cultural Trust has given away over \$1.7 million in grants and program funds for various up-and-coming and professional artists. In education, the Charles G. Koch Summer Fellow Program reaches out to young college students and invites them to join programs offered through the Institute for Humane Studies, a non-profit organization that offers educational and career opportunities for up-and-coming students and entrepreneurs.

To be fair, Charles Koch does fund and support many things I don't like, such as the Tea Party, which by this point has pretty much been proven to be a money machine for right-wing demagogues (though it is worth noting that the Tea Party had two separate origins, and one of them was actually a true, honest-to-goodness grass roots uprising). But so what? We have already determined that Charles is much more of a right-leaning libertarian than most, but that doesn't negate all of the genuine good his philanthropy seems to be doing. And he did it all without the government's help.

And then there is David. While the same accusations previously posed against his brother can also be applied to him, so can the same explanations. So I would rather touch upon some new moral sins both brothers always seem to be accused of for David's portion of this article. Namely, that David (and his brother) is anti-science, pro-fringe think tanks, and very, very right-wing in his politics. Let's squash these momentarily. First and foremost, David Koch is a very pro-science and pro-science education philanthropist. Just like his brother, David donates generous amounts of money to various causes, not all being his own, he feels benefit society. One way in which David helps promote science literacy is through the David H. Koch Fund For Science, which has served as a primary funder for certain educational programs such as the award-winning NOVA program on PBS. One NOVA program in particular, Intelligent Design on Trial, is all about proving the fact that Evolution is true and Creationism, its direct combatant in the classroom, is non-scientific bunk. David's name is directly featured in the program's credits; a clear sign of any endorsement. David also contributes directly to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC, and gave a whopping \$20 million to the American Museum of Natural History, which features the David H. Koch Dinosaur Wing. Both museums and subsequent exhibits, as you might imagine, promote real science and real science literacy regarding various theories, specifically evolution. If Mr. Koch were as fringe right-wing as his leftist critics claim, he would be much more likely to contribute to the asinine Creationist Museum than either of these fine institutions.

But it isn't just areas such as anthropology and biology David cares about. Medical science and healthcare as a whole also sees generous financial support from David H. Koch. Between the years of 1998 and 2002, he gave over \$395 million toward the funding of cancer research, and well over \$100 million more to various other institutions including Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, University of Texas Anderson Center in Houston, and New York-Presbyterian Hospital in his largest ongoing donation to date (which will total over \$2 billion by 2019 in order to provide a revolutionary new ambulatory care center).

This love and support for science, medical scientific progress, and science education in general also permeates into Mr. Koch's political alignments and public support as well. For instance, the liberal's enemy number one has funded stem cell research. He is also an advocate of gay marriage and civil liberties overall. Interesting how the hit jobs against him in the media seem to always either neglect or misrepresent these aspects of his character.

So, what about this “dangerous” and “fringe” think tank David and his siblings are apparently so responsible for unleashing on the world? Another John Birch society, stirring up trouble and parroting harmful conspiracy theories about public figures? Hardly, unless one considers the CATO Institute, a group dedicated to analyzing economics and political policies, and that houses such revered figures as Harvard economist Dr. Jeffrey Miron in its employ, “fringe.” The real issue many people, especially on the left, have with organizations like the CATO institute is simply this: it’s yet another libertarian organization, and as such impossible to box completely within either of the two prevailing political parties. If it’s too complicated to classify, simply throw it all out – that’s the mainstream media’s drumbeat.

Again, in the name of fairness and objectivity, there are some causes David Koch seems intent on supporting that I cannot get behind – namely, the climate change deniers. When asked point-blank about his own views on the matter, Koch and his spokespeople simply fall back on the non-answer of “teach the controversy – all the evidence has not yet been presented.” This attitude is eerily reminiscent of the “Intelligent Design” proponents and ideologues that Koch himself clearly finds worth combating, and so not only do I find Koch’s willingness to buy into such an anti-scientific ideology extremely contradictory and annoying, but I also think someone with as much influence as he has a responsibility to promote only the most objectively helpful and educational causes for the public to consume. David Koch’s outward support of this sort of nonsense is in this regard counterproductive to his otherwise forward-thinking cause, and frankly, I wish he would just cut it out. However, that being said, his libertarian allegiances make this type of reverse stopped clock syndrome unfortunately more predictable than not. He certainly isn’t perfect, and he could use a good crash course on climate science, but just like with his brother, there seems to be little to no evidence indicating that any of his missteps are intentional or malicious. Far more good than harm has befallen American society because of David Koch and his siblings, and this image of them presiding over their evil empire, stirring their boiling pots and cackling maniacally, is more than just misguided – it’s immoral and irresponsible.

Science, medicine, education, the arts, and entrepreneurship – what more could we be asking the wealthiest residents of our country to spend their money on? We have lucked out with this family and their willing generosity in all of these areas, yet we dare discredit them and accuse them of being evil and conspiring, all the while benefitting from their never-ending generosity. Now, a recent conversation with an anti-Koch friend of mine led to said friend’s resting defense amounting more or less to the accusation that all of the Kochs’ philanthropic acts are mere misdirection and patter to distract us from all the really evil, corporatist, anti-little guy schemes being hatched elsewhere. If that is truly the case, then the Kochs have failed, because their supposed misdirection has far exceeded their “bad” deeds and become their very reputation. At least, their reputation according to any objective observer. Read enough Rolling Stone articles, however, and one will likely end up accusing this family of being everything all the other critics claim it to be. But isn’t it interesting that in spite of all the bad press and smear jobs, the world

still moves on, largely in the right direction, and, like it or not, largely because of the Koch brothers?