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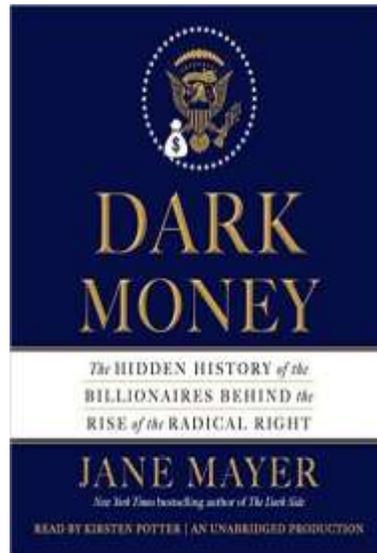
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**Capital, Power, and Education:  
“Dark Money” and the Politics of  
Common-Sense**

**A Critical Essay Review of Jane  
Mayer’s *Dark Money:  
The Hidden History of the  
Billionaires Behind the Rise of the  
Radical Right***

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**Introduction**

For years, there have been powerful arguments that education can best be understood as a political act, as strongly connected to the relations of dominance and subordination in the larger society and to the movements that seek to interrupt these relations (see, for example, Apple, 2004, 2013; Apple, M., Au, W., Gandin, 2009). This is even more visible in the current political context of the United States.

Regardless of the outcome, the 2016 presidential election campaign has been one of the strangest on record. Perhaps one of the most startling moments of the 2016 primary election came when conservative billionaire Charles Koch stated his potential interest in Democratic candidate

Hilary Clinton over Republican front-runner, Donald Trump (LoBianco, 2016). Charles Koch and his brother David, two of the world's top 10 wealthiest individuals, have financed libertarian and conservative political foundations and advocacy groups for the past four decades. His tacit support for Hilary Clinton was surprising all around. A far cry from an interest in progressive politics, Charles Koch's preference for Clinton reflects his disdain for both Trump and the progressive candidate Bernie Sanders alike. That one of the world's most conservative political donors considered lending his support to an establishment Democrat reveals the profound rearrangement of political and economic forces at play this election season.

Or does it? The Koch brothers' influence in the upcoming elections, after all, has been anticipated for months (Confessore, 2016; "Koch Brothers Get Each Other Same Election For Christmas," 2016). Political scientist Thomas Ferguson offers a matter-of-fact explanation of both Trump and the Koch brothers prominence: political parties and candidates first and foremost seek investors for their campaigns; voters are a secondary concern (Ferguson, 1995). From this point of view, Trump's biggest liability to the Republican Party is not his inflammatory disregard of political correctness, but rather his independent wealth. His financial freedom from the Republican apparatus enables his ideological separation; he simply doesn't need the approval of the Bush oligarchy, the Tea Party donors, or the Koch brothers.

Similarly, Trump's financial independence alone makes him a less than palatable candidate to the Kochs. The political cleavage between the conservative billionaires Koch and Trump offers an important amendment to Ferguson's thesis. Rather than political parties seeking investors who will then secure votes, investors such as the Koch brothers seek political parties who will secure their financial and political protection (in both models, readers will note, voters remain secondary). As Ferguson argues, political parties are first and foremost bank accounts; they secure voters in so far as they can finance outreach, media, advertising and data infrastructure (Ferguson, 2016). But as income inequality in the United States grows, the role of political parties becomes almost obsolete, as wealthy individuals, such as the Koch Brothers and Donald Trump, can bankroll their own political infrastructure.

Jane Mayer's stunning new book, *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right*, provides an in-depth expose of the key characters in this political plot twist. With rich attention to detail and savvy analysis of the political influence of the Koch brothers, Mayer

provides an extremely important account of their origins and impact on U.S. politics, from campaign finance to environmental destruction, from tax policy to public education. The Koch brothers' political influence is amplified by the rising rip current of income inequality. And Mayer puts a human face on economist Thomas Piketty's widely cited picture of what such inequality looks like and how it has grown (Piketty, 2014). Although the story of the Koch brothers is notable in large part for the monetary numbers associated with the family (billions made here, millions spent there) Mayer goes beyond a one-dimensional log of the growth and deployment of their investments. Rather, she provides an intimate portrait of the personal and political formation of the Koch brothers and their key allies. We learn not only how much money these conservative leaders possess, but also about the decisions and strategies they adopted in the economy, in the politics of persuasion, and in important aspects of education in pursuit of their wealth.

After reading *Dark Money*, the capitalist logics of profit accumulation seems anything but logical. Mayer provides particularly moving attention to the Koch brothers' impacts on the environment and public health. She tells the stories of people who have died working in Koch Industries' factories, and the stories of the people who have died living near them. She exposes the natural resources that have been destroyed in the wake of their companies. What's more she manages to make these nearly unreadable and distressing stories quite readable. Mayer's rich animation of the Koch family's personalities lends *Dark Money* the intrigue of a legal thriller as much as a chronicle of economic elites; the book is a page-turner.

Drawing from interviews and previously unreleased documents, the first third of *Dark Money* describes the iniquitous underbelly of the Koch brothers' family fortune, a chapter deleted from the public accounts of Koch family history. Mayer also outlines their supporting cast, that is, the other wealthy families such as the Bradleys, the Olins, and the Scaifes, also committed to the Koch family's ideological agenda through the work of aggressive philanthropies. The second third of the book details the rise of the Koch brothers' political operating groups. The opposite of grassroots organizations, these corporate-sponsored organizing machines and private think-tanks engaged in lobbying and media efforts to propagate the financial and political interests of their corporate backers. In doing so, they generated the optics of a mass movement. Dubbed "Astroturf" (as opposed to bottom-up, community led, grassroots organizing efforts), Mayer exposes the agenda and tactics of these groups as a far cry

from community organizing. She zeroes in on their undemocratic election strategies, such as gerrymandering voter districts to disenfranchise especially communities of color. Mayer documents how the Koch brothers effectively debased domains of knowledge that threatened their political and financial interests, specifically climate change science. In the final third of the book, Mayer details the years of the Koch brothers' political ascent, starting with the 2010 mid-term elections, which yielded the nation's most conservative Congress by far. Mayer takes us through the notable political contests, such as the 2012 presidential elections (the first presidential elections since the *Citizen's United* ruling which made corporations' unlimited political contributions), the rise of the Koch brothers' policy network known as ALEC, and the further conquest of state and local issues. As a volume, the book provides both crucial detail and overview of the rise of the Koch regime.

In the following pages, we will explain why Mayer's book provides important architecture for critical education scholars. We then overview what we see as Mayer's key contributions: her analysis of how the Koch brothers generated their wealth, how they've deployed it, and the consequences of both. Finally, we note briefly additional questions and overlooked areas of the analysis.

### **Why *Dark Money* Matters for Education**

At first pass, Mayer's book seems disconnected from the field of education – after all, what does the story of a litigious family of oil moguls, science skeptics, and free-market missionaries have to do with education? True, Mayer's book focuses on the Koch family as characters. But these characters must be understood as the protagonists in one of education's most searing plots, the conservative restructuring of the core beliefs undergirding public education. This restructuring is evident through policies and programs that aggressively advance theories and policies of “free-market” education systems, such as vouchers and for-profit charters. It is evident through high-stakes accountability regimes that condense curriculum into testable chunks and expel histories of oppression. It is evident in the loss of democratic governance mechanisms, such as publicly elected school boards, in the name of “efficiency.” The intersection of these competing political and economic commitments for standards, efficiency, markets, conservative religious values, and inequality combine into a larger ideological program, what one of us calls conservative modernization (Apple, 2006). As Apple writes, the conservative alliance “has been so successful in part

because it has been able to win the battle over common sense” (2006, p. 31; see also Apple, 2014).

A growing body of scholarly literature in education attends to the impacts of conservative movements in education. This literature documents changes to school organization (e.g., Ball, 2009; Burch, 2006), the rise of corporate influences on education (e.g., Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Saltman, 2009a), including venture philanthropy (e.g., Saltman, 2009b; Scott, 2009) and its impact on educational programs (e.g., Kretchmar, Sondel, & Ferrare, 2013) and policy landscapes (e.g., Anderson & Donchik, 2014). Crucially, this body of literature details the deleterious effects of these initiatives: their weakening of democratic processes (Anderson, 1998; Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, & Murillo, 2002; Cucchiara, Gold, & Simon, 2011) and their disproportionately harmful impacts on communities of color (Lipman, 2004, 2011). Yet little research has connected the conservative movement in education to the conservative movement nationwide.

Mayer’s book enhances conversations in education by exposing the formation and ascent of the leaders of the conservative movement. Both directly and indirectly, the Koch brothers are first authors of this conservative script. Mayer’s exposé of the explicit “war of ideas” waged by the Koch brothers and their allies gives important texture to the battle over common sense. In essence it documents how the Right has understood what the great Italian political theorist and activist Antonio Gramsci called a “war of position” (Gramsci, 1971). In large-scale ideological battles, nothing is unimportant. *Everything* counts, at *every* level.

Mayer shows us how the Koch brothers’ near-evangelical commitment to (their notably selective interpretation of) free-market ideology structured not only their own business initiatives, but also their political strategies. Through the foundations, think tanks, and research centers they fund, Mayer reveals how the Koch brothers’ primary battle extends well beyond their own business interests, and into the terrain of ideology. With an eerie resonance to Marxist theorists such as Gramsci and Althusser, the Koch brothers developed strategies to inform how policy makers, citizens, and investors construct “common-sense,” a common-sense that not-so coincidentally secures their own economic and political interests.

Of course, educational institutions themselves play a major role in the Koch brothers’ strategy. Just as influential Marxists such as Althusser and Gramsci recognized the important role of public education in waging the battle of ideas, the Koch brothers too have turned to education

institutions to expand their conservative influence, particularly higher education. By using their wealth to fund private research centers and think tanks embedded in universities, the Koch brothers and their allies created a landscape of “beachheads,” protected positions they could use to launch their ideas into the mainstream. Doling out millions of dollars to young academics – and often cash starved universities – the Koch brothers have created a web of researchers, intellectuals, and teachers obliged to propagate research and analysis that protects and expands the Koch’s investments. Rather than making traditional gifts to universities, they specifically earmarked their gifts to create institutes within the university to promote their conservative economic world views and to fund particular faculty lines specifically to teach about “economic freedom.” This strategy gave the Koch brothers control of their gifts, ensuring the funds would be used to promote their agendas, while appearing to be part of mainstream institutions. Their tactics went down to the very names they chose for their research centers, purposefully using “ambiguous and misleading names [to] obscure the true agenda and conceal the means of control” (p. 56).

The Koch brothers’ strategy to insert their networks into universities has been tremendously successful. A recent report published on *Alternet* detailed the extensive web of professors and academic institutes who receive funding from the Koch brothers’ various foundations in exchange for promoting their belief in free-markets (Kotch, 2016). Over 5,000 professors participate in their network; they have given hundreds of millions of dollars just to higher education institutions over the past 10 years. Particularly given declining state aid to universities, the Koch brothers’ donations to higher education program are often seen as a financial necessity for struggling institutions (Mitchell & Leachman, 2015). Not only do these gifts create a cohort of university instructors who are financially dependent on the Koch brothers, it also creates a body of research and policy proposals in line with the Koch brothers’ economic interests and positions, like climate change skepticism and corporate tax-reduction policies (Crowley, 2016; Farrell, 2016; Jacques, Dunlap, & Freeman, 2008).

The Koch brothers’ policy networks have also had large effects on K-12 education. ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council), their primary policy network, has drafted influential anti-teachers’ union legislation, and scripted massive budget cuts for public education, cuts that all but force students and families into private schools. They’ve poured millions of dollars into online education programs,

such as the Young Entrepreneurs Academy, whose curriculum professes, among other things, minimum wage laws hurt the poor, lower pay for women is not discriminatory, and the government caused the 2008 recession. What's more, Koch-sponsored political advocacy organizations, such as Americans for Prosperity, have looked beyond state-level educational policies and budgets, also turning their attention to micro-political spaces, like small-town school board elections. These spaces – critical sites for establishing “common-sense” – enable conservative billionaires to run against progressive, grassroots candidates, many of whom campaign on a budget of a few hundred dollars (Schirmer & Apple, 2016). From the federal to state to local, from endowed professorships to private research centers, from legislative models to lobbying efforts, the Koch brothers are undoubtedly at the center of the conservative advance of education.

Though Mayer's book provides an intimate portrait of the Koch brothers as characters, they are, in a way, incidental to the larger story *Dark Money* illustrates: the growing democratic instability of the globalized economy.

Fundamentally, education must be understood as deeply embedded within the broader political economy (Apple, 2012). In a capitalist economy, the state's political legitimacy is tied to its capacity to prop up the needs of capital's big actors, thus the state's autonomy weakens (Fraser, 2015). Tax incentives and corporations and capitalists reduce levies available for public infrastructure such as public education. The crisis of public education, therefore, is at least partially a crisis of capitalism. Mayer's work introduces us to the cast.

### **How the Kochs' Made Their Money**

One of Mayer's most striking contributions is her exposure of the history of the Koch family. She reveals the dark source of the family's wealth, an account previously untold. In 1927, Fred Koch, Charles and David's father and an engineer by trade, developed an improved technology to separate gasoline from crude oil. The oil industry, however, regarded his development as a patent infringement and sued Fred Koch. Fred was incensed. For Koch, this lawsuit represented the worst of government interference into business workings, and marked the beginning of his antipathy towards government market regulations. Nonetheless, Fred Koch was not to be stopped in pursuit of his fortune, and took his invention abroad. Despite his fierce loathing of communism, when the Stalin's regime offered Koch a handsome sum of money (particularly attractive during the

Great Depression), Koch overcame his philosophical antagonism. He worked with Russian engineers to set up oil refineries in the country, bringing in cash not only for the Koch family, but also enabling Stalin's regime to procure large amounts of currency from its oil exports, which was then used to modernize other industries. In addition to Stalin, Koch's oil refinery company worked closely with leaders of the Nazi party. By 1935, Koch's refinery was the third-largest refinery in the Third Reich. The oil it produced not only contributed to Fred Koch's wealth, but also fueled many of the fighter planes used in Germany's air raids. By the time the US got involved in World War II, Koch quickly joined the U.S. Airforce to contribute to its wartime causes. Ironically, his oil refinery became a key target, and reports suggest that when the Allies finally bombed it, the civilian death toll was unimaginable. Acquaintances of the Koch family reported that Fred Koch's was especially traumatized by his firsthand experiences of Stalin's Russia, and felt considerable guilt from aiding communist power. This guilt, they speculated, fueled his extreme anti-communism beliefs and participation in political fringe groups, like the John Birch Society.

In addition to a nefarious inheritance, the Koch children were raised in a complicated home life. Fred Koch was known to be a harsh disciplinarian, and the four boys' childhoods were marked by fierce and cruel competition with each other. Charles, the eldest, quickly gained dominance over his brothers Freddie and Bill, and formed an early alliance with his brother David. Their first mutual business endeavors were attempts to push the other two brothers out of the family inheritance. In particular, Charles and David strong-armed their brother Freddie, who possessed a more sensitive disposition and took less interest in competing with his brothers. When Charles and David began to suspect Freddie was gay (and even broke into his apartment to spy on him), they attempted to blackmail him into relinquishing a share of the family inheritance, lest they disclose the rumors and supposed evidence to their father of his personal life. Years later, Charles and David bought out their brothers' shares in the family company, for about 1.1 billion. The two other brothers brought forward a lawsuit against Charles and David, claiming they underestimated the value of Koch Industries. For nearly the next two decades, the dueling brother duos engaged in legal battles with one another of their inheritances. (Their relationships were so litigious that their mother's will stipulated that any sons engaged in lawsuits with one another within 6 weeks of her death would be denied their inheritance, a clause which unsurprisingly produced yet more intra-family legal disputes.)

Mayer takes great care to show how the Koch's peculiar family dynamics contributed to their political beliefs. She sketches the links between the father's intense authoritarianism and Charles' rejection of authority, noting how Charles was "driven by some deeper urge to smash the one thing left in the world that could discipline him: the government" (p. 54). Charles and David took special interest in their father's political commitments and also joined the John Birch Society. Charles especially became a rapt student of free-market economics. However, unlike his father, Charles was as interested in libertarian philosophies themselves as in their deployment. An active participant in Libertarian Party politics, in 1979 he published an essay in the *Libertarian Review*. He wrote, "Ideas do not spread by themselves; they spread only through people. Which means we need a *movement*...to destroy the prevalent statist paradigm" (p. 54). This provides support for the claims that we have made elsewhere that it is social movements that transform education, rather than educators themselves (Apple, 2013, 2014; Schirmer and Apple, 2016).

Over the next three decades, Charles devoted himself to building that movement by covertly developing the political and ideological networks necessary to further his free-market beliefs. Meanwhile, the family fortune, under the ownership of David and Charles, continued to grow. Now a conglomerate of corporations in petroleum, chemicals, finance, manufacturing and other industries called Koch Industries, David and Charles' company became one of the largest privately-held firms in the country. Their wealth soared, and with it, their investments in private foundations.

### **How the Koch Brothers Use Their Money**

First drawn to pursue their political ideas directly through politics, David Koch, at Charles' behest, ran for vice-president on a libertarian ticket in 1980. David spent close to 2 million of his own dollars on his campaign, and earned less than 1% of the votes. Frustrated by the limitations of electoral politics, the Koch brothers decided their influence was not in the business of politics, but rather in constructing and deploying the ideas that prefigure politics. They were less interested in casting themselves in a political drama, than supplying "the themes and words for the scripts" (p. 58). In essence, they recognized that they needed to engage in what might be called a wide-spread pedagogic and ideological project.

Mayer highlights how the Koch's investment strategies created their economic and political control. By

donating their wealth to a wide array of private foundations, Mayer argues, the Koch brothers secured tax protections and anonymity for their investments, as well as funding the programs and initiatives of their choosing. The role of foundations to solve social problems, rather than the state, characterizes late-stage capitalism and the rising income inequality it creates. Tax breaks, rather than taxes, “enable the wealthy to simultaneously receive generous tax subsidies and use their foundations to impact society as they please. In addition, the process often confers an aura of generosity and public-spiritedness on the donors, acting as a salve against class resentment” (p. 70). For the Kochs, donating to private foundations not only granted them tax-breaks and control of their political agenda, it also provided them a veil to obscure their political investments, a process of creating what Mike Davis has called an “epistemological fog” (Davis, 2006). By giving to third party organizations to do their political bidding, the Koch brothers managed to avoid disclosing the actual recipients of their investments, a key requirement of receiving tax breaks. Many of the Koch-funded foundations intentionally created seemingly innocuous titles, suggesting their commitment to unobjectionable goal of “social welfare.” In reality, these groups have very particular partisan agendas. Groups like the Center to Protect Patient Rights collected millions of dollars in secret and tax-exempt donations to take on the primary charge of attacking Obama’s health care plan. The identity of donors was even further obscured through sophisticated mechanisms like DonorsTrust, what journalist Andy Kroll called the “dark money ATM of the conservative movement” (p. 206). DonorTrust is a “donor-advised fund,” erasing the name of a donor from their gift to a politically controversial or sensitive cause. Donor-advised funds allow wealthy and politically motivated donors, like the Kochs, to by-pass the requirements to disclose their political contributions; yet they still receive tax breaks for their gifts. Donor-advised funds erased the minimal public accountability within the philanthro-capitalist economy. Despite their attempts towards secrecy, savvy investigative journalists and alternative media sources have been able to track down and make public the political influence of the Koch brothers’ contributions. This brand of journalism has made a critical contribution to understanding the shadowy influence of the Koch brothers. It also points to the importance of a larger and more progressive “educational” agenda—making hidden knowledge available to the public as part of an organized strategy to make democracy more substantive and critical (Apple, 2013).

Yet Mayer's account goes beyond the existing journalistic accounts of the Koch brothers. Extending the story of "how much," Mayer tells the story of *how come* the Koch brothers became free-market diehards. Mayer's expose of the Kochs is as qualitative as it is quantitative, exploring the origins of their wealth and the devastation created through its wake. We learn that the Koch's money is not only dark – it is deadly. Mayer's focus on the origins and effects of the Koch fortune, not just the mind-blowing quantity, reveals its sordid origins in the oil refining industry, and that industry's lethal environmental and health effects. For example, Mayer provides chilling accounts of several Koch Industry employees who contracted terminal cancers as a result of exposure to chemicals produced by the firm. A neglect verging on murderous, company officials in fact knew of the unsafe levels of chemicals and still chose to do nothing, and even falsified accounts of their emissions. When one employee's widow brought forward a lawsuit against the Kochs to take responsibility for her husband's death, the Koch brothers did everything they could to silence the family, barely squeaking out an apology for the untimely death. Even more upsetting, two seventeen year old students died in an explosion from a Koch Industry's leaky pipeline, just days after their high school graduation. Although the company had known the pipeline was corroded and unsafe, it had neither replaced it nor notified families nearby of the risk it posed. Instead, company officials chose to revive the pipeline when they realize they could make an addition 7 million dollars from a low-grade patch job, causing the death of the two teens. When one company whistle-blower raised concerns to his boss about another failing pipeline, he "was told it would be cheaper to pay off damages from a lawsuit than make the repairs" (p. 130). We need to see this too as part of an "epistemological war" that is fought by dominant groups. Knowledge about reality, according to these groups, is dangerous and must be kept hidden or discredited.

In addition to disregarding health regulations and the livelihoods of workers and residents, Koch Industries violated environmental regulations often. They dumped extra pollutants late at night or on weekends to avoid monitoring. They stole oil from protected Native American tribal land by cheating their oil measurements. As one worker said,

If you bought crude [oil from Indian reservations] you'd shorten the gauge. They'd show you how. They had meters in the field. They'd recalibrate them so if it showed a barrel, they'd say it was just three-quarters of a barrel when they were buying it. You did it in different ways. You cheated. If we sold a barge with fifteen hundred barrels, you'd say it

was two thousand. It all involved weights and measurements, and they had their thumb on the scale. That was the Koch Method (p. 137).

Mayer makes evident the Koch philosophy embedded in their method. For the Koch brothers, their dereliction of health and environmental regulations weren't simply a business tactic, it was an expression of their libertarian philosophical commitment. The Koch brothers justified their ethical negligence as consistent with their virulent opposition to government regulations of all kinds, which they viewed as "socialist." From Charles Koch's point of view, the real issue was not the environmental and health effects of the Koch's industry, but the regulatory state, "an illegitimate encroachment on free enterprise and a roadblock to initiative and profitability" (p. 121). Mayer underlines, however, the Koch brothers' contradictory – and quite profitable – reliance on government subsidies and regulations when they stood to gain from the policies, such as artificially low taxes on their cattle land, massive financial incentives from the 2008 federal "bail-out," and profits made from selling millions of barrels of crude oil to the "Strategic Petroleum Reserve," a federal oil reserve to protect against market disturbances, essentially an anti-free market mechanism.

Nonetheless, by the late 1990s, lawsuits mounted against the Koch brothers for their flagrant disregard of health, environmental, and market regulations. (Adding to the drama, David and Charles's younger brother, Bill, filed one of the chief lawsuits in the case against Koch Industries, determined to see his brothers criminally prosecuted.) On December 23, 1999, the courts found the Koch brothers guilty of making 24,587 false claims to the government. To settle, they paid \$25 million dollars, seven of which went to their brother Bill. When reflecting on the growing accusations raised against the Koch brothers, Charles deflected the major cause of the family's setbacks – these deaths weren't a result of his poor ethics, but government regulations. He wrote, "We were caught unprepared by the rapid increase in regulation. While business was becoming increasingly regulated, we kept thinking and acting as if we lived in a pure market economy" (p. 138). The loss of both money and legitimacy in the aftermath of the lawsuits prompted the Koch brothers to rethink their strategy. They needed to chart a new course to pursue their power.

The Koch brothers' defeat, Mayer highlights, in fact helped them retool for greater political influence. After spending months studying their losses – and their opponents' successes – their team produced a revised strategy. Instead of focusing directly on either their business or their political

projects, they realized they needed to re-tool the very ideas which structured both politics and business; they needed to re-engage the war of ideas. Their revised blueprint had three main phases: first, an investment in intellectuals “whose ideas would serve as the ‘raw products’”; second, an investment in think tanks to create marketable policies; and third, an investment in ‘citizen groups’ and special interests groups to lobby for their policies (p. 142). This strategy became the new Koch method, and characterizes their on-going influence. They did not want to work within electoral politics to create change, they wanted to supplant them. Their social/pedagogic project took on greater strength.

### Points to Note

Unsurprisingly, the particular strengths of Mayer’s analysis are also the source of the work’s blind spots. Mayer shows – rather than tells, pleasing English teachers everywhere – the singular influence the Koch brothers have had in constructing conservative common-sense, from energy policy to economic philosophy. Like a theater critic drawing attention to the puppeteer’s hands, Mayer’s work unveils the Koch brothers’ back stage operations. As *Dark Money* demonstrates, the Koch brothers have not only written the contemporary political script, they have cast the actors, established the plot, and all but determined its denouement. In particular, Mayer highlights how the Koch brothers’ investment in research, public policy, lobbying and “astro-turf” organizing, determined long-range political plots, in addition to short-term outcomes. Yet Mayer’s critical attention to the Koch brother’s political strategy, from their media to their messaging, may overstate the deterministic power of the Koch’ brothers wealth. Did the Koch brothers’ achieve their political victories because of the flashy media and outreach they financed, or because their policies and messaging spoke to issues perceived as quite real to voters?

By focusing primarily on the power of the Koch brothers as political actors, Mayer overlooks the agency – albeit limited – of political subjects. Of course, the Koch’s political power is a product of their wealth. But it is also a product of their capacity to construct consent for their agendas. To a degree, they have managed to summon voters in real ways by articulating the gaps in their life that don’t make sense, why their teacher neighbor, for example, has health insurance and they don’t. In this way, the book does not attend to the real ways that Koch-backed policies gain popular traction and take-up. These reasons, research suggests, are often far more pragmatic and contradictory than

philosophical. Indeed, studies of participants in conservative movements suggest people may “become Right” with far less strategic or tactical understanding than philosophical commitment, moving Right for pragmatics *and* contradictory reasons (Apple & Oliver, 1996; Blee, 2007; Pedroni, 2007). People often get organized into conservative groups without a priori aims or goal, instead motivated by what sociologist Kathleen Blee calls ‘a politics of vulnerability’ (Blee, 2002). Though some people join social movements with particular political objectives, equally as important are the people who join movements because of the identities and social networks they offer.

The exclusive focus on the Koch brothers’ political influence also minimizes the organizing and resistance that has developed in opposition to corporate elites and loss of democratic power. As we show elsewhere, successful community organizing around educational issues has defeated the Koch brother’s machinery in places like Jefferson County, Colorado (Schirmer & Apple, in press).<sup>1</sup> When these victories have occurred, struggles have moved beyond the domains of institutional elites. They have formed in coalition around multiple issues, such as racially just curriculum teachers’ compensation models, and school choice programs. They have acted in solidarity and provided meaningful and political alternatives to undemocratic, corporate forces. They have developed the dialogic power necessary for democratic transformation (Offe & Wiesenthal, 1980). Mayer, however, does not address these struggles, and as a result, potentially overstates the capacity of the Koch brothers to determine outcomes. Though it is often partial, resistance to the Koch brothers is real, and therefore an important part of the story about their impacts. Telling these stories of resistance are

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<sup>1</sup> In 2014, conservative school board members in Jefferson County attempted to alter the Advanced Placement history curriculum, aiming to make the curriculum more “patriotic” and minimize the role of “civil disorder, social strife or disregard.” Their proposed changes would eliminate curriculum on the Civil Rights movement, Native American genocide, and U.S. slavery. In response, more than a thousand high school students organized walk-outs and inspired parents and teachers to similarly mobilize. When the parents, teachers and students of Jeffco organized a recall election of the conservative school board members, Americans For Prosperity, a conservative political advocacy group funded by the Koch brothers, stepped in. They poured hundreds of thousands of dollars in election materials, hoping to defend the incumbent board members. Despite their financial advantage over the community-instigated recall, the conservative school board members lost their recall election.

important for fostering their movement; as the Kochs themselves note, ideas themselves constitute a primary arena. Recounting the victorious narratives against the Koch brothers' corporatism is in itself part of the struggle against it.

## Conclusion

The Kochs' interest in the "war of ideas" marked their brand of politics, structured their early investments and, according to Mayer, made them something of fringe characters in their early years of influence. Mayer's attention to Koch's nascent strategy in the late 1970s and 1980s as off-beat reads strangely from the point of view of the present, in which private think-tanks and research institutes wield considerable political influence (e.g., Béland & Hacker, 2004); private foundations and think-tanks' intersection with politics is common practice. Yet it is precisely this argument of Mayer's that constitutes her key contribution. As she traces the Koch brothers' strategy, she denaturalizes the prominent features of today's political landscape, showing their deliberate construction by a small handful of mercenary wealth. Mayer's research reveals the steady and constant pace of the Koch brothers' political and ideological war, played like a three-decade game of Risk. Slowly, slowly, the Koch brothers built their war chest, gathered their allies, studied their opponents' strengths and weaknesses, assessed their own influence, and used all their available methods to maximize their power. It has indeed been a "war of position."

To a degree, Mayer's analysis of the Koch brothers adopts a strategy of their own. Just as the Kochs have developed a deep and calculated analysis of their own strengths and weaknesses alongside their opponents, Mayer's careful study explains that a corporate oligarchy is fraying, if not completely unraveling, the requirements of democracy. To defeat the Right, we must understand how they work – and where they are succeeding. *Dark Money* does just this. It is no reflection on Mayer's fine analysis that we hope there is no opportunity for a sequel.

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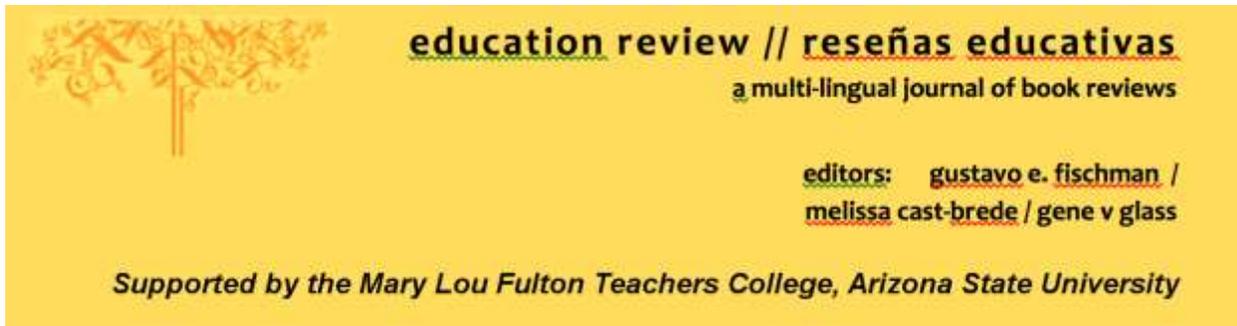
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