

In Defense of the Kochtopus

Posted By [Justin Raimondo](#) On August 29, 2010 @ 11:00 pm In [Uncategorized](#) | [5 Comments](#)

Suddenly, the "Kochtopus" is [in the news](#) – a subject about which I have first hand knowledge. That's because, for a year and a half or so in the late 1970's, I was part of it: part of the "family" of organizations funded by [Charles](#) and [David](#) Koch, two of [the richest](#) men in America. I wrote about this period at length in my 2000 biography of Murray Rothbard, *An Enemy of the State*, and thought I would never return to the subject again. Alas, history has caught up with the "Kochtopus," as we used to call it with some bitterness mixed with affection, and today the Koch empire is the object of the Left's vexatious attention, with the Kochs billed as "the billionaire brothers who are waging a war against Obama," as [Jane Mayer](#) put it in a widely-cited piece in the *New Yorker* magazine.

The Obama network, otherwise known as MSNBC, has regularly [railed against](#) the nefarious influence of the Kochian conspirators, with all the subtlety of *Pravda* denouncing those Trotskyite wreckers and agents of the Mikado who are undermining the Revolution from within. State-controlled [National Public Radio](#) has joined the chorus, along with [Frank Rich](#), who, from his perch at the *New York Times*, hurls invective at these "tycoons," whose "radical agenda" is being covertly imposed on the country by the "invisible hands" of Big Business, personified by the brothers Koch. Rich cites the work of Kim Phillips-Fein, an [assistant professor](#) at New York University Gallatin School, whose book, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan*, seeks to debunk the populist credentials of the American Right by peddling a sophisticated conspiracy theory that posits the "invisible hands" of billionaires as the real force behind the such movements as the Tea Party and its predecessors. Sketching out a skeletal history of this nefarious, progress-resisting billionaires' cabal, Rich traces their origin back to the [American Liberty League](#), set up by Midwestern businessmen to oppose the New Deal:

"You can draw a straight line from the Liberty League's crusade against the New Deal "socialism" of Social Security, the Securities and Exchange Commission and child labor laws to the John Birch Society-Barry Goldwater assault on J.F.K. and Medicare to the Koch-Murdoch-backed juggernaut against our 'socialist' president."

What Rich, Mayer, and the other chroniclers of the "Invisible Hands" behind the libertarian-conservative movement elide from their pocket history is the one factor that sets the Kochs apart from [post-cold war conservatives](#) (and liberals), and that is their untrammelled anti-militarism. The Cato Institute, which was started with Koch money, stood almost alone in Washington [against the first Iraq war](#) [.pdf], and [staunchly opposed](#) the more recent invasion – just as they oppose Obama's wars in [Afghanistan](#) [.pdf] and [beyond](#). Cato has also stood up for our civil liberties, [opposing](#) the PATRIOT Act, and the [whole panoply](#) of post-9/11 repressive measures initiated by the Bush administration and [expanded](#) by Obama. Right after 9/11, the Koch brothers [gave the ACLU \\$20 million](#) to fight off the Bushies' [assault on the Constitution](#) (George Soros gave half as much).

The Kochs stand at the end of a long albeit virtually unknown tradition. The [American Liberty League](#), which Rich and his ideological allies disdain, was financed by many of the same businessmen who later founded the biggest organized peace movement in our history, the [America First Committee](#). A thoroughgoing anti-interventionism motivated these men, as much as horror at what Roosevelt was doing on the home front.

Contrary to Rich's assertion that the Liberty Leaguers were a bunch of reactionary Republicans, in fact they were mostly dissident Democrats, such as League chairman [Jouett Shouse](#), a GM executive, former chairman of the Executive Committee of the Democratic Party. The leadership included two former Democratic presidential candidates, [Alfred E. Smith](#) and [John W. Davis](#), and [John Raskob](#), another GM executive and former Democratic national chairman. Contra Rich, they were a bit more thoughtful than their alleged legatees in the Tea party, who think Obama is a 'socialist.'" It was Al Smith, who [declared](#):

"Don't let anyone tell you that President Roosevelt is a Communist. That is not so. Or don't let anyone tell you he is a Socialist. That is not so. He is neither a Communist nor a Socialist—any

more than I am—but something has taken place in this country—there is a certain kind of foreign 'ism' crawling over this country. What it is I don't know. What its first name will be when it's christened I haven't the slightest idea. But I know it is here, and the sin about it is that [Roosevelt] doesn't seem to know it."

What the Liberty League and its successors opposed was the centralization of all power in the hands of the State: they saw [the New Deal](#) as an assault on the Constitution, and the distinctly American idea that government must be strictly limited, as opposed to the European concept of the [Total State](#), which was fashionable among intellectuals at the time. When Roosevelt plotted to get us involved in the European war, the anti-New Dealers joined with many Democrats and progressives, such as [Burton K. Wheeler](#), [the LaFollettes](#), and [Norman Thomas](#), the Socialist party standard-bearer, in organizing the America First Committee, which campaigned against the President's [largely covert](#) efforts to drag us into the conflict.

Phillips-Fein identifies [Jasper Crane](#), a Dupont executive, as one of the sinister "Invisible Hands" plotting against the New Deal, and it was in a letter to Crane that [Rose Wilder Lane](#), the libertarian activist who served as Crane's ideological adviser, expressed the apprehension that motivated her and her comrades in their opposition to intervention and all things Rooseveltian: that we would fight national socialism on the European front, only to succumb to a [homemade version](#) of it on the home front.

It was, at the time, a valid fear: the President had tried to [pack the Supreme Court](#) in order to push through his program, and the spectacle of various "isms" of a totalist nature marching across Europe and Asia was enough to invest this fear with a certain immediacy. Today, as we wage [endless global war](#), and the trustification of the American economy [proceeds apace](#) under President Obama, this [same fear](#) is rising up from the populist grassroots, much to the chagrin of Frank Rich and the entire political class in Washington and New York, which dreads any popular expression of outrage at the depredations of government. Why can't the hoi polloi just shut up and take their medicine? After all, we know what's good for them.

Posing as populists, however fake, Rich and [his friends](#) in the administration can't hope to make any progress with that line, so they came up with this tycoons-against-government narrative, which seeks to create a conspiracy theory in order to explain rising [popular opposition](#) to the Obama-ite agenda of Big Government and perpetual war.

It won't work, because it has nothing to do with the facts. Rich opines that none of Mayer's blogger critics "found any factual errors in her 10,000 words," but the piece is riddled with them, not to mention based on a completely false premise, as stated by Rich:

"Her article caused a stir among those in Manhattan's liberal elite who didn't know that David Koch, widely celebrated for his cultural philanthropy, is not merely another rich conservative Republican but the founder of the Americans for Prosperity Foundation, which, as Mayer writes with some understatement, 'has worked closely with the Tea Party since the movement's inception.'"

Manhattan's liberal elites may be content to get their reporting on the inner workings of the conservative-libertarian movement from *The New Yorker*, perhaps because of the [cartoons](#), but the tea parties were created by another wing of the libertarian movement, and not the Kochtopus, which only later – after the movement took off – decided to go along for the ride. The first tea parties were organized by supporters of Ron Paul, who, on the 234th anniversary of the Boston Tea Party, in December 2007, [held rallies across the country](#) and held a "money bomb" for Paul's campaign raising the all-time record for a single day's political fund-raising. The organizations affiliated with the Kochs have long kept their distance from Rep. Paul: they view him as an [unbridled radical](#), and one who – worse, from their perspective – can't be controlled or reined in.

This is typical of the methods of the Koch organizations, which rarely initiate anything: instead, they glom on to an existing movement, "entryist"-style, and bore from within. One example: when the independent campaign of [John Anderson](#) for President took off, and stole the thunder of the Libertarian Party's 1980 presidential campaign, they joined Anderson's briefly-existing "National Unity Party" in the hopes of taking it over. Like most of their entryist tactics, this one flopped spectacularly, with the Andersonites rejecting their wise counsel and opting to go their own way.

The Rich-Mayer conspiracy narrative that puts the Kochs at the epicenter of a Vast Right-Wing Cabal to Take Over America creates a fearsome amalgam that throws everyone to Obama's right in the same pot, creating a goulash of some rather discordant ingredients. Rupert Murdoch isn't funding the Tea Parties, as much as Fox News is promoting them: [he is funding the Weekly Standard](#), the chief organ of yet another rightist groupuscule, the neoconservatives, which is [seeking to hitch a ride](#) on the Tea Party bandwagon. [These are the mosque-bashers](#), who seek to scapegoat Muslim Americans the way Rich's hero, Roosevelt, [scapegoated Japanese-Americans](#). Yet the Cato crowd has not joined that particular lynch mob, and it is totally unfair to group the Kochs with Murdoch and the neocons.

Another point to make is that the Rich-Mayer narrative portrays the Koch brothers as dangerous "radicals," whose anti-government politics are close to anarchism. If only! The truth is that the entire history of this tendency is one of almost fanatical moderation: if anything is to be gleaned from their thirty-five year history as an organized force on the right, it is that they often mistake respectability for success. In 1980, when their chosen candidate for President, Libertarian nominee Ed Clark, appeared on national television in an appearance that has become legendary in libertarian circles, he described libertarianism as "[low tax liberalism](#)"! The final straw, as far as many LP activists were concerned, came when Clark (at Cato President Ed Crane's urging) refused to come out for abolition of the income tax – a stance which made him less radical than the neoconish Jack Kemp.

Crane and Koch walked out of the Libertarian Party because the party refused to moderate its radicalism – which makes it more than somewhat ironic that Mayer and Rich are attributing the LP's radicalism (long since dissipated, by the way) to the Koch brothers. And when a truly radical libertarian current did emerge, out of the Ron Paul campaign, with a real mass following, the Cato-ites [disdained it](#), telling Chris Hayes of *The Nation* magazine that Paul was too populist and plebeian for their aristocratic oh-so-high-minded selves. He wasn't, they averred, *cosmopolitan* enough.

Always behind the curve, never ahead, the Kochtopus is an unwieldy, and often clueless entity, one that usually goes along with much of the Washington conventional wisdom in order to get along. Far from being the "Invisible Hands" of the American right-wing, or of anything else for that matter, they are Johnnie-come-latelies to the tea party, and simply hope to cash in on a movement that has already taken off.

What is so dishonest about the Rich-Mayer conspiracy theory, however, is not what they say about the Kochs, but what they leave out. That \$20 million contribution to the ACLU, post-9/11, pretty much says it all: these are not reactionary Know-Nothings, or even Republicans of a familiar hue. The fear and hate exuded by the "get the Kochs" crowd is motivated by panic: the fear that the Obama-ites are about to lose their grip on power, and that they'll lose it in part due to the Achilles heel of this administration: our [interventionist foreign policy](#).

The Kochs, and Cato, have been staunch opponents of the Af-Pak war, as well as the escalation of the war on our civil liberties that George W. Bush started and Obama has continued. The biggest fear of the Obama cultists is that this potent combination – opposition to Big Government and foreign wars – will coalesce in a populist upsurge against Washington. If allowed to take off, such a movement would appeal to the Obama-ite's base, which, [you'll recall](#), came together initially due to Obama's supposed "antiwar" credentials. Now that his administration is [handing out trillions](#) to the banksters, the left-wing of the Democratic party is beginning to grumble, and there's a rebellion brewing in the ranks – which [Obama's wars](#), in Afghanistan and Pakistan, could ignite into a prairie fire.

In which case, rather than FDR, the model for the Obama presidency may turn out to be [Lyndon Baines Johnson](#), who was harried out of office by antiwar protesters shouting "hey hey LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?!"

God knows, I am no fan of the Kochtopus: I've often pointed out their shortcomings, from a libertarian perspective, in this space. They betrayed their founding principles time and time again, [driving out](#) their [former intellectual mentor](#), [Murray Rothbard](#), when he wouldn't toe the party line, and refusing to this day to acknowledge him as the true founder and inspirer of the Cato Institute. They then smeared and demonized him, trying to cut off such support as he had. Yet the Rothbardian wing of the movement prospered without Koch money, and eventually gave birth to [the Ron Paul campaign](#): the most successful libertarian effort in our movement's storied history.

This underscores the paucity and one-dimensionality of the Rich-Mayer conspiracy theory, which posits that everything is about money: yes, money can help create a movement, but it cannot sustain it, or ensure its success. The Ron Paul campaign was pathetically underfunded, in the beginning, until the Ron Paul for President "money bomb" taught the rest of the political world how online fundraising is really done. It's passion – ideological passion – that energizes political movements: money is an afterthought. The Frank Riches of this world think money determines everything: a curiously plutocratic idea for alleged liberals to hold, but there you have it. The truth, however, is that ideas rule the world, not dollars – and the "Invisible Hands" are not the billionaires, but the ideologues and activists to whom they must inevitably turn.

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