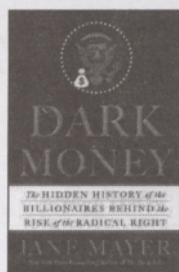


"Dark Money:" How the billionaire boys club bought our democracy

BY MEGAN WILDHOOD
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST



"Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right" by Jane Mayer

If you care about the poor, the environment, fair taxes, workers' rights, consumer protection and safety regulations, you're likely pretty frustrated with what's going on in American politics. You might ask, why doesn't the United States lead the way in climate change solutions when it's one of the global leaders in pollution and resource consumption? Or, where is all this income inequality coming from if we are supposed to have progressed beyond the Gilded Age? And what, most importantly, can we do about it?

In "Dark Money," Jane Mayer fills nearly 400 pages attempting to answer all but that last question. She, like many others, has been smeared for her work to expose the secretive, erstwhile illegal activity of shady campaign contributions that came to the surface after the Supreme Court ruled on Citizens United. Conservative media outlets funded by billionaire donors have attempted to discredit her facts, frame her for plagiarism and associate her work with 'fringe' movements or radical activist groups as opposed to robust, researched journalism.

It is not, as the now-common narrative goes, excessive government that caused the 2008 recession, or the limp to incomplete recovery. It's not excessive government that caused stagnant wages that gutted the middle class, climate action paralysis, the crumbling transportation grid, increasing poverty and homelessness. In fact, a handful of magnates, headed up by brothers, Charles

and David Koch, who inherited most of their wealth, have spent the past 40 years constructing an invisible infrastructure that requires only inputs of tremendous amounts of money in order to produce desired political results.

Mayer takes us through the harrowing journey of the Koch boys and their band of billionaires toward a concentration of power that could be its own political party. She spotlights key players and their roles in this unprecedented takeover of not only the American political system, but also of how Americans think about politics, the planet and the poor. She details how every thread of the American life – from universities to think tanks to news outlets to health care to social policy – has been spun by and for the ultra-rich. It infuriates and fascinates the rest of the 99.9 percent with how they managed to undo the work of the Progressive Era for the .01 percent's own self-interest, while crafting an evidently convincing enough narrative that their self-serving policies and ideas are actually beneficial to the rest of us. They feel they are, in fact, the saviors of the country.

If you want to understand what's going on in American politics (and potentially get very angry), Jane Mayer has done great work in exposing what the Koch brothers worked very hard to keep hidden from the public eye. It would seem logical that to get to a solution, you must first understand the problem. If you think shredding the social safety net, taking no action on climate change, believing that the poor deserve their lot because they're lazy and don't want

to work are problems, then Mayer's book can lead to understanding the small knot of extremely wealthy Americans who have weaponized philanthropic giving to mask money trails and keep up the appearance that they are benevolently helping the country with its troubles.

It's important to know who pays for the ideas we consume and Mayer's reportage on the Koch-backed moneyed coup will either confirm what you already know – if you're one of the millions struggling to get by in this country – or invite you to consider a different narrative about why things are going the way they've been going in our nation. By the end of the book, I was seething: Charles Koch would make a joke growing up that he "just wanted [his] fair share, which was all of it." Koch gathered his rich friends around him to stop at nothing – recessions, increasing homelessness and the need for one person to work two jobs just to make ends meet, a polluted, injured planet – to get what he wanted.

But in the age of information, when we have unfathomable amounts of data at our fingertips, simply producing more of it isn't enough, even if it's accurate. Learning how a few ultra-rich Americans have rigged the system for themselves for what they hope is perpetuity is not something you do "just so you know." I want to do something about this but I don't know what. Unfortunately, Mayer doesn't tell me.

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