

*Democracy in Chains:
The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*

Nancy MacLean

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Bartholomew Steer

This book ticks a lot of boxes.

First, it does not shrink from acknowledging the existence of a conspiracy working against the interests of the ordinary folk. That it centres on neo-liberal economic theories and the money of – amongst others – the Koch brothers and the Mont Pelerin Society will come as no surprise to readers of this journal. The surprise may be the scope and depth revealed.

Second, it respects the evidence and produces chapter and verse collated by an eminent historian who had the sense to fall on the archives of her anti-hero James Buchanan, the Nobel Prize winning neo-liberal economist.

Third, it does not fail to identify the smoking guns and culprits responsible for many of the bad things going on in the world.

Finally, it is written with verve and plenty of entertaining anecdotes. Other reviews have pointed to weaknesses¹ but these are forgivable and do not undermine the gist of the story. Moreover McLean has provided a robust defence.²

The links drawn to the politics of the deep south of the USA and its attachment to slavery provides a persuasive link explaining why certain universities (principally George Mason University, South Carolina) have promoted ideas of elite interests – and damn as unnatural anything that would threaten those interests. It also shows why James Buchanan found a convivial home and sponsors for his ideas. Others have noted the pervasive trail of slavery on our culture³ and McLean's arguments ring

¹ <<http://tinyurl.com/y7ekya56>> or <<https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/7/14/15967788/democracy-shackles-james-buchanan-intellectual-history-maclean>>

² <<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Nancy-MacLean-Responds-to-Her/240699/>>

³ <<http://tinyurl.com/yxebep6>> or <<https://www.deepdyve.com/lp/brill/cultural-formation-and-appropriation-in-the-era-of-merchant-capitalism-MA5pdoHjuP?>>

true. The connection to the defender of slavery, Senator John C Calhoun, is clear and the association damning. If you have never heard of him you will learn a lot about where many of the ideas of the Hard Right come from.⁴

The focus of the book is the long struggle of neo-liberal ideas to develop and reach their current level of ascendancy in the public sphere. From the first it appears that, despite Buchanan's wishes, there have been plenty of hangers-on and promoters of his ideas who see in neutral sounding concepts (such as public choice theory) the hammers to destroy the New Deal/social democrat/Keynesian thinking that dominated for so long. Buchanan worked with better known figures such as Milton Friedman and advised General Pinochet in Chile; but it has only been since the Koch Brothers became convinced that Buchanan provided the credibility to advance the Kochs' agenda that his ideas had the financial push required to achieve the dominance they now have in elite thinking.

Buchanan wanted to work on the cast-iron theories that would bolster right-wing thinking and inform policy-making. Public choice theory has achieved some success – a success that rests not on theory but on its friends relentlessly pushing it to the gullible. For example, it seizes on the fact that actors in the public sector may be guided by self-interest but seems to ignore the rather larger risk of private interests dominating on the dubious basis that the market cannot be wrong.

If it all were at the level of competition between ideas it would not be so bad but fair competition is not what this book shows. What is revealed is the way constitutional blocks are being put in place to prevent governments ever being in a position to challenge elite interests. This means that, as in Chile, there can be changes in government, but no ability for governments to enact changes in laws to put their policies into action. The core Hard Right beliefs or mantras of: taxation and fiscal blocks on wealth and information, trade agreements ruled by corporate interests, education policy promoting 'free' or academy schools, voter registration schemes denying votes to poor and black people, the promotion of corporate lobbying directly of politicians and governments – all find their inspiration and funding from the neo-liberal institutions described in the book.

Tellingly it describes how young people are disengaging from politics as 'disgust spreads with a system that is so beholden to corporate power, so impermeable to deep change, and so inimical to majority interests'. (p.

⁴ His influence continues to this day, as George Mason University recently launched the 'James Buchanan Fellowship'. See <<https://economics.gmu.edu/articles/12547>>

168) This is no accident and may even be being promoted by the latest generation of right-wing manipulators, as the inquiries into social media involvement in the Trump election and the Brexit referendum suggests.

That the *gilets jaunes* and protesters in Greece, Italy and other countries persist in asking for government to act in their interests only girds right-wingers into resisting the claims being made on their wealth and control. This is the public choice with which the book concludes and readers of the book will be in no doubt as to what is at stake.

Some of MacLean's critics have accused her of peddling a conspiracy theory. She responded to that charge.

'As a scholar, I understand the problems of conspiracy theories and while I never called this movement a conspiracy in the book, we do face a problem that our language has not caught up to our world.

In hindsight, I wish I'd said more about that in my book because we do not yet have a conceptual system adequate to capture what is happening. On the one hand, yes, absolutely, there is a big movement out there on the right that has varied sources and whose many members are openly declaring their intentions. On the other hand, there is also an audacious elite project underway that is not open with even these rank-and-file followers about its endgame.

Economic inequality has now advanced to the point that several hundred incredibly wealthy donors, who are hostile to our democracy as it currently operates and are led by a messianic multibillionaire, have contributed vast amounts of dark money to fund dozens upon dozens of ostensibly separate but actually connected organizations that are exploiting what Buchanan's team taught about "the rules of the game" of modern governance in a cold-eyed bid to bend our institutions and policies to goals they know most voters do not share (such as the repeal of Obamacare without replacement).

And they're operating within the law, informed by some of the best legal talent money can buy, so it's not a conspiracy, by definition, because that involves illegality. The world has never seen anything like it before; no wonder it's hard to find the right term to depict it. It's a vexing challenge to understand, let alone stop, and in hindsight I wish had been more explicit about that conceptual challenge. But so far no criticism has made me question the fundamentals of the research, the narrative, or the interpretation. I stand by those.'⁵

⁵ See note 2.

My reaction on reading the book was to see it as showing a vast conspiracy to limit the scope of democracy, and damage the interests of ordinary people. Despite McLean's own equivocation and the risks associated with calling out a conspiracy, I stick with my gut instinct and McLean's final judgement, which I think meets the duck criterion in full. In other words if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks . . . it's probably a duck.