

by David C. Jacobs

## Politicization of Catholic Social Teaching



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**A**uthor Jane Mayer wrote of the billionaire network bankrolling authoritarian politics in her book *Dark Money* (Penguin, 2017). While Mayer described the origins of climate change denial and “free market” think tanks, she missed another significant propaganda node, the initiative to check the influence of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). With varying degrees of energy, elements of the Catholic hierarchy have prioritized concerns of the working class and poor at least since Pope Leo XIII. The social encyclicals (*Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Centesimo Anno*, and other documents of CST) in 1891 sought to address the conditions of the working poor through the advocacy of limited reforms that would preserve the status of the Church. Since 1890, the Church has been formally committed to acceptance of unionism and collective bargaining and the humanization of capitalism. The encyclicals have also embraced worker participation in management, employee ownership, and a broader distribution of property. In the United States, the Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on the Economy reinforced these commitments in 1986. The content of the encyclicals assured that many in the Catholic hierarchy would endorse labor causes and that Catholic business schools would emphasize curricula in labor, human resources, and ethics.



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Catholic Social Teaching has, of course, played a role in the development of social and liberation movements across the globe. In the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, CST has been a factor in organizing and ideology in trade unionism. Particular priests have been closely identified with unions.

The Association for Catholic Trade Unionists participated in factional disputes in the United Auto Workers and other

unions. Philip Murray, who became president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations in the 1940s, proposed a CST-inspired alternative to capitalism and socialism: national planning through “industry councils.” Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker movement to bring justice to the working poor.

In Latin America, local clerics applied the “preferential option for the poor” in the development of liberation theology. Of course, left-wing critics of the Church still found these reform currents to be fundamentally conservative, and the right wing of the Church sought to suppress them.

The significant role played by Catholic institutions in labor advocacy has rendered them a target for the Catholic advocates of corporate power, who seem determined to root out reformism across the church infrastructure. Possibly because of pressure from conservative donors and/or the pre-existing neoclassical tilt of business schools, Catholic university business schools’ faculty softened the critique of capitalism implicit in CST in the 1980s.

However, a softened critique was not sufficient from the perspective of the right wing. Donors including the Charles Koch, BB&T, and John William

Pope Foundations provided funds to Catholic institutions and other universities to further marginalize the threat represented by CST. The Acton Institute was created to broadly contest reformism across religions. Centers for “free markets” were established at Catholic schools such as Georgetown, Catholic University, and Creighton. At the Catholic University Business School (now the Busch School of Business, in honor of a leading Catholic billionaire), the Koch agenda of opposition to the minimum wage, the defense of inequality, resistance to action on climate change, and other right-wing dogmas has become the creed of the faculty.

One concern of prominent Busch faculty is the redefinition of fundamental principles of CST. Solidarity and subsidiarity are given new meanings. Busch scholar Andrew Abela acknowledges that solidarity reflects the reality of an individual embedded in society. Curiously, he tends to identify business institutions as a primary expression of solidarity, not unions or social movements. As he sees it, solidarity is instantiated in markets. A colleague at Busch has proposed the relationship of greeter and consumer at Wal-Mart as an example of solidarity.

In general, teaching and scholarship at the Busch School now serve to suppress public understanding of some of the crises of the modern era, such as rising inequality and environmental peril. CST at Busch has been stripped of its historical labor



Charles Koch

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concerns. It is remarkable that business ethics as taught there would leave the practitioner blind to the social consequences of management decisions. A business school, particularly in its programs on ethics, should illuminate the world as it exists rather than hide from it to protect the property and self-respect of billionaires.

Much to the surprise of no one, universities and religious organizations prove vulnerable to manipulation by the wealthy, and particularly to coordinated action by billionaires. Concentrated wealth can produce the appearance of public support for ideologies that are focused on defense of oligarchy. Given the gap between the narrowness of the constituency served combined with broad claims, and the implied illegitimacy of alternative perspectives, concealment and subterfuge characterize the CST strategy at Busch.

Despite the challenges of donor influence, is it possible for a business school to become hospitable to critique and contribute to necessary social change? Perhaps a school influenced by a renewed CST stripped of propaganda would be an improvement. However, an inclusive and socially relevant institution is unlikely to emerge unless we can alter the governance and political economy of business education. This will probably follow rather than precede an era of broader social reform. ■