

Book Review: Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America by Nancy MacLean

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MacLean, Nancy, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America*. New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2017. xxxiv + 334 pages. \$28.00.

Nancy MacLean has a well-earned reputation as an upstanding, influential labor historian; indeed, she is the William H. Chafe Professor of History and Public Policy at Duke University. Her previous publications are respected by all who are interested in leftist history and politics: her *Behind the Mask of Chivalry* provides a seminal look at the inner workings of the Ku Klux Klan, and *Freedom is Not Enough* explores her theory that the civil rights movement also changed the workplace into an environment of celebrated inclusion. Thus, one would expect her newest work, *Democracy in Chains*, to make similar contributions to the historiography by exploring the Nobel Prize-winning economist James Buchanan's Public Choice Theory and his influence on the "radical right."

MacLean brilliantly researched Buchanan's papers by sifting through his office at George Mason University and exploring the influences that helped him form his political and economic outlook. MacLean writes that this was completely serendipitous; she was originally trying to craft a narrative on school vouchers in Virginia. However, upon entering his office, MacLean found papers outlining one of the most far reaching policy agendas of the modern political right. It can only be fair to say that Maclean found her ground zero on his desk.

What she discovered, and what she thoroughly presents throughout the book, is the formulation of Buchanan's Public Choice Theory and how Buchanan then ensured its silent, yet central position in the policies of the Libertarian "radical right." This theory, which she loosely traces back to John C. Calhoun's racist ideals of States' Rights, is now the central theory of such institutions as the Cato Institute, the Heritage Foundation, Americans for Prosperity, and Koch Industries, among others. In fact she alludes, through the prologue's title, to John C. Calhoun as

“the Marx of the Master Class.” MacLean then sets forward an interesting suggestion that Buchanan’s theory drew on the foundations set by Calhoun and affected policy as far as Pinochet’s Chile. The author also draws from Buchanan’s papers and his dealings with the Koch Brothers to argue that Buchanan was the architect of what we see as conservative politics today. She also takes pains to point out that Buchanan also knew that the majority of the American public would never accept such a theory, especially, as she mentions, one that places a wealthy few politically over the majority. Therefore, she also takes time to document how this policy also contained a “stealth plan” that Buchanan and others would use to instill the theory into policy and make Americans accept it.

While her research is impeccable on paper, it must also be said that the book immediately garnered serious criticism, especially from Buchanan’s students and acquaintances. In fact, one of the harshest reviews of the work comes from MacLean’s colleague and Buchanan’s friend, Michael Munger. He not only excoriates the book for cunningly inventing thoughts that MacLean put into this work for effect, but also insists that her work is “an alternative past that never actually happened.” Such criticisms are immediately suspect; after all, Munger also says that her research into Buchanan’s papers and ideas is in many ways seminal. Can a work be two things at once: a false history and an intriguing academic study of a person’s life’s work? The dichotomy he presents is in some ways baffling, but expected from one who knew the subject of her scathing book personally.

There are, however, some shortcomings of her work. MacLean draws connections between Calhoun and Buchanan with no real documented link; it seems to be more of a sensationalistic ploy to ensnare the reader into her brilliantly weaved web of racist conspiracy. At times, her work also becomes entangled in its own intrigue, for example when she tries to

prove that Buchanan's stealth plan is now becoming a reality in American policy by citing the works of the Koch Brothers. The problem is that she never really seems to prove that his plan was indeed a secret one of slow coercion. In fact, the evidence she presents seems to point to the exact opposite notion: Buchanan made his hopes no secret.

While the book is certainly a powerful and seminal first work on the topic of the radical right's plans for America and their origins, one can only hope that someone else will also undertake the same resources she used to analyze her assertions. There is certainly much to learn from this book about the far right's agenda, but the leftist bias and the assertions of conspiracy render the book questionably credible, at best. There is much to be harvested from Maclean's work, to say the least, and it is in fact wonderfully written. Yet, *caveat emptor*, every assertion that is not cited should be carefully considered before being fully accepted by the reader—and that especially is true in this work until further research either confirms or negates her assertions.

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Endnote

Munger, Michael C. "On the Origins and Goals of Public Choice: Constitutional Conspiracy?" *The Independent Review* 22, No. 3 (2018).