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## Illuminating the Dark History behind the Contemporary Assault on Public Interests

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### Abstract

Nancy MacLean’s recent work, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America*, reveals the quiet development of a powerful libertarian movement, built by a cadre of economic thinkers and funded by the Koch brothers who sought to free business interests from “parasitic” systems of democratic government. As this review discusses, MacLean’s troublingly important narrative illuminates the racism and deception behind contemporary neoliberal politics.

Nancy MacLean. *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America*. New York: Viking, 2017.

One of the key, bittersweet moments of my graduate education at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee was fighting with friends, colleagues, and allies against Governor Scott Walker’s “Budget Repair Bill” in the late winter of 2011. Promising to “fix” a budget crisis largely manufactured through new tax cuts for the wealthy and businesses, Walker’s bill sought to strip many organizing rights of public worker unions and portended crippling cuts to public education, environmental regulations, and other legacies of Wisconsin’s proud history of pioneering progressive politics. My colleagues and I happily joined the tens of

thousands (topping 100,000 on some days) of teachers, students, firefighters, police officers, farmers, steelworkers, and many others who occupied the state capitol building in Madison in our collective resolve to maintain the state's commitments to public service and organized labor. Ultimately, state Republican legislators approved the bill through a backdoor process, and protesters (some more reluctantly than others) redirected their efforts toward a failed recall election. As sympathetic journalists revealed Governor Walker's connections to Charles and David Koch, however, it increasingly appeared as though we were up against not just a rightward turn in the state's popular politics but also a larger conspiratorial project with both terrifying and hidden implications where our collective resistance did not matter. Yet, even as we watched Walker's vast agenda unfold, it still seemed crazy to think that some kind of right-wing cabal was behind these measures to undermine Wisconsin's deeply rooted progressive traditions.

In *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*, Nancy MacLean confirms the truth behind our suspicions in Wisconsin. MacLean's meticulously researched and beautifully crafted narrative reveals the quiet development of a powerful libertarian movement, built in academic institutions by a cadre of economic thinkers and funded by the Koch brothers and other power brokers who sought to affect constitutional changes that limited democracy. As MacLean explains, these libertarians attempted to free business interests from "parasitic" systems and regulations of majority rule by imposing "locks and bolts" on democratic government and collective interests.

In illuminating this "stealth plan," *Democracy in Chains* provides an invaluable roadmap to the powerful forces that have leveled an uncompromising capitalist crusade against the public institutions and services on which many Americans rely. Many scholars point to Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of Economics as intellectual roots for the "neoliberal turn" of the late twentieth century. MacLean instead points to a comparatively obscure economist, James M. Buchanan, who established institutes (innocuously named the Thomas Jefferson Center for Studies in Political Economy and the Center for the Study of Public Choice) that similarly worked to advance neoliberal ideologies where he taught at the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, and George Mason University. Buchanan developed libertarian theories of social justice and "public choice" that valued personal responsibility and cast tax-based social welfare systems as selfishly parasitic to the deservingly wealthy, which earned him a Nobel Prize for Economics in 1986 and, more important, the adoration and financial support of Charles Koch. As MacLean reveals, Buchanan effectively demonstrated the power of his ideas in practice as he personally guided the regime of General Augusto Pinochet in Chile through a series of constitutional "reforms" that privatized public services, deregulated markets, and hamstrung democratic processes that might challenge the Chilean elite.

Two of MacLean's most important contributions to understanding our contemporary "age of inequality" are her illuminations of the racial politics of neoliberalism and the libertarian movement's reliance on deception and stealth to advance their agenda. As MacLean explains, Buchanan's Thomas Jefferson Institute at the University of Virginia was first created in the wake of the US Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. His opposition to collective interests echoed the slavery logic historically expressed by John C. Calhoun and validated white southern anxieties and resistance to the civil rights movement. The historically racist roots of such ideologies rings true in Walker's Wisconsin, where communities of color bear the brunt of austerity politics. The libertarian movement also cleverly echoed Malcolm X's call for change "by any means necessary." As MacLean reveals, Buchanan and the Kochs came to understand deception and secrecy (what MacLean describes as "crab walking") as imperative to their mission, because if people understood their true intentions to dismantle popular programs, like Social Security, and replace systems of checks and balances with "locks and bolts," no one would support them. Although Walker let the cat out of the bag while he was recorded talking to a business executive shortly after his inauguration, Buchanan's "divide and conquer" strategy played out spectacularly well in Wisconsin as Walker pitted public and private sector workers against each other to achieve "right to work" legislation.

MacLean's troublingly important work effectively ends any lingering question as to whether or not there is a grand right-wing conspiracy to shackle collective interests in favor of unfettered capitalism and calls us to instead build our resistance from there—treating this not as a foregone conclusion but as a fight in which we are already committed.

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