The Eighteenth Brumaire of James Buchanan: Review of Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains*

Philip Mirowski

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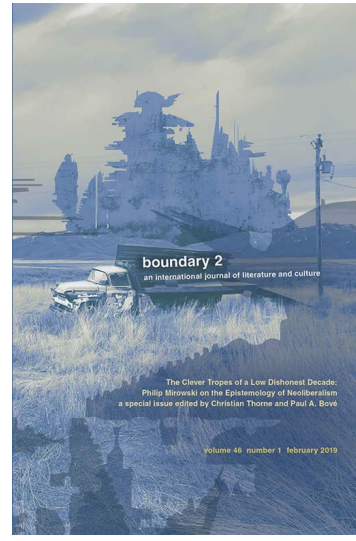

As I set out to write this, the neoliberal echo chamber has succumbed to yet another paroxysm of disgust and disdain over Nancy MacLean's book *Democracy in Chains* (2017a), mainly because it had been named a finalist in the nonfiction category of the National Book Awards. The blogs and broadsheets have been bloated with neoliberals calling for the book to be stripped of its nomination (if not the author run out of town on a rail);[1] one wonders whether a rousing book burning on the Bebelplatz would serve as a fitting denouement, in their estimation. Indeed, one gets the feeling that this is what "freedom" has come to signify for the neoliberals: whining endlessly about how they can't get no respect, while viciously

Book Reviewed: Nancy MacClean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017).

1. See https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2017/10/27/has-the-national-book-award-been-corrupted-by-politics/?utm_term=.cbd17ab39721. MacLean did not win the award.

tearing down their opponents' reputations and accomplishments.[2] It does indeed presage a war of ideas, as they never tire of reminding us.

In the current climate, it has become a struggle to bring the book into focus, much less to tell a convincing story concerning what it portends for its contemporary audience. Over the past few months, I have had quite a number of friends and acquaintances ask me out of the blue about the book, which I suppose is evidence that it has touched a nerve. It certainly has gotten reviews in far-flung publications that have revealed no prior capacity to distinguish a "conservative" from a "libertarian" from a "neoliberal"; the reviews themselves have displayed no particular advance in that respect, either. Many suggest that the book came to them as some sort of stunning revelation, only to then quickly pass over the actual content in favor of a discussion of Trump and his antics. In an epoch of political danger, as this surely is, it is predictable for people to grasp at straws to achieve some modicum of understanding; my worry revolves around the extent to which the MacLean book actually provides an effective political primer to those in search of enlightenment.[3]

However, my responses have been further roiled by a question that probably will not concern most of her readers: that is, To what extent is the book a harbinger of what is happening to the writing of history in our epistemically challenged era? Some readers may be aware that I have been embroiled in a series of projects to write a history of what I and others have called the Neoliberal Thought Collective for more than a decade (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009; Mirowski 2013; Mirowski and Nik-Khah 2017).[4] During that time, I have had to confront many of the thorny issues that we will confront here with regard to MacLean's book: from the dangers of Great Man intellectual history, to the significance of disciplinary background for understanding some political inclinations, to the precariousness of linking the expression of ideas to concrete activities, to the slipperiness of political labels, and thus to endless accusations of dealing in "conspiracy theory" by people who have no clue as to what the Mont Pèlerin Society (or Heritage Action or the Atlas Foundation) ever was or the functions it performed. And

2. "Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man am Ende auch Menschen."—Heinrich Heine

3. Some such primer is desperately needed, given that economists (Rodrik 2017) have been making an utter hash of the history and political content of the Neoliberal Thought Collective of late.

4. MacLean acknowledges this (2017a: 242n9) but suggests I have not paid sufficient attention to James Buchanan.

yet, the overriding impression I got after reading the book was that, as academic history departments have shed their specializations in intellectual history, and the relevant disciplines (such as economics, political science, and political economy) have sloughed off any required historical training for recent cohorts, the very *genre* of what counts as historiography is changing rather rapidly in this area. It seems one is enjoined to write a punchy page-turner for a general populace these days if you want to do history—although it also seems the future of books is itself at risk. One technique for carrying this off is conveying the impression that you can readily see inside the mind of your protagonist; that trick has been taken over from the modernist novel, used to propel the reader through the text. It is not that context for ideas is altogether absent; rather, it has been simplified to a point of view more characteristic of cinema than of (let us admit) old school intellectual history. In many ways, this might be harmless in, say, the history of science, in order to bring the tyro innocent of technical issues up to speed in the narrative stream; but in political thought, it does come lumbered with some drawbacks.

1. "Midcentury Virginia Wine with a Mont Pèlerin Label"?[5]

MacLean had not been generally regarded as an intellectual historian prior to this book. Rather, she has had a distinguished career as a historian of social movements, with some geographical focus on the American South—the woman's movement, the relation of workplace reform to the Civil Rights Act, the Ku Klux Klan, and civil rights activists. As she freely admits, the topic of the current book was not something she intended to research when she set out on her recent quest. In a number of public talks, she acknowledges that she knew almost nothing about James Buchanan or the Koch network when she embarked upon this book. Indeed, she often relates the story of the peripatetic path that led to the book in her talks; thus, we may infer that this sequence explains something about the shape and intentions of the final volume.

By her own account, MacLean started out being curious about reactions to school desegregation in the Upper South, primarily in Virginia, in the mid-twentieth century. The story of Prince Edward County particularly caught her eye. In a plot to circumvent *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the Prince Edward executive opted to shut down all of

5. MacLean 2017a: 83.

their public schools and shift subsidy to private schools, leaving the black population with essentially no schools whatsoever for roughly five years. She grew interested in how they justified such a drastic stratagem, and she stumbled over Milton Friedman and others calling for a voucher system for public education starting in 1955. While outside apologists were one thing, she sought to find out what justifications were being deployed within Virginia, and then came across a report and a newspaper article by Warren Nutter and James Buchanan (1959). She was gobsmacked to read that these men defended Prince Edward County avowedly, not on the basis of race but rather on "economics":

> Although our ethical views have nothing to do with the economic issues we propose to discuss, we state them here in brief in order to forestall misunderstanding: We believe every individual should be free to associate with individuals of his own choosing. We therefore disapprove of both involuntary (or coercive) segregation and involuntary integration. At the same time, we are deeply concerned over constitutional questions . . . that have nothing to do, one way or the other, with the economic questions on which we are about to comment. These questions are what they are no matter what we believe in or wish were so or not so. They are matters of fact, not values. (Nutter and Buchanan 1959)

This pretense of value-free defense of segregation induced her to read Buchanan further; and then the more she read, the more she thought she recognized not only the political rationality that had been used to justify policy back then but also the ideas driving the dramatic reversals of decades-long political stability playing out in North Carolina, occurring after she had moved to Duke University in 2010. This led her to realize that there was a larger neoliberal thought collective of which Buchanan was a part; but remarkably, she chose neither to research or describe this larger movement because, as she wrote, "none of the usual suspects had sired this campaign. The missing piece of the puzzle was James McGill Buchanan" (2017a: xviii).

At this juncture, I want to insist that the eschewal of the "usual suspects" seemed rather capricious on MacLean's part, in part because the referent of the "master plan" she thought she glimpsed remained rather vague. Nevertheless, in her self-account, MacLean traces her epiphany to a visit to the Buchanan archives at George Mason University, in 2013. There among unsorted boxes and scattered papers, she happened upon

a correspondence between Buchanan and Charles Koch and decided that she must recount the attack on democracy guided and funded by just these two protagonists. She has a tendency to suggest that the neoliberals forgot to cover their tracks: "Future-oriented, Koch's men . . . gave no thought to the fate of the historical trail they left unguarded. And thus, a movement that prided itself, even congratulated itself, on its ability to carry out a revolution below the radar of prying eyes (especially those of reporters) had failed to lock one crucial door: the front door to a house that let an academic archive rat like me, operating on a vague hunch, into the mind of the man who started it all" (xxi).

Here, in microcosm, resides one of the reasons that the book provokes such intemperate responses in many readers. It is *not* because she has fallen prey to conspiracy theories as such, as numerous reviewers have alleged. There does indeed exist an elaborate set of structures built around the recruitment, indoctrination, and political mobilization of neoliberals—but MacLean is evidently uninterested in the scores of scholars who have been documenting its shape and contours for decades. Instead, she thinks the entire narrative boils down to *these two protagonists* who purportedly "started it all." That premise is implausible in the extreme, as many other historians before her might have warned her. But even more egregious for a historian, the neoliberals resident at George Mason haven't fostered a contempt for history—far from it, because their Mercatus unit serves as a platform for one of the two or three remaining graduate programs that actually support the history of economics in any active format. The other is situated at MacLean's own home institution, Duke, a "Center for the History of Political Economy," funded by Art Pope money, promoting the study of neoliberal heroes. It has been instead the so-called liberals (in wonky American parlance) who have driven history out of the social sciences and politics. The Neoliberal Thought Collective does not generally seek to restrict access to their archives; on the contrary, they strive to flood the market with their own Whig histories, as one more gambit in the larger war of ideas. The notion that MacLean somehow snuck around their defenses is risible and largely an artifact of her own lack of familiarity with the Neoliberal Thought Collective and its standard operating procedures.

This tendency to hypostatize an entire political movement as the embodiment of one or two persons is a very uncomfortable aspect of the book, in part because MacLean is not entirely candid about the extent to which she believes it to be accurate, as opposed to resorting to a narrative device, which merely allows her to address a number of key politi-

cal moments that might otherwise seem to be relatively unconnected. Although much of the volume—chapters 2 through 11, to be precise—is organized chronologically along a biographical timeline of Buchanan's life, there is little attempt to fashion a serious biography as such. (Charles Koch is barely introduced at the very end.) If this is meant to focus on an individual, then it seems predicated upon a rather strange species of individualism. Curiously, in this she mirrors Buchanan's own autobiographical document, *Better than Plowing* (1992), which comes nowhere near being a serious biography but instead a haphazard collection of a few previously published impressionistic memoirs interspersed with all manner of padding, from *ex cathedra* pronouncements on philosophy to an entire chapter (12) of seemingly random epigrams taken from everyone from Herbert Spencer to Nietzsche to Iris Murdoch (!). In that volume, Buchanan never once mentioned the Mont Pèlerin Society; given its significance for his own intellectual development and sources of support of his various centers, one might suspect this was a rather glaring oversight. One has to read very carefully between the lines to detect the importance of a few throwaways, such as, "we were not totally isolated, and we secured solid and substantial early support for our projected program. The William Volker Fund deserves special mention" (Buchanan 1992: 95).[6] Only a very few historians will recognize that the Volker Fund was the main patron of the American wing of Mont Pèlerin and the Neoliberal Thought Collective in its formative years, and that its personnel performed significant managerial functions. The problem for Buchanan, and maybe MacLean, is that their commitment to a notional individualism tends to occlude the profound infrastructure of political organization that surrounded figures like Buchanan, essentially from square one. For Buchanan, his narrative was projected as a self-image of the lonely isolated rebel hero, a Don Quixote slouching against the Empire. This persona is the major theme of his "autobiography": "I have always thought it to be my task to develop and create ideas and to enter these ideas into the discussion matrix. Once this step is taken, my task is done. I have felt, and feel, no moral obligation to promulgate my own ideas, or those of others" (149). This disdain for his surroundings, his comrades, and the politics of knowledge, along with his strange reference to a shadowy Matrix, ventures so far from actual events in his timeline that one wonders what it was that was so very necessary to hide. It is an occupational hazard of intellectual history to portray protagonists living in their own heads; but

6. For some background, see McVicar 2011. MacLean (2017a: 49) provides the amounts of funding.

in this instance, the inability to seriously confront the aporia of his own politics led Buchanan to revel in a Bunraku theater where thought thinks itself.

MacLean's book constitutes an incremental improvement on this, in the sense that she wants to suggest it was Virginia that made Buchanan what he became; only afterward did he eventually putatively morph into some sort of prime mover behind American (and Chilean) politics. There is some suggestion that Buchanan would concede the former, although in nothing like any straightforward acknowledgment of the history of the Commonwealth.[7] As MacLean portrays it, Virginia was a nest of states-rights, aristocratic, racist, and antidemocratic movements; and it was this atmosphere that proved decisive for the early acceptance of some of Buchanan's more outré enthusiasms. She attempts to link Buchanan to the earlier thought of Southerners like John C. Calhoun, James Kilpatrick, and Donald Davidson, but this seemed to me rather a stretch, given there is very little evidence that Buchanan ever cited them, or else displayed a healthy breadth of curiosity outside of the narrow canons of what passed as economics and politics at the University of Chicago in the 1940s. It is true he repeatedly and vociferously avowed himself a follower of Frank Knight, but it is hard to detect the grit of relative philosophical sophistication of the mentor having rubbed off onto the devotee. Indeed, Knight apparently expressed some qualms about ambient racists before a visit to the University of Virginia in 1957, which Buchanan dismissed, as MacLean reports (2017a: 69). Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore the fact that Buchanan was able to successfully plant the flag of his den of followers sequentially at *three* separate Virginia universities: first at Charlottesville, then Virginia Polytechnic Institute, and subsequently at George Mason in Fairfax. One might try and take the boy out of Virginia, but it would seem a lot harder to expunge Virginia from the boy.

While she certainly has a point, the book rarely strays beyond the boundaries of Virginia, while repeatedly making grand generalizations about "America" and its political vicissitudes. MacLean is less than candid about whether she intends this as a rhetorical strategy, like a synecdoche,

7. "[Public choice] I have found to be appropriately described locationally in the commonwealth that produced James Madison and the other Virginia Founders. I think I can make a plausible case that this framework would be out of place in California, Illinois, or Massachusetts" (Buchanan quoted in Meadowcroft 2011: 32). Or, in an even stranger locution: "I should be naively romantic to believe that more than a very small number of persons in modern societies could achieve the degree of independency that I have attained in the Southwest Virginia mountains" (Buchanan 1992: 125–26).

or whether she really believes that the strands of the neoliberal project radiated out from Virginia, with Buchanan at the center of the web. This reticence in rectifying a basic indeterminacy concerning an overall maintained thesis is a symptom found in many other celebrated works in twenty-first-century intellectual history, particularly in books which aim to come to terms with the neoliberal insurgency; I am thinking here of Daniel Rodgers's *Age of Fracture* (2011) as a similar instance. Rodgers also wanted to cover big contentious topics like power, race, and gender in the intellectual arena, but he constantly found himself citing writers from the Neoliberal Thought Collective, without displaying any inkling that there was a collective nurturing a relatively coherent set of doctrines across topics undergirding their individual interventions, or that they also formed a networked thought collective in pursuit of political objectives. Rodgers in that book sought to build a grand narrative where "individualism" displaced Cold War collectivism in American thought but ended up with a rather conventional timeline from the stagflation of the 1970s to the destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11. Given that said layout did not come equipped with any particular intellectual cogency or documentary drive, Rodgers then sought to plaster over the absence of a coherent narrative by conjuring an "age of fracture" in American thought in general. From a great height, Rodgers claimed to diagnose whatever ailed the nation as a consequence of stripped-down action-centered individualistic mental models, largely attributed to generic "economists" and rational actor theory. Interestingly, nevertheless Rodgers anticipated much of MacLean's position in his two-page drive-by coverage of James Buchanan. For Buchanan, "The public interest was a mask. Government failure was epidemic. The majority will was an unstable phantom. Impelled by these presuppositions, public-choice scholars pushed hard for schemes to limit the scope of political and governmental action and restrict the action of minorities. Buchanan spent the last part of his career, like a latter-day John C. Calhoun, absorbed in countermajoritarian constitutional theory" (Rodgers 2011: 87).[8]

The point intended here is to suggest that the standards of the framing of intellectual history in contemporary history departments have grown rather flimsy and inadequate of late, in part due to the imperative to write for generalist audiences but to a greater extent because of deep ambivalence as to how to deal with the necessary interaction of formal academic thought

8. In many ways, a more revealing approach to Buchanan was that taken by the video documentarian Adam Curtis in his BBC program *The Trap* (Curtis 2007).

and political activity. Modern attacks on Enlightenment epistemology have only exacerbated the situation. It is not that there is (or should be) one correct historiographic method to approach this problem; it is, rather, that authors like MacLean need to take the problem much more seriously as part of the historiographic mandate, which includes consideration of the proposition that the members of the Neoliberal Thought Collective have constructed bridge institutions between grand theorists like Buchanan and the politicians who break bread at Heritage Action or the American Legislative Exchange Council or convene for Charles Koch's annual retreats. They have also devoted substantial effort to considering how and how much of their doctrines should be broadcast to the larger public. It is much more likely that what MacLean actually encountered at her George Mason epiphany was Mont Pèlerin wine with a midcentury Virginia label rather than vice versa. But that would have made for a very different book than the one we consider here.

2. Things about MacLean that Drive the Neoliberals Crazy

MacLean has complained that swarms of neoliberals have subjected her and her book to scurrilous attack, ranging from Twitter and blogs to Amazon ratings and YouTube diatribes (2017b). In November 2017, a Google search of her name turns up roughly half of the entries on the first two pages that are attacks launched from within identifiable neoliberal sites. One can approach this as a symptom of the current predicament of social media as promoting and amplifying noise surrounding any controversy (Mirowski 2019). In one sense, she should have not been so surprised that the neoliberals' superior resources and manpower would readily be mobilized to counter any perceived disrespect of their heroes as soon as the book had garnered some attention. But it is easy to be sanguine until you are on the receiving end of nasty personal aspersions, niggling nitpicking, nonlinear rants, and intermittent substantive objections that are the stock in trade of the internet. Following in the pattern of reactions to the controversy over global warming, more conventional outlets have taken to offering a platform to "both sides," which has been the surest path to intellectual bedlam.[9]

9. For instance, some kibitzers attempted to pillory NPR for publishing an online-only review of MacLean. See https://www.npr.org/sections/ombudsman/2017/08/14/542634650/readers-rankled-by-democracy-in-chains-review. The Wikipedia entry on James Buchanan has been similarly corrupted by neoliberal trolls.

I believe that it is time to wise up and admit that archival documents do not speak in a single voice, that people with different prior commitments will read the book in widely divergent registers, and that neoliberals in general harbor a peculiar set of epistemic commitments that throw the entire roster of complaints under a new and refracted light. Many of the members of Mont Pèlerin during Buchanan's lifetime did not hold the epistemic capacities of the general public in high regard, to the extent of denouncing a segment of the population as "parasites," and therefore did not see themselves as winning over the citizenry to their policies by polite debate under *Robert's Rules of Order* (see Buchanan 1970; Stigler 1979).[10] MacLean is correct in suggesting that the neoliberals sought to usurp power by misrepresenting a substantial portion of their rationales and objectives; Buchanan himself was scathing about politicians pandering to the infatuations of the masses. Such dissimulation imposes a further heavy burden on the historian in sifting the significance of the archives. This fact in itself dictates that one must take quite a bit of the affronted hermeneutics of suspicion emanating from both the Neoliberal Thought Collective, plus outside academic commentators seeking to defend so-called public choice theory, with a spoonful of salt.

Nevertheless, there are some big issues raised by the neoliberal critics that do warrant some further consideration. The book highlights a few big lessons MacLean seeks to draw from her immersion in Buchanan, and it is precisely those that neoliberal critics have sought to challenge. The first is the relationship of Buchanan to racist ideas, the second is the hostility of Buchanan and neoliberals to democratic structures and procedures, and the third is the deep issue of how precisely the neoliberals pursue their ends.

Racism

In the current climate, one of the most damning things one can say about a public figure is that they are a racist. It reeks of recourse to identity politics, even though short of carrying a banner proclaiming "White Power,"

10. This is the major flaw of another book, Angus Burgin's *The Great Persuasion* (2012). Because it similarly seeks to reduce the entire neoliberal project to a single protagonist—Milton Friedman in the post-1960 period—it misses this most significant aspect of the epistemological politics of the later movement. Friedman was very unrepresentative of Mont Pèlerin back then because he still believed the primary project was one of persuasion of the masses, something his peers had rapidly repudiated. See "Hell Is Truth Seen Too Late" (Mirowski 2019, in this issue). MacLean 2017a: 92 notes this crucial distinction between Buchanan and Friedman.

racism consists of a continuum of attitudes rather than a fixed identity. Given that disciplines like anthropology have been striving to refute racism for over a century, with little success, it would seem that some aspects of racism are very deep rooted, even for those proud of their rational dispassionate stance toward the problem.

Although MacLean purposely begins her book stating that there was no evidence that Buchanan was "uniquely racist" (2017a: xiv), I think it fair to say that most readers take one lesson away from their reading the book above all others: that Buchanan's thought was inseparable from the racist traditions that preceded it, and therefore racism lies at the heart of the neoliberal project.[11] She leads off with this theme in her prologue, where she suggests that a particular strain of hostility to government and deference to property rights was rooted in the experience of slavery. This waved a red flag to any number of constituencies, but it is noteworthy that she does not so much establish this proposition as rest it on a few examples from the secondary literature. Thus it must appear that she intends specifically to indict Buchanan himself of racism, since he is being portrayed as the progenitor of what she considers to be the modern version of neoliberal politics. By this device, she ties Buchanan to his Virginia environment,[12] as well as draws the attention of general readers concerned to understand the contemporary backlash against the erstwhile black president and clear indignities that blacks suffer at the hands of police and the justice system.

MacLean's Exhibit A is the previously cited Nutter/Buchanan article and report concerning school segregation in Prince Edward County. While Buchanan never published anything substantial explicitly concerning racism, it must be said that he did pen a couple of scattered things which, if only in retrospect, seem a little odd. For instance, there is the disclaimer in his autobiography: "There is no extended discussion of religion or race in my early times. These subjects are left out, because they did not loom large in my childhood consciousness" (1992: 34). And then, in his jeremiad concerning American universities in the rebellious 1960s, he disparages the notion of "African American studies" indirectly by quoting a news release; elsewhere, he accuses black students of being cynically used by left stu-

11. For example, consult the podcast Hartman and Haberski 2017. Before we deplore this accusation of racism as a left preoccupation, I need to point out that neoliberal historians have made similar allegations of racism against left-leaning economists in the past, suggesting this invalidated their politics. See Leonard 2017; Levy and Peart 2005.

12. Buchanan's "vision meshed almost perfectly with what Virginia's elite sought, while avoiding the pitfalls" (MacLean 2017a: 48).

dent protesters: “Apparently, white Americans harbor a guilt complex about the treatment accorded the Negro throughout most of the nation’s history. . . . Because of this apparent guilt complex, faculties appear particularly vulnerable to the demands placed upon them by black students. . . . The revolutionary adopts the black students as his most attractive allies” (Buchanan and Devletoglou 1970: 149; 123–29).

Such combinations of faux naïveté (“Apparently . . .”) and scorn are what is commonly designated blowing the “dog whistle” in modern politics. And yet, numerous colleagues and acquaintances have testified that Buchanan did not make overt racist statements in their presence. What this portends is that it is probably a mistake to hang as much of the argument on indictments of Buchanan’s personal inclinations as MacLean sometimes appears to do.[13] Every American is racist to some degree, insofar as they cannot simply wish away the continuing legacy of slavery in American history. The important issue is instead to explore the ways in which particular neoliberals threaded the needle of making alliances with explicit nativist and racist movements (the so-called fusionist strategy on the American Right from the 1950s onward) without actually necessarily submitting directly to their doctrines.

I have been won over by the attempts of John Jackson Jr. to clarify this important distinction. In short, his contention is that, in the United Stated, neoliberals and libertarians and the racist Right (those deemed too noxious by the “legitimate” Right) tended to subscribe to similar values, but the former held them in one strict hierarchy, whereas the latter tended to propound them in mirror image and reverse. Basically, the neoliberals and libertarians wanted to privilege economic freedom and restrict the government to protecting private property as they saw it. Now, if people revealed a “taste” to live in racially pure enclaves, as a consequence of their free individual choices, then a white separatist world would be just one secondary consequence of their prime directive, an artifact of a geographically situated neoliberal state. The sovereignty of the market had to rule. Any government that attempted to impose a regime of desegregation on this situation was violating the law of the market and, therefore, would only fail in its misguided endeavor. On the other hand, the racial Right elevated the nativist principle of racially pure enclaves as the premier solution to all their political problems. Now, if the policy of a “free market” and weakened government was an expression of the natural cultural tendencies of the white

13. That is not to say there were not virulent white supremacists in the Mont Pèlerin Society—Wilhelm Röpke, for one. See Slobodian 2017.

race, once they were given free reign and fortified the self-determination of a racial enclave, well, that became the package of policies that would be enshrined. It didn't hurt that alternative value frames could be tailored and retailed to different audiences to achieve the same goals. The fact that neoliberalism and white power seemed to refer to the same ultimate political goals (but in different orders) forged a common denominator of "analysis" which tended to promote the "fusionism" that the legitimate Right had sought to bring to life from the 1950s onward.

It was this bridge between the two political projects that Buchanan (and Nutter) were well positioned to construct. This is the case that MacLean sometimes makes, yet it is her critics who insist the question narrowly revolves around Buchanan's personal proclivities.

> So too, with James Buchanan in the 1950s. We do not need to know that Buchanan was a hardcore segregationist, only that he sought to privatize schools in order to advance what he thought of as freedom. He did so by paying little, if any, attention to the African American voices who warned that such a "solution" would guarantee that they would never get a quality education. It's so easy to condemn a blatant extremist like Carto, and it's easy to let [Robert] LeFevre[14] or Buchanan off the hook, to explain away their indifference, to make excuses that they weren't *really* racists, they were interested in other things, like "freedom." It's easy, but it's also wrong. All it took to enable racist propaganda was for LeFevre to look the other way when Carto began talking about the Jews. All it took was for Buchanan to ignore James Jackson Kilpatrick when he wrote "Negro race, as a race, is in fact an inferior race." And all it takes for historians is to pretend none of these alliances happened. (Jackson 2017)

Rather than racism being inherently intrinsic to neoliberalism, as some readers seem to think after reading MacLean, perhaps a better interpretation is that the Neoliberal Thought Collective developed a tag team approach to fighting their opponents, with the proviso that they would never turn on each other. By all evidence, that description fits the behavior of Buchanan. And it supplies a fair characterization of the contemporary reciprocal relationship between white supremacists and Koch-funded neoliberals.[15]

14. LeFevre is briefly mentioned in MacClean 2017a: 132.

15. This may go some way in dispelling the impression that Trump's modus operandi is "fascism," which is somehow the negation of neoliberalism (O'Kane 2017).

Attitudes toward democracy

It cannot be overstated the number of hostile reviewers of MacLean that are just *shocked, shocked, shocked* that she accuses Buchanan and the neoliberals of hostility to democracy, to the extent that they might even be willing to subvert it from within to secure their power. This reaction is particularly prevalent among proponents of the so-called school of public choice as well as academic political scientists. At first glance, it is a bit hard to see why this comes as a thunderbolt to so many members of the Neoliberal Thought Collective. As one contrarian think tank denizen recently wrote:

> But the specifically libertarian beef with democracy isn't exactly the dark secret MacLean makes it out to be. This year, Jason Brennan, a libertarian philosopher at Georgetown, published a book called . . . guess what? *Against Democracy*. Ilya Somin, a libertarian law professor at George Mason, is the author of *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government Is Smarter*, published in 2013. In 2007, the libertarian economist Bryan Caplan published *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*.[16]

Beyond the evidence of a few contemporary book titles, it seems that many reviewers cannot bring themselves to entertain the notion that neoliberals actually might want to subvert certain democratic formats because (a) they don't believe that neoliberalism is a serious political category in the first place; and (b) they think they know what "real" public choice theory is, contra MacLean, and insist it has been used as much by those on the left as on the right in their experience in political science departments; and (c) anyway, everyone claims they can directly translate their pet theories into political action, but in the real world, professors have little actual impact on political actors and their plans. We should therefore realize everyone is busy trying to alter democratic structures, but we should grant the charitable interpretation that they are all seeking to improve it, by their own lights.[17]

This is no place to become embroiled in the history of economic models of politics, which has enjoyed a very checkered history since World

16. Will Wilkinson, at https://niskanencenter.org/blog/libertarian-democracy-skepticism-infected-american-right/. See also Scheuerman 2017.

17. This is a gloss on the critical reviews by Henry Farrell and Steven Teles, who proclaim that they have no inclination to support what they call "libertarianism" and therefore are not a part of the swarm of Buchanan groupies seeking to discredit MacLean online. See Farrell and Teles 2017; Farrell 2017). It equally covers the review of Munger 2017, who was a protégé.

War II, even outside the precincts of the Virginia School.[18] However, within the community of those who have worked on the history of neoliberalism, the notion that the thought collective was united in its distaste for democracy is, frankly, old news. The potential stumbling block for observers is to come to realize that the individual neoliberals did not share any specific theory of governmentality, but yet, strikingly, all eventually ended up at the same place anyway, inclined to either smother most democratic participation or else to assume power to prevent it from hindering their plans.

There abides a large literature on the topic, unfortunately not discussed by MacLean; perhaps the most incisive contribution has been made recently by Lars Cornelissen (2017).[19] He surveys all the discussions of democracy at the Mont Pèlerin meetings from 1947–98 and concludes that the attitudes expressed were "remarkably homogeneous, remaining stable over time." The general consensus was that while democracy should not be renounced as such, it nevertheless inherently posed a threat to what they considered economic liberty and, more alarmingly, bore within itself a tendency toward totalitarianism. Where they differed was on their diverse theories of government and philosophies covering what might be done about the debilities. William Rappard, at the first meeting in 1947, traced the deplorable decline of "liberalism" to the spread of democracy. Fifty years later, Peter Bernholz argued that democracy was no precondition for a capitalist market economy, citing Hong Kong and Chile. Arthur Shenfield, in 1967, traced the disease to the tendency of the majority to plunder the rich. Buchanan had his own version of the diagnosis, linked to his contempt for the notion of majority rule:

> At the same time Western society has been establishing the majoritarian fetish, we have been witnessing the increasing intervention of the state into the economy. The rules of the economic game have been continually subjected to modification and change, and these rules have been changed by majority votes of legislative assemblies. The set of decisions that legislative assemblies make has been significantly expanded, and majority vote of a legislative assembly is no longer linked to issues which are essentially of trivial economic importance. Capital values of significant magnitude are created

18. See, for instance, Medema 2000, 2009; Mirowski 2002; Amadae 2003, 2016.

19. See also Brown 2015; Amadae 2016; and especially Slobodian and Plehwe (forthcoming), which greatly clarifies the attitude of Buchanan and others in their evolving attitudes toward the European Union.

> and destroyed by the turn of a few votes in a national legislature. (Buchanan and Boba 1960: 271)

While all sorts of remedies for the notional democratic disease were proposed at the Mont Pèlerin Society, ranging from the restriction of suffrage to bypassing of legislatures, Cornelissen makes the astute observation that the most common language used to frame democracy critique was to have recourse to "constitutional" interventions. The thought collective consequently sought to assess all manner of virtual devices to freeze up political activity and short-circuit the influence of citizens on the legislature, only then to pretend they had all been put in place in some imaginary prelapsarian epoch in the form of an iron-clad constitution. Friedrich Hayek made a contribution in his *Constitution of Liberty*, but Buchanan eventually became the master of this glass bead game, to the extent of relinquishing the promotional label of "public choice" for that of "constitutional economics." In his major work *The Limits to Liberty*, he ominously intoned, "Democracy may become its own Leviathan unless constitutional limits are imposed and enforced" (Buchanan 1975: 205). This, in a nutshell, explains Buchanan's outsize significance for the larger Neoliberal Thought Collective in the later twentieth century. Buchanan became the poster child for their preferred political stance: constitutional immobility.

Once one comes to appreciate this dynamic, then it appears rather fallacious to assert that neoliberals were just striving to "improve" democracy; their ambition was explicitly to hobble it and to minimize its expression of any potential will of the people. The people had to be brought to defer to the natural order of things. The simple lesson for them was: you should enjoy your so-called freedom only if you don't try to exercise it in a democratic context.[20] This is why contemporary neoliberals are so prickly about any and all work that seeks to explore the culpability of figures like Hayek, Friedman, Buchanan, and others for the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship. I am aware there are a plethora of attempts by the thought collective to absolve their own favorite neoliberal of inspiring the Chilean dictatorship,[21]

20. Thus one has to agree with MacLean that, "The libertarian [should read "neoliberal"—PM] cause . . . was never really about freedom as most people would define it" (2017a: 236).

21. Although not all of them are made fully available for outsiders to evaluate. A number of reviews (e.g., Munger 2017) make reference to an unpublished paper by Andrew Farrant and Vlad Tarko, "The Devil's Fix: James M. Buchanan and the Pinochet Junta," claiming that it refutes any notion that Buchanan inspired or encouraged the Pinochet-era consti-

but mostly, they miss the mark. Endless special pleading that they were "just passing through" Chile to give a lecture or two (or attend a Mont Pèlerin Society meeting) and never fully endorsed the dictatorship are unavailing; they didn't need to provide an elaborate blueprint for their disciples.[22] The function they served was to fortify the Chileans in their belief that the citizenry harbored an irrational hatred of the market and therefore had to be disciplined.

Conspiracy theories

MacLean quotes an unpublished manifesto by Buchanan entitled the "Third Century Document" outlining his plans for the creation and support of an "effective counterintelligentsia" to spread a deep distrust of government, to form a counter-Brookings, and, most significantly, to stress that "conspiratorial secrecy is at all times essential" (2017a: 116–19). MacLean regards this as evidence that Buchanan was the Svengali at the center of the conspiracy, but lots of other neoliberals had been thinking along much the same lines around the same time and did something about it. Indeed, separate and distinct from Buchanan, in the same year as his 1973 memo, Edwin Feulner, Paul Weyrich, and Joseph Coors conjured up the Heritage Foundation, thanks to a few megarich donors, which rapidly surpassed the Brookings Institution in importance and influence in Washington, DC. When the Cato Institute was founded in 1977, Buchanan was present at the creation, which is how MacLean shoehorns the Koch Brothers into her own narrative (141 et seq.). She breezes by the Reason Foundation, the Liberty Fund, the Institute for Humane Studies, the Federalist Society, and a host of others; easily, there were too many to do justice in any single book. The subsequent rise to prominence of neoliberal ideas in the United States is often attributed to this efflorescence of these new think tanks and university-affiliated platforms from the 1970s onward—but that clashes with the evil genius narrative.

Many readers of the book, innocent of the larger history of the neoliberal movement, have an allergic reaction when they encounter these sorts of arguments. No mere professor can move mountains! And no subset of intellectuals can agree sufficiently to actually motivate and guide a political

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tution in Chile. Wondering about that evidence, I wrote Professor Farrant, asking if I could see a copy. He refused.

22. For an example of hairsplitting, only with regard to Hayek, see Farrant and McPhail 2014.

movement! And finally, the Kochs can't really be that powerful! Nancy MacLean must be an addled conspiracy theorist, they grumble.

I have to concede that sometimes MacLean's purple prose can have the unintended effect of setting such people off. Part way through the book, I started using a green marker to identify the passages I thought were a bit over the top; and when I had finished I was left with a couple dozen green marks. Yet, however many statements one encounters like, "Is it any wonder that [Buchanan's] allies would now rather bring down the government than improve it" (135), none belie the central historiographic point that the neoliberals have been one of the most effective thought collectives in recent intellectual history. It seems nowadays that the median reader simply cannot absorb the crucial points that allied political and economic thinkers (a) are not solely responsible for the ideas attributed to them and may differ profoundly on particular doctrinal tenets, but nevertheless (b) are capable of banding together to develop joint doctrines to which they may predominantly subscribe, and, further, (c) work to found institutions and an elaborate division of labor to politically intervene to bring those doctrines to fruition. Moreover, if they are steeped in enough Leo Strauss, they are perfectly aware that they will end up saying one thing to their comrades and something else often contradictory to the general public because that is how politics works. If that qualifies as conspiracy, then so be it.

Strangely enough for people who sometimes profess their disdain for methodological individualism, many of a left persuasion still have great difficulty treating intellectual history as anything other than a biography of a single mind. The notion that ideas are honed and torn apart and appraised by a group with identifiable boundaries, and that active members subsequently adjust their positions held jointly, with the intention of having them put into practice, and outsource the results to others to bring to life, seems to be distinctly out of favor in the parlous shrinking realm of serious intellectual history. I am afraid that MacLean still caters to this tendency, by building most of her narrative around the disembodied protagonist called James Buchanan and ignoring nine-tenths of the real action. It doesn't matter that many readers have been weaned on Michel Foucault or David Bloor or Bruno Latour or whomever. If they encounter a narrative of designated intellectuals banding together to change the world and actually getting somewhere conceptually and politically, instead of assenting "so that's how the knowledge game works," they feel compelled to bemoan "conspiracy theory."

But a lesson I take from MacLean is that you cannot treat spe-

cific neoliberal thinkers in splendid isolation, nor should you lump them all together as some homogenized robotic "neoliberal." No single individual should stand as synecdoche, an adequate representative for the whole. Here I want to illustrate the point by comparing Hayek and Buchanan on the nature of government (something I wish she had done). Hayek notoriously believed that your average citizen is cognitively incapable of understanding how the market works to his political advantage—probably because if you get shafted economically, you tend to be skeptical of the wisdom of the market. Hayek's answer was, crudely, to block most political participation on the part of the great mass of citizens, all the while trying to convince them that is what "freedom" looked like. In Hayek's world, they must relinquish their atavistic notions of "justice" once and for all. Since it is not clear what would command the fealty of such a shriveled and stunted political actor, Hayek invented the fiction of a "spontaneous order" that could not be comprehended except by the superior insight of the aristocratic few and carried within itself the very progress of civilization. Moreover, later in life he appealed to "evolution" to underwrite this otherwise mysterious order. This looked like political passivity raised to the nth degree.[23]

Mont Pèlerin's other prominent twentieth-century political theorist, Buchanan, could not stomach very much of this story. For him, it violated his vaunted respect for methodological individualism, which he had promoted throughout his life. Consequently, Buchanan roundly and explicitly rejected Hayek's appeals to evolution, and indeed to the natural sciences in general (Buchanan 1975: 183n13). Moreover, he denounced Hayek's central epistemological doctrine—namely, that the market was a greater information processor than any actual human being (Buchanan 1997: 7).[24] What he did instead is pretend that the only legitimate political system was one based on complete unanimity. That constituted the only bulwark against what he defined as coercion. But thoroughgoing unanimity is a pipe dream, you retort. Not a problem, since Buchanan projects that single moment of virtual unanimity back to a time before any actual politics, an imaginary moment in which everyone made their decision to support a constitution that somehow did not violate their prerogatives. So what sort of constitution would they have virtually accepted? Here comes the rabbit out of the hat: the "no coercion" principle translates into a constitution that stymies almost all democratic procedures and protects property rights in precisely

23. This point is rendered with exquisite specificity in Whyte 2017.

24. This is one reason why, in my work, I have not devoted as much attention to Buchanan as to other members of the thought collective.

the manner that Buchanan the neoliberal would prefer! This, Buchanan dubs freedom and equality.

I agree with the verdict of my former teacher, Warren Samuels, in this regard: this is little more than apologetics for the rich to keep their status quo ante. "The rationale that each man's values are to count as any other's is inaccurate and obscurantist in the context of any system of privilege. It presumes an equality that does not exist. There is coercion even in a market relying on contracts; the problem is not coercion or no coercion but coercion within which institutional or power structure" (Buchanan and Samuels 1975: 34).

The central issue here is not to pursue any particular argument against Buchanan; rather, it is to notice that Hayek's *Constitution* looks nothing like Buchanan's Constitution, and yet, these two together managed jointly to provide effective intellectual justifications for the concerted attack on contemporary democracy that MacLean deplores and that emanates from Heritage Action and the American Legislative Exchange Council and the Manhattan Institute and the Mercatus Center. The differences also were treated as irrelevant by the Chileans in the Pinochet era. It is another one of those tag team scenarios, resembling the one broached in the section on racism above. You can praise equality or disown it; you can appeal to justice or else take the low road and insist justice doesn't exist; you can appeal to natural law or dispense with it altogether; you can disparage all government or else indeed praise the virtues of an authoritarian takeover. All that really matters is the political terminus, which is to hamstring democracy and impose policies that the thought collective portrays as market enhancing.

And before you cave in to the inclination to scoff at all this as a conspiracy theory, take a little time to delve into how the history of the Neoliberal Thought Collective has actually worked.

3. Coda

As I composed this, the current president of the Mont Pèlerin Society delivered the fifth annual Liggio Lecture to the Atlas Network Liberty Forum (Boettke 2017). In that lecture, I am bracketed together with Nancy MacLean and Avner Offer as comprising what he calls a "*House of Cards* conspiratorial style of 'story telling'" about himself and his comrades. He there has the temerity to resort to Stephen Colbert's concept of "truthiness" (as though it were not originally aimed at his own comrades), claiming that we

do not so much confront the neoliberals' ideas as misrepresent them in some species of diabolical legerdemain. I am surprised he didn't also complain about "fake news."

I do find it amazing that when the set of sallies and interventions that *they* first dubbed the "war of ideas" is finally beginning to be directly engaged by their opponents—in other words, we actually read their texts and work in their archives and strive to produce an alternative understanding of recent political epistemology—they take umbrage, as if Hayek had never once sneered at what he deemed "second-hand dealers in ideas." Perhaps it is they who languish in a period of relative paucity of imagination; perhaps the Mont Pèlerin Society no longer abides as a vibrant hothouse of political criticism and discussion. Perhaps their substantial victories and sumptuous dinners have blunted their formerly sharp edge. The Marxist inclination to dismiss ideas as mere epiphenomena of underlying pecuniary forces had to finally dissipate, so that the neoliberals can begin to be seen for what they actually are, and now the Left may be prepared to learn something from their history and not merely parrot the neoliberals' own versions of it.

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