

## *Unkocking Tennessee*

*Oped by Máté Wierdl, expressing only his own opinion*

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By the time I retire—no doubt, still as a math professor—in 7 years, at age 67, the total of my pretax earnings will be less than \$2 million, after 40 years on the job. The multibillionaire Koch brothers normally make this much money between breakfast and lunch, but they may have to wait till dinner to make a few millions, in case things don't go well for them—for example, when the mean and incompetent 99% mishandles the economy.

In theory, there should be no hard feelings between the Kochs and I: they are in the business of making money, and I am in the business of serving the public both as a research mathematician and as a teacher at a public university. To maintain the peace between us, we simply need to keep a suitably safe distance from each other. This shouldn't be too hard, should it? I certainly have kept myself out of the Kochs' and other businesses, but the Kochs apparently cannot keep away from public universities: Over the past 10 years, the Charles Koch Foundation has “donated” to over 300 universities. The intent of these donations is to advance their particular political agenda, and at schools such as George Mason University, Florida State University, and West Virginia University the donors have had the ability to pick which faculty are hired, what curriculum is taught, and which students they will fund.

The latest Koch donation occurred really close to home: they gave \$3.5 million to Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), barely a 3 hours drive from Memphis, to establish the so called “Political Economy Research Institute” (PERI). What are the members of PERI going to work on? Well, the leader of PERI is Dan Smith, and he came from Troy University. What do we know about Smith's work at Troy University? According to an article in the Murfreesboro Post,<sup>1</sup>

... during Smith's time at Troy University, the chancellor there sanctioned the Manuel H. Johnson Center for Political Economy, also a Koch-funded institute, in part because of comments professor George Crowley made at an Association for Private Enterprise Education (APEE) conference sponsored by the Koch Foundation in which he allegedly bragged about recruiting students for the Koch “liberty movement” and Smith's efforts to *derail the Retirement Systems of Alabama*.

What?! An Alabama public university professor was trying to derail the retirement system of the state, and now he is leading a political-economy institute at a Tennessee public university?! No

<sup>1</sup> Stockard, *MTSU workers' union questions Koch connections*.

wonder my colleagues at MTSU have been up in arms about this new Koch institute on their campus. What is PERI supposed to work on? Is it going to research how to bring down *our* retirement system? What other public good in our state will be in danger?

What does such politically motivated institute and research do to the reputation of MTSU and possibly of other universities in Tennessee?

However unbelievable it may seem, one of the purposes of PERI and other Koch sponsored institutes could very well be to make public universities collapse by destroying their reputation. Indeed, libertarians, such as the Kochs, are no fans of democracy; they believe, taxes are money taken away from the 1% by the undeserving 99% who then spend it on themselves—such as on public schools and universities, national parks.

Since antidemocratic ideas and activities are not popular among the majority of the population, according to Duke University's Nancy MacLean,<sup>2</sup> the Kochs employ the method of cuckoos to advance their political agenda: they plant their libertarian brainwashing and action centers as eggs on the campuses of public universities which then are expected to nurture these centers until they are strong enough to start attacking democratic institutions such as their own caretakers.

<sup>2</sup> MacLean, *Democracy in chains*.

Unfortunately, some university leaders don't stay on their job for long, and this lack of long term commitment to public education and academic integrity makes their knees weak and accept donations that have strings attached—strings that may end up strangling the university.

It is then up to professors and students to be vigilant about protecting a university's reputation from donors with a "plan" for them, or from grants with strings attached. Those who want to help out in these efforts, can start by reading the *Unkoch my campus* website at

<http://www.unkochmycampus.org/>

## References

MacLean, Nancy (2017). *Democracy in chains*. e-book. VIKING. ISBN: 9781101980989.

Stockard, Sam (2018). *MTSU workers' union questions Koch connections*. Mufreesboro Post, May 22, 2018. URL: [https://www.murfreesboropost.com/news/murfreesboro/mtsu-workers-union-questions-koch-connections/article\\_4d3e1b8a-5e31-11e8-8b99-b77efa4a98f7.html](https://www.murfreesboropost.com/news/murfreesboro/mtsu-workers-union-questions-koch-connections/article_4d3e1b8a-5e31-11e8-8b99-b77efa4a98f7.html).