

“Free Market is the Secret to Happiness” - A Billionaires’ PR Initiative

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Global Research, June 26, 2014

[The Center for Public Integrity](#) 25 June 2024

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [History](#), [Poverty](#) & [Social Inequality](#)

Editor’s note: This story is one in a continuing series on Washington, D.C.’s information industry. The series seeks to illuminate the sometimes-misleading methods used by special interest groups to gain support for their agendas from government and average Americans.

When Arthur C. Brooks stepped on stage in December, the influential conservative’s mission was simple, yet ambitious: “If I do my job,” [Brooks began his speech](#), “in the next few minutes I’m going to give you the secret to happiness.”

Standing before large block letters that spelled “H-A-P-P-I-N-E-S-S,” the charismatic president of the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, explained how genetics, major life events and choices all contribute to one’s well-being.

Brooks mentioned the importance of forging close relationships with family, promoted charitable giving and emphasized that “money doesn’t buy happiness.”

Nearing the end of his nearly 20-minute speech, Brooks said happiness also depends on ... free markets?

“The earned-success system that brings you happiness is the system of free enterprise that lifts people out of poverty,” Brooks said. “Don’t work for the stateism, the collectivism that suppresses this,” he added. “Work for the free enterprise that makes this possible.”

Don’t worry, be happy

Proponents say the free market system encourages investment, stimulates innovation and increases efficiency. But according to Brooks, it also makes you happy and improves your well-being — even if you’re poor.

The message appears to be part of a new public relations initiative spearheaded by America’s most high-profile free-market advocates: Charles and David Koch, the billionaire brothers who have built a powerful political empire based on libertarian principles.

Brooks, whose high-profile think tank receives Koch funding, was recently tapped to serve on the advisory board of the Charles Koch Institute’s “[Well-Being Initiative](#),” which “aims to advance our understanding of the meaning, foundations, and drivers of human flourishing” through research, education and discussion.

The initiative may be billed as a way to explore well-being, but some critics of the Koch brothers are skeptical.

“The question needs to be: Whose well-being are we talking about?” asks Tony Carrk, a director at the Center for American Progress, a liberal advocacy group that serves as a counterweight to the Koch brothers’ political operation. “The policies that the Koch brothers have promoted and put forward seem to only benefit those at the very top, at the expense of everyone else.”

Officials from the Charles Koch Institute did not respond to requests for comment.

The Kochs oversee a political ecosystem whose influence stretches far and wide — from think tanks and universities to trade associations and political action committees. As their public profile has risen, so too has criticism.

In January, Koch Industries, America’s second-largest privately held company, hired Steve Lombardo of global public relations firm Burson-Marsteller as “part of an effort by the Koch brothers to tell their story better,” [according to Politico](#).

“Koch Industries is working to improve the daily life of people around the world,” he said, “and I look forward to working with the team to bring this story to the global marketplace.”

In May, [Politico reported on a memo](#) from the Koch brothers’ powerful political group Americans for Prosperity, which laid the groundwork for its future political operations.

“[W]e consistently see that Americans in general are concerned that free-market policy — and its advocates — benefit the rich and powerful more than the most vulnerable of society,” the memo read. “We must correct this misconception.”

Koch and the ‘true nature of well-being’

Charles Koch informally introduced the Well-Being Initiative in a January [blog post](#) titled, “The importance of well-being.”

“Through sound research, broad education and robust discussion, the Initiative aims to advance understanding of what it means to flourish, how to understand and measure the various aspects of well-being, and how to empower individuals to live better lives,” he wrote.

The Charles Koch Foundation, a separate nonprofit from Koch Institute and supporter of the Well-Being Initiative, recently posted on its website calls for research proposals, seeking “doctoral students interested in contributing to the academic exploration of the role free societies play in advancing human well-being and prosperity,” [one proposal request states](#).

Before it recently underwent a redesign and many old links died, the Charles Koch Institute’s website had highlighted past well-being events and work published by Brooks and other board members dating back to last fall. It also linked to Brooks’ “Secret to Happiness” speech.

In December, Brooks published an op-ed in *The New York Times* titled, “[A Formula for Happiness](#),” which mirrored his American Enterprise Institute speech. A few months later, in a *Times* op-ed about income inequality and what he referred to as the “rising sympathy for income redistribution,” he argued that there is “a strong link between economic envy and unhappiness.”

And in February, Brooks even managed to pull off the unthinkable: He got the Dalai Lama, a self-described socialist, to visit the American Enterprise Institute, which decries socialism.

The title of the [panel discussion](#) featuring the Tibetan leader: “Happiness, free enterprise, and human flourishing.”

Brooks did not respond to requests for comment.

Some recent well-being forums sponsored by the Charles Koch Institute have featured panel discussions on the [economy](#), [criminal justice](#) and [higher education](#), among others.

On Wednesday, the Charles Koch Institute will host what it’s calling its “[Inaugural Well-Being Forum](#)” at the Newseum in downtown Washington, D.C.

Not-so-diverse board

The five-member advisory board of the Well-Being Initiative includes Ángel Cabrera, president of George Mason University and Tyler Cowen, a popular libertarian professor at the school who has been dubbed “[America’s Hottest Economist](#).”

As the [Center reported](#) in March, two of the six private charitable foundations the Koch brothers control and personally fund combined in 2012 to pump more than \$12.7 million into colleges and universities. George Mason University has received more Koch money than any other school.

“The Charles Koch Foundation has been generous to the university, and they have supported various efforts in areas that are important to us, so this time around they wanted my guidance and advice, and I thought it would be a great thing to do,” Cabrera told the Center for Public Integrity in an interview.

Cabrera — not a libertarian, he says — explained that the Koch’s Well-Being Initiative lines up with the university’s strategic plan, which includes a well-being component. He refuted the idea that this initiative was all about promoting the Koch brothers’ libertarian ideology.

“If they had a pre-defined definition or ideology that they wanted to push with this effort, the last thing you want is free, independent thinkers telling you what to do,” he pointed out.

The initiative seeks to explore various research areas, including something called “neuroeconomics” — a field of study that merges brain science and economics to explore economic decision-making.

Advisory board member Paul Zak, aka “Dr. Love,” is a neuroeconomist and founding director of the [Center for Neuroeconomics Studies](#) at Claremont Graduate University. He is widely known for his research into the brain chemical oxytocin — which he calls the “moral molecule” that is key to improving social interactions, including those involving financial transactions.

Zak has concluded in his research that [free markets are inherently moral](#).

In an interview, Zak told The Center for Public Integrity that he had reservations about joining the advisory board when he was first approached by Koch Institute officials about nine months ago.

“I said, ‘You guys have kind of a dicey reputation,’” Zak recalled, noting that he disagrees with some of the Koch brothers’ political efforts. “And they said, ‘Yeah, we know, and we want to start funding some good science so that we can allow people to draw their own conclusions.’”

Zak said officials convinced him that the Well-Being Initiative is apolitical.

“It seems non-agenda driven,” he said.

“We really want to understand [well-being] better and we want lots of people to use this. Let’s try to make a really global, useful, broad index and just see what it tells us about government policies, about economic growth, about all of these things that can affect people’s well-being.”

Still, Zak acknowledges that the initiative’s advisory board is dominated by libertarians. “Could [the board] be more diverse?” he asked. “Probably.”

More libertarianism

The other two advisory board member positions are filled by [William Inboden](#), a professor of public affairs at the University of Texas-Austin, and Chris Rufer, the president and founder of the Morning Star Company.

A former fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, Inboden was previously the senior vice president of the London-based [Legatum Institute](#), which publishes the “[Prosperity Index](#),” ranking countries based on wealth, economic growth and quality of life.

Rufer is a board member of the [Free to Choose Network](#), which produces broadcast programs that air on PBS stations. Last November, the network produced “[Economic Freedom in Action: Changing Lives](#),” a documentary about how the “rise in economic freedom has led to increased prosperity and longevity, allowing more people to rise out of poverty and build positive futures for themselves and their children.”

The program, funded in part by Chris Rufer and his wife, aired on stations [all across the country](#).

In an interview with the Center, Rufer said the Koch brothers’ message has been misinterpreted by the liberal media.

“Is it a PR move?” he asked. “Call it PR. What do you do when you put on a better shirt so you think the girls will look at you? Is that fraud? It’s not fraud. You’re just trying to represent yourself.”

This initiative, though, is good PR to a good end, he said.

“If you’re maliciously trying to deceive, well that’s bad,” he said. “But look at well-being and look at libertarianism and I think you’ll see it’s pretty consistent ... because that is the objective of libertarianism: human welfare.”

Erin Quinn contributed to this story.

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