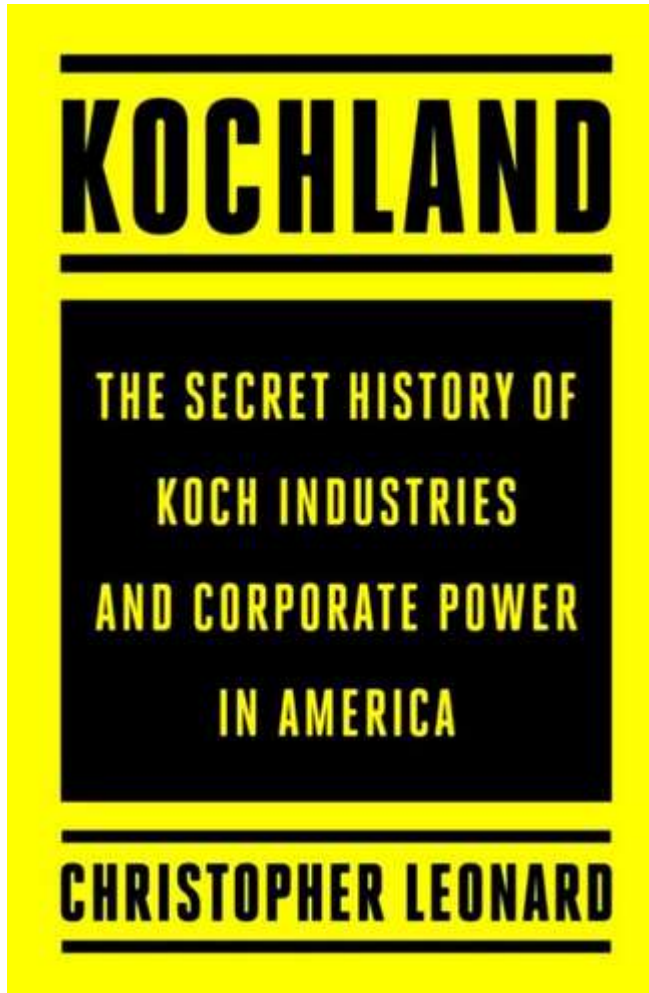


‘Kochland’ explores foundation of powerful family

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“*Kochland: The Secret History of Koch Industries and Corporate Power in America*” by Christopher Leonard. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2019, 704 pages, \$35.



“The profits from Koch’s activities are stunning,” Christopher Leonard explains near the beginning of “*Kochland: The Secret History of Koch Industries and Corporate Power in America*,” his exhaustive new treatise on the history of one of the most successful – and controversial – family businesses in America. “Charles Koch and his brother David own roughly 80 percent of Koch Industries. Together the two men are worth \$120 billion.

“Their fortune is larger than that of Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, or Microsoft founder Bill Gates,” he continues. “Yet David and Charles Koch did not invent a major new product or revolutionize any industry. The Koch brothers derived their wealth through a patient, long-term strategy of seizing opportunities in complex and often opaque corners of the economic system.”

So begins one of the most fascinating – and at times infuriating – books I have ever read. I would venture to speculate that most readers have heard of the Koch brothers; they have played an integral role in shaping the last several election cycles. Their conservative brand of politics permeates the economic and

cultural landscape in a way that few can rival. But like most of my peers, I had little information about how they came to be so influential before this hefty volume arrived on my desk. The narrative itself (excluding the appendix and source notes) pushes 600 pages. This is certainly one of those in-depth investigative explorations you have to be exceptionally interested in or you will never make your way through it. Luckily, I stuck with it until the end – and I am happy to report that the insights Leonard provides are definitely worth the journey.

As I have mentioned in previous reviews, I find descriptions of the early years of people who eventually go on to become immensely successful to be especially intriguing. This is certainly the case with “*Kochland*.” Many of us know how the story turned out, but few are privy to the experiences that created the foundation for what came later. Like most brothers, Charles and David Koch shared many similarities, including challenging relationships with their father, Fred. But they also had distinct personalities and different areas in which each excelled.

“One of Charles Koch’s earliest memories is of sitting in a public school classroom in Wichita, watching the teacher write math problems on the chalkboard,” the author writes in “The Age of Volatility Begins,” the second chapter. “He was in the third grade. He would always remember how the other students were asking questions and how the teacher kept trying to explain to them the

mechanical interactions between the big white numerals and symbols. This was puzzling to Charles Koch. He didn't understand why the other children should be confused."

"This was when he realized that he had a gift for math and the mind of an engineer," he continues. "He could clearly see a set of rules, the language of numbers. And this was a set of rules that existed perfectly within its own realm, whether people understood it or not. Math didn't change just because a person struggled with it. Math was perfect. And Charles Koch understood it."

"Kochland" is, without a doubt, one of the most extensively-researched books I've read in quite a while, with 62 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the 25 chapters arranged in three major sections: "Part 1: The Koch Method," which consists of the initial 10 chapters; "Part 2: The Black Box Economy," which is made up of the next seven chapters; and "Part 3: Goliath," the final eight chapters that tie everything together and bring the reader right up to the present moment. I was especially appreciative of the inclusion of an Appendix that lists all the significant characters found in the narrative as well as providing a brief snapshot detailing why they are relevant. The result is a seamless and comprehensive portrait of the meticulous yet calculated rise of one of the most powerful families in U.S. history.

Leonard is a business reporter whose work has appeared in The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, Fortune, New Republic, Slate and Bloomberg Businessweek. A 1998 graduate of the journalism program at the University of Missouri, his resume includes a stint as a Schmidt Family Foundation Fellow at New America. He also served as a national business reporter with The Associated Press. He was recently named executive director of the Watchdog Writers Group, a groundbreaking investigative fellowship program, at his alma mater.

My first acquaintance with Leonard was through an article he wrote for The Washington Post in 2017, "An inside look at how Koch Industries does business," which piqued my interest in the topic at hand. This is his second book; his first being "The Meat Racket: The Secret Takeover of America's Food Business," which was published in 2014. In 2017, he won the prestigious J. Anthony Lukas Work-in-Progress Award, which is co-sponsored by the Columbia Journalism School and the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, for the current tome.

Of course, you can't mention the Koch brothers without including a thorough discussion of their critical role in encouraging and actively promoting skepticism about climate change. Leonard spends a significant portion of the book exposing their involvement in shaping the debate. It is important to remember that a sizable chunk of their vast fortune is inexorably tied to the fossil fuel industry and its complex network of tributaries. Witness the following from "Warming," the 19th chapter – and one of the more instructive with respect to how the Kochs labor tirelessly to protect their various revenue streams:

"In private, Koch Industries officials were even more dismissive of the science around climate change. One former senior Koch Industries executive, a trained scientist who only made business decisions after first analyzing reams of data, explained that he believed global warming was a hoax invented by liberal politicians who sought to use the fiction as a way to unite the populace against an invented enemy. After the fall of the Soviet Empire in 1991, this executive explained, American elites needed a new, all-encompassing enemy with which to frighten the masses, and so they invented one with global warming. All the data on atmospheric carbon levels and rising temperatures were part of this conspiracy, the executive said."

As Leonard makes clear, this kind of strategy is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the Koch brothers. If you want a better understanding of why unions are in decline or why the gap between the haves and have-nots continues to widen, then you might want to add this one to your reading list. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.