

The Missing Link: 'Despotism in defense of freedom'

It's the missing chapter: a key to understanding the politics of the past half century. To read Nancy MacLean's new book- **Democracy in Chains**: the deep history of the radical right's stealth plan for America- is to see what was previously invisible.

The history professor's work on the subject began by accident. In 2013 she stumbled across a deserted clapboard house on the campus of George Mason University in Virginia. It was stuffed with the unsorted archives of a man who had died that year, whose name is probably unfamiliar to you: **James McGill Buchanan**. She writes that the first thing she picked up was a stack of confidential letters concerning millions of dollars transferred to the university by the billionaire **Charles Koch**.

Her discoveries in that house of horrors reveal how Buchanan, in collaboration with business tycoons and the institutes they founded, developed a hidden program for suppressing democracy on behalf of the very rich. The program is now reshaping politics, and not just in the US.

Buchanan was strongly influenced by both the neoliberalism of **Friedrich Hayek** and **Ludwig von Mises** and the property supremacism of **John C Calhoun**, who argued, in the first half of the 19th century, that freedom consists of the absolute right to use your property- **including your slaves**- however you may wish. Any institution that impinges on this right is an agent of oppression, exploiting men of property on behalf of the undeserving masses.

James Buchanan brought these influences together to create what he called **"public choice theory"**. He argued that a society could not be considered free unless every citizen has the right to veto its decisions. What he meant by this was that no one should be taxed against their will. But the rich were being exploited by people who use their votes to demand money that others have earned, through involuntary taxes to support public spending and welfare. Allowing workers to form trade unions and imposing graduated income taxes are forms of **"differential or discriminatory legislation"** against the owners of capital.

Any clash between what he called **"freedom (allowing the rich to do as they wished)** and democracy should be resolved in favor of freedom. In his book **The Limits of Liberty**, he noted that:

"Despotism may be the only organizational alternative to the political structure that we observe."

Despotism in defense of freedom.



His prescription was what he called a **"constitutional revolution"**: creating irrevocable restraints to limit democratic choice. Sponsored throughout his working life by wealthy foundations, billionaires and corporations, he developed both a theoretical account of what this constitutional revolution would look like and a strategy for implementing it.

He explained how attempts to desegregate schooling in the American South could be frustrated by setting up a network of state-sponsored private schools. It was he who first proposed the privatization of universities and the imposition of full tuition fees on students: his original purpose was to crush student activism. He urged the privatization of Social Security and of many other functions of the state. He sought to break the links between people and government and demolish trust in public institutions. He aimed, in short, to save capitalism from democracy.

In 1980, he was able to put the program into action. He was invited to Chile, where he helped the Pinochet dictatorship to write a new constitution, which, partly through the clever devices Buchanan proposed, has proved impossible to reverse in its entirety. Amid the torture and killings, he advised the government to extend its programs of privatization, austerity, monetary restraint, deregulation and the destruction of trade unions: a package that helped trigger economic collapse in 1982.

None of this troubled the Swedish Academy, that, through his devotee at Stockholm University, Assar Lindbeck, in 1986 awarded James Buchanan the Nobel Memorial Prize for

economics. It is one of several decisions that have turned this prize toxic.

But his power really began to be felt when Charles Koch, currently the seventh richest man in the US, decided that Buchanan held the key to the transformation he sought. Koch saw even such ideologues as **Milton Friedman** and **Alan Greenspan** as **"sellouts"**, as they sought to improve the efficiency of government rather than destroying it altogether. But Buchanan took it all the way.

MacLean says that Charles Koch poured millions into Buchanan's work at George Mason University, whose law and economics departments look as much like corporate-funded think-tanks as they do academic faculties. He employed the economist to select the revolutionary **"cadre"** that would implement his program (Murray Rothbard, at the Cato Institute that Koch founded, had urged the billionaire to study Lenin's techniques and apply them to the libertarian cause). Between them, they began to develop a program for changing the rules.

Buchanan saw stealth as crucial. He told his collaborators that **"conspiratorial secrecy is at all times essential."** Instead of revealing their ultimate destination, they would proceed by incremental steps. For example, in seeking to destroy the Social Security system, they would claim to be saving it, arguing that it would fail without a series of radical **"reforms"**. Gradually they would build a **"counter-intelligentsia"**, allied to a **"vast network of political power"** that would eventually become the new establishment.

Through the network of think-tanks that Koch and other billionaires have sponsored, through their transformation of the Republican Party, and the hundreds of millions they have poured into state congressional and judicial races, through the mass colonization of Trump's administration by members of this network and lethally effective campaigns against everything from public health to action on climate change, it would be fair to say that Buchanan's vision is maturing in the USA.

There is indeed an inherent conflict between what he called **"economic freedom"** and political liberty. Complete freedom for billionaires means poverty, insecurity, pollution and collapsing public services for everyone else. Because we will not vote for this, it can be delivered only through deception and authoritarian control. The choice we face is between unfettered capitalism and democracy. You cannot have both.

Buchanan's program amounts to a prescription for totalitarian capitalism. And his disciples have only begun to implement it. But at least, thanks to Maclean's discoveries, we can now apprehend the agenda.

One of the first rules of politics is know your enemy. We're getting there.

George Monbiot
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The Muir Report:

Like a pregnant cat, the gift that keeps on giving, The Trump administration once again exceeds expectations with the hiring and firing of Anthony Scaramucci, by far, the most interesting of the current set of buffoons in the White House. He was director of communications and what do you want from a communications chief? the ability to communicate, and that he had hands down. Rince Preibus was a FUCKING paranoid schizophrenic, we can all understand that, we call him "rancid penis" We can all relate to that. I like a guy who uses FUCK more than two times in a sentence, means he's from New York, get over it....and, he's a hedge fund operator, hedge fund is synonymous with stealing old ladies life savings, and his wife divorced him while she was pregnant...the trifecta, how could Trump have fired such an accomplished skill. Joe Pesci was getting ready to play him on Saturday Night Live. We were going to get Scaramucci bobble head dolls, now, nothing.

On a more somber note, two of Sohum's most illustrious citizens and tireless advocates for the poor, Paul Encimer and Deb Carey, attended a regional WRAP conference and an end to homelessness demonstration, in San Francisco last week. The signs were colorful and the participants lively, all 65 of them, a far cry from the thousands who showed during Obama's first term. Of course, there was false hope then. The following day there was a demo against animal cruelty, which drew a crowd of thousands. Perhaps I'm on the wrong side of things. My advice to people



down on their luck, get a wheelchair so you can sleep in public and get a pet so you can beg enough money to eat. Maybe we can hire Scaramucci as a voice for the homeless population, aw FUCK that....

Thank God, people questioning their sexuality cannot bomb shoeless people overseas, from a bunker, using a simulated video game. We, as Americans, have a certain standard to uphold. The world looks to us for spiritual guidance. People who are getting killed deserve to have their lives taken by someone in the state of grace. We cannot countenance the killing of people by the use of poisonous gas, so we bomb them to smithereens instead, that sort of humanitarian effort is appreciated, believe me, no one wants to say their spouses and children were killed by a sexual degenerate. We owe it to the world to show the way.

-Muir Walker