

Public Choice Analysis a Scheme for Imposing Racist Oligarchy on the USA? Preposterous!

Public choice analysis shows, among many other things, that organized political interests will tend to dominate the political process at the expense of the unorganized members of society. This is not a claim that “the rich” will necessarily dominate “the poor” in the political process, although the rich obviously have an advantage in influencing politics, other things being equal. “The rich” and “the poor” are not standard categories in public choice analysis. In empirical public choice studies, one finds, for example, that groups such as the National Education Association exert disproportionate influence on legislation and regulation related to the public schools. Are school teachers members of “the rich”? Hardly. Likewise, labor unions such as the Service Employees International Union pack a substantial political punch. Do the members of this union belong to “the rich”? Hardly.

The claim that public choice analysis is intended to, or actually does, assist the rich in dominating the poor, or the capitalists in dominating the workers, or the whites in dominating the blacks cannot be made in good faith by anyone who has the slightest familiarity with public choice analysis. Questions posed in these forms are simply not component parts of public choice analysis. Nor were they among the concerns of James Buchanan, one of the leading founders of modern public choice analysis. Buchanan’s principal concern pertained to the use of constitutional restrictions that would, to the maximum feasible extent, allow each individual’s preferences to be registered in the political process and prevent special interests and the state itself from overriding the rights and interests of those with the least voice in the process.

Progressives who do not understand public choice analysis (and indeed object to it on principle) seek to force it into the Procrustean bed of quasi-Marxist class-struggle analysis—you know, capitalists versus the oppressed working class as a whole—or into a quasi-Marxist multiculturalist framework in which privileged straight white men as a whole oppress women and members of ethnic and sexual-preference minorities as a whole. These aggregations are so coarse that they invite the mockery of informed people, and they certainly cannot be sustained by systematic research of the kind one finds in the pages of Public Choice and related peer-reviewed journals.

Nancy MacLean’s thesis that James Buchanan and his comrades in the development of public choice analysis sought to subvert democracy and put in its place a racist oligarchy at the behest of evil billionaires is too ludicrous to take seriously. Yet, today, a multitude of progressive academics and their fellow travelers are treating this baseless accusation as if it were an established truth. Ignorance is a sorrowful thing, but ignorance conjoined to ideological blindness is a vastly more wretched thing.