



## How George Soros Became The Right's Scapegoat

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Over the years, false and antisemitic attacks on George Soros have been used to undermine pro-democracy causes and the struggle to expand human rights.

George Soros, Chairman, Soros Fund Management, USA, is captured during the session 'Redesigning the International Monetary System: A Davos Debate' at the Annual Meeting 2011 of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, January 27, 2011. (Copyright by World Economic/Photo by Michael Wuertenberg)

*Rand Engel directed a humanitarian program in Kosovo 1999-2015. They received multiple grants from Soros-funded Open Society Foundations.*

George Soros is an object of extreme hatred on the right. It has made him an assassination target. The mention of his name on a YouTube video prompts anger and slurs at astronomical ratios to positive comments. Antisemites feel emboldened to renew centuries-old tropes. These attacks seek to undermine his influence not in the competition of ideas but by a poisoning of discourse.

A 2019 Intercept article traces the defamation of Soros to an on-going Fox News assault that began with Bill O'Reilly on April 23, 2007. O'Reilly and his guests that night said Soros was secretly giving "millions to politicians who will do his bidding;" "buy influence among some liberal politicians and smear people with whom he disagrees;" Soros is "really the Dr. Evil of the whole world of left-wing foundations. ... He really hates this country." As the Intercept documented, Fox host Glenn Beck at a later date, on Fox, repackaged antisemitic tropes in attacking Soros.

Melik Kaylan, in Forbes, writes, "For the appeal of populism to succeed you need an inside-outside enemy, one you can personify concretely then attribute all ills thither, however disparate. ... George Soros got picked for that role with malicious precision and wrongly so starting in the late 1990s." Kaylan writes of interviewing people throughout the former Soviet bloc in the early 2000s who credited Soros with funding "the entire community of pro-democracy intellectuals, former dissidents, open-society politicians" – people who could perhaps be an alternative to the ex-communists and mafia-types who sought to control these new fragile states.

Almost endless conspiracy theories aim to muddy Soros. However, reliable news sources refute that he or the Open Society Foundation ever paid protesters, funded immigrant caravans, support Antifa, said they want to destroy America, was a nazi, financed pedophilia rings... on and on with hateful nonsense where there is neither evidence nor the remotest possibility of such a public figure hiding it.

Soros is a complex figure, and one can look askance at the source of his wealth, hedge fund management – but his work and motives have been transparent. I’m writing somewhat from a personal vantage point, as explained later in this article.

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Soros’ Journey, a refugee story

Hitler’s Nazi regime, the Soviet communist regime, the current Russian neo-fascist autocracy, and the American neo-conspiratorial right have at least one thing in common: in various ways, these three despised and despise American financier and philanthropist George Soros.

George Soros was 13 years old when Hitler took direct control of Soros’ native Hungary in March 1944.

Soros, a Jew, was marked for death. 565,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered, while only 255,000 survived. Soros was a survivor at age 14. Modern purveyors of hatred and ideological opponents who will use any libel to gain advantage, paint him as a Nazi collaborator. This claim has been completely debunked by those who actually investigate the truth. Soros survived the Second World War and the Holocaust in Hungary. He survived the 50-day 1944-1945 siege of Budapest, when approximately 38,000 civilians died. He survived the new Stalinist Hungarian regime that ruled the country.

Soros fled Hungary in 1947. He made it to the United Kingdom, where he worked odd jobs, walked because he could not afford bus fare, borrowed and read philosophy and economics books, and on his second try, as his English language skills improved, was admitted to the London School of Economics (LSE). A major influence at LSE was the renowned philosopher Karl Popper, whose book *The Open Society and Its Enemies* inspired Soros’ creation many years later of the Open Society Foundations (formerly the Open Society Institute). During Soros’ third year at LSE Popper was his tutor.

Soros went into finance. He credited Popper’s General Theory of Reflexivity as being fundamental to his understanding of markets – and his rise from being a poor immigrant, survivor of the Holocaust, and a descending iron curtain, to being one of the world’s wealthiest individuals. In Soros’ words,

“While I was reading Popper I was also studying economic theory, and I was struck by the contradiction between Popper’s emphasis on imperfect understanding and the theory of perfect competition in economics, which postulated perfect knowledge. This led me to start questioning the assumptions of economic theory. I replaced the postulates of rational expectations and efficient markets with my own principles of fallibility and reflexivity.”

Soros Fund Management, founded in 1970, has consistently been an industry profit leader.

Soros’ success is the kind of story that Republicans and conservatives usually celebrate. Not only is he an incredible business success – but, conservatives would *usually* say, “See, any person can rise from poverty with hard work! The government can stay out of education, health, support for indigent children...” In this way the poor can be blamed for their own poverty, ignoring that the odds of being a billionaire right now, world-wide, are 2.4 million to one, and many millions to one to rise from extremely difficult beginnings to the heights of wealth.

## The “Self-Made” Score

Forbes Magazine devotes an annual issue to billionaires. On the 2020 Forbes list of the 400 Wealthiest Americans, Soros was #56 with \$8.6 billion. According to the 2018 Forbes listing, Soros had donated to the Open Society Foundation more than \$32 billion which made Soros the 3rd largest philanthropist, and the largest by percentage of wealth donated to philanthropic causes on the Forbes list.

Forbes also rates how much each person contributed to his or her own wealth creation – the “Self-Made Score”. For example, Alice Walton, who inherited all of her Walmart’s wealth, has a Self-Made score of 1. A person who started life with major obstacles such as war, genocide, poverty, or living in a totalitarian regime could be a 10: George Soros, for example, is a 10. Oprah Winfrey, who overcame poverty and sexual abuse, is another 10. Unsurprisingly, having a billionaire parent means about a zillion times better chance of ending up on the billionaire list than starting life in the “10” category.

(As an aside, along with being financially successful and funding the world-changing Open Society Foundations, Soros has written 15 books. Even I could hate him for that.)

## Soros and the Koch Brothers –Wealth, Intention and Social Change

Many wealthy people are mega-donors supporting various political candidates, philosophies, or causes – or attacking others. The most iconic current mega-donors supporting conservative/right-wing candidates and causes have been brothers Charles Koch and David Koch (deceased 2019). George Soros is the most noted supporter of center-left causes. (I write “center-left” as Soros would have been in sync with some more moderate Republican positions before the last twenty years of that party’s radicalization.)

Soros and the Kochs have invested heavily in the intellectual underpinnings of their positions. The Kochs receive significant analysis and unfavorable press on the Left. Soros is vilified on the Right. It is interesting to note contrasts between them.

Soros-funded Open Society Foundations have supported press freedoms and development, minority rights and advancement, ending apartheid, education, the art of debate and discourse, empowerment of women, civil society development, civil rights, social justice, immigration reform, journalism, and drug reform among a multitude of activities. A number of primarily authoritarian governments including Russia, Turkey, Hungary, North Macedonia, Pakistan, Poland, and Romania have targeted the Open Society Foundation, its local offices and staff with harassment or closure.

The Koch brothers have been the founders and or lead funders of the most influential political theory and action organizations on the right, some 85 organizations, including: The Heritage Foundation, the CATO Institute, Americans for Prosperity, and the Center to Protect Patient Rights. Going back a generation, Fred Koch, Charles’ and David’s father, was one of the founders of the far-right conspiracy-peddling John Birch Society – but to be fair, David and Charles resigned from JBS early. The Kochs have been major donors to ALEC, the American Legislative Exchange Council, which develops model legislation for state legislatures: making voting more restrictive, privatizing schools, supporting private prisons and migrant detention centers, deregulating energy production and transport, opposing health insurance mandates, etc.

The Kochs have spent “liberally” on party politics, budgeting \$889 million for the 2016 election cycle, and \$400 million budgeted for the 2018 elections. Soros has as well. Contributions to party politics, to candidates and parties, to PACs, and to lobbying are not tax-deductible charitable contributions – or are not supposed to be.

The authoritarian governments that claim the Open Society Foundations are interfering in the politics of their countries are right that the Foundation in their country may be working for inclusion of minorities, a free press, responsive politics, women’s rights, for example. They label this interference in their politics. The Foundation is not interfering in party politics, but it is using all of its available tools on behalf of an expansive open society. On his own, George Soros donates to political candidates and organizations. The Open Society does not.

ALEC, remember Koch-supported, is registered as a 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization. It does not donate directly to candidates or parties. It does charge companies large “membership” dues, it does push its legislative agendas. Common Cause and the Center for Media and Democracy call that lobbying. I believe there is a qualitative difference between Soros’ approach to building a good society and the Kochs’: that the Open Society is legitimately public interest and disinterested in the sense of not bringing economic benefit to Soros, while ALEC, as an example and some others of the Koch-funded organizations are not public interest and do bring economic benefit to the Kochs. Of course, one’s own political orientation seems to influence their perception of this.

Brave New Films’ Koch Brothers Exposed documents Koch support of making voting more difficult, union-busting, opposing any minimum wage, dismantling Social Security, expanding extractive industries, as examples. (Koch is backing away from the Trump aspects of the Republican Party and even supporting a few Democrats.) The Kochs believe minimizing government maximizes growth. It certainly maximizes their income growth. The Kochs’ charitable giving is a 2 on the Forbes list where 1 is smallest percentage of giving and 5 is highest. Soros is a “5”.

George Soros, on the one hand, Charles Koch on another, invest heavily in getting the world they want. If we look at their respective interests what kind of world do we want?

It’s Personal

For me, the vilification of Soros is tedious, insulting, ugly. It’s also personal, partly because I am Jewish, and the denigration of Soros trades on anti-Semitism, but further, it’s connected to my work of 16 years in Kosovo for a humanitarian organization. During that time, we received more than a dozen grants from the Kosovo Foundation for Open Society (KFOS), a Soros-funded foundation. The first grant we received, in 1999, supported young refugee artists uprooted from their homes by war, surviving in camps in Macedonia.

Most of the grants we received over the years supported educational development for ethnic minority Roma children in Kosovo, training for community leaders, training and stipends to young people as tutors, and advocacy. KFOS (Soros) money prepared people to live productively and decently in society, to pursue education, to advocate to government, to improve health, to debate issues, to do needed research, to preserve their cultures and present them to themselves and others.

Moreover, I knew not only KFOS, but we also worked with the European Open Society headquarters in Budapest and I was familiar with Open Society activity elsewhere in the region and with other programs supported by the Foundation. I knew students attending Soros-funded Central European University in Budapest. The generosity, intelligence, and extraordinary breadth of activities supported by George Soros and the Open Society Foundations was and is inspiring.

Progressives and liberals critique the Kochs and their political agenda, uncover hidden connections, and seek to curtail their influence. Investigators may highlight the self-interest in many of their charitable investments, even boycott their businesses. They may see them as greedy – which is certainly a strong charge. They do not paint them as traitors, or betrayers, or pedophiles. The attacks on Soros often portray him as evil, a spider with his web, a puppet master pulling strings. Soros-haters use the messaging of the vile attacks and dehumanization that enabled the Holocaust. There is a difference.

### The Open Society

“Open Society” is not a lightly chosen or vacuous name. Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* is a seminal work of political philosophy. Popper writes, “only democracy provides an institutional framework that permits reform without violence, and so the use of reason in political matters.” His democracy is not, for example, the democracy of ancient Athens: the vote restricted to a very limited class, influence granted to demagogues and oracles, to men, not women, to citizens not slaves... The “open society” is much more: inclusive, experimental, and grounded in scientific method. Popper, like his student George Soros, was a refugee, though he saw what was coming and found an academic post outside of his native Austria in 1937.

In creating an “open society institute” George Soros was betting on inclusion of the excluded and oppressed, experimentation where results could be far from guaranteed, freedom from autocrats on all levels, and rejection of barriers that limit options to old, tested, culturally sanctified, and class or gender defined boundaries.

Enemies of the open society typically treat life as a zero-sum game: they get more only if others get less. When others do not agree to less, force is required – violence. This is often, of course, played out as ethno-nationalist identity politics. Opponents can be “taken off the board” by disenfranchisement, character assassination, or more direct violence.

Soros represents a threat to the status quo whether totalitarian, authoritarian, or economic. Soros seeks to broaden access to education, political power, environmental protection, and government resources, and to include people often excluded because of sexual identity, national minorities, gender and race. Yes, inclusion for some people is threatening. Bill Gates and the Gates Foundation, by comparison is not working directly in the political sphere, nor challenging values. He’s aiming for concrete (indeed extraordinary) measurable goals. Soros is not so measurable. The open society challenges how we as humans think and act.

Popper’s open society may not level the playing field, but it makes it more broadly accessible. Looking beyond institutions and mechanisms at society-wide attitudinal change is challenging. Institutions and elections are vital expressions of a Democracy – but not the be and end all. Democracies can do hateful things: elect “strong men”; legalize segregation, gender discrimination, and voter disenfranchisement; protect police misconduct; sacrifice climate and environment to short term outcomes; allocate resources vastly disproportionately to schools in

poor area and rich areas; and on and on. An open society aims to empower the disempowered to use every available tool compatible with democracy to create a more just society, and to enable (push? shame? convince?) the “haves” to understand why an open society is not only more just, but also is ultimately better for the “haves” as well as for the “have nots”.

Popper’s open society is Soros’ open society. Popper conceived it as political philosophy. Soros seeks to realize it through vast funding of programs and projects around the world, challenging the status quo and test driving the prototype models – the programs and projects developed on the ground, by the people living their daily lives, in countries around the globe. It is and has been a profoundly ambitious project. Should anyone – should George Soros – be vilified for trying to repair the world?