Title: Know Your Values, Control the Frame that Governs Political Debate—and Avoid Thinking Like George Lakoff

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If you are concerned about conserving species and habitats, conserving what remains of the local cultural commons and the intergenerational knowledge it is based upon, and conserving such traditions as an independent judiciary, separation of church and state, and the separation of power between the three branches of government, don't take George Lakoff as an authority on how to control the frame governing political debates. His best selling book, Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Value and Frame the Debate (2004), is an outstanding example of how authors often ignore the advice they want others to follow. Many of his insights about how right-wing extremists have succeeded in becoming the dominant force in American politics are essentially correct—including their long-term approach to establishing the institutes that serve as the incubators for formulating market-liberal policies, and the strategies for achieving them.

However, he ignores his own advice on the more critical issue of using the word "progressive" as the primary metaphor for carrying the fight to the "conservatives". That is, by ignoring that the right wing extremists are actually a coalition of market-liberal and Christian fundamentalists, he has accepted their take-over (framing) of the word conservative. At the same time, he ignores that a number of the cultural assumptions that underlie what he represents as a progressive, nurturant approach to politics are also the same assumptions that underlie the industrial, consumer-oriented culture that the market-liberals want to expand on a global basis. What is particularly surprising is that the examples of conservative beliefs and values that Lakoff cites turn out to be the core features of the free-market system. He cites Adam Smith's principle of laissez-faire as one of the conceptual and moral foundations of the conservatives—but this did not lead Lakoff to question whether policies based on the ideas of Classical Liberal theorists such as Adam Smith should be labeled as conservative. Ironically, the institutes that he mentions, such as the CATO and the American Enterprise Institutes, have posted statements on their websites that their political philosophy should not be identified as conservative as that "smacks of an unwillingness to change"--as it is noted on the CATO

website. Both institutes claim that they promote free markets and a diminished role for government. On an earlier CATO website posting titled "About Us" the point was made that only in America are people so uninformed that they identify the institute with a conservative agenda. If Lakoff possessed a more historical understanding of the layered nature of metaphorical thinking, he might have realized that the same root metaphors of individualism, anthropocentrism, and progress as an inherent characteristic of change (along with the hubris of an ethnocentric way of thinking) that support his use of "progressive" as his legitimating metaphor are also taken-for-granted by the market-liberals. By directing his fire against what he thinks conservatism stands for, he forces the environmentalists and social justice advocates to identify themselves as progressive thinkers—even though there is nothing as progressive in terms of undermining important traditions (such as privacy, non-monetized relationships and activities) as the constant stream of technological innovations and the efforts to turn more of the cultural commons into the markets of an ever-expanding industrial/consumer-dependent culture.

Lakoff's metaphor of the "strict father figure" cannot be traced back to the ideas of intergenerational responsibility that is at the center of Edmund Burke's conservatism, now can it be found in the writings of such environmental conservatives as Wendell Berry and Vandana Shiva. If Lakoff had done his homework he would have found that the image of the "strict father figure" , as well as the idea that the rich should receive further rewards while the poor will suffer further impoverishment, has its roots in the fundamentalist Christians' understanding of a wrathful God. Deuteronomy 28 provides the analog for understanding the God/human as well as the rich/poor relationships that the fundamentalist Christians take-for-granted. The reductionist and dichotomous pattern of thinking that characterizes the fundamentalist Christians' approach to such policy issues as gay marriage, reproductive rights of women, and the teaching of "intelligent design" can also be found in their claim to know the will of God—and to being God's regents until the Second Coming.

If one follows current political events it should be abundantly clear that both market-liberal and Christian fundamentalists are working together to overturn the traditions of the separation of church and state, an independent judiciary, and the separation of powers between the three branches of government. They are making

progress, to use Lakoff's favorite metaphor, in undermining the gains made over the last decades in the areas of social justice and, more recently, in environmental protection. Returning the economy to a free-market system that is governed by the supposed natural law of supply and demand, and winning more converts that declare Jesus Christ as their personal savior, is the "progressive" agenda of these two groups. If Lakoff had given attention to the actual political agenda of these two groups, it might have occurred to him to ask "What is it that the market-liberal and Christian fundamentalists want to conserve?

Reactionary is not part of Lakoff's political vocabulary. Instead of referring to market-liberals and fundamentalists Christians as conservatives when, in fact, today's market-liberals want to go back to the Truths held several hundred years ago, and today's fundamentalist Christians want to go back to the Truths held several thousand years ago, he should have used the more accurate label of "reactionary." The fundamental difference between a conservative and a reactionary thinker is highlighted in the speech that Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia gave at the University of Chicago in 2002. In a speech titled "God's Justice and Ours," he acknowledged that he did not subscribe to "the conventional fallacy that the Constitution is a 'living document'—that is, a text that means from age to age whatever society (or perhaps the Courts) think it ought to mean." In effect, Scalia is claiming that the political consensus reached over the last two hundred or so years on social justice issues should not be conserved. Rather, the achievements of the democratic process must be rejected in favor of using the "original intent" of the men who wrote the Constitution as the guide for judging which laws are appropriate for the country to live by. The analog for understanding what reactionary means is the person such as Scalia that wants to go back to the"Truths" of an earlier time and thus claim that the achievements in recent years have no significance. A conservative in the Burkean tradition would want to conserve the political achievements of the recent past—including, within our historical context, the democratic process itself. Journalists and media pundits commit the same error that underlies Lakoff's context-free use of the conservative metaphor by referring to Scalia as a conservative when it would be more accurate, in light of his ideas, to refer to him as a "reactionary extremist." That is, he wants to force the nation to go back to an earlier way of thinking—one that could

not anticipate the issues we now face. Lakoff's use of conservative is context-free as he does not ask what the people he labels as conservative want to conserve.

There are a number of possible reasons that Lakoff reproduces the formulaic thinking that reduces our political categories to that of conservative and liberal. One plausible explanation is that he wants to ground the theory of metaphor as a branch of cognitive science, which leads him to argue that repetition in the use of preferred metaphors alters the synapses in the brain. As all languages illuminate and hide, which is an aspect of the process of framing which interpretative system is to be used, Lakoff's scientific orientation marginalizes the importance of understanding the historical nature of how root metaphors (the meta-cognitive schemata) frame the process of thinking over hundreds, even thousands of years—and over a wide range of cultural practices. Examples of root metaphors in the West include mechanism, individualism, patriarchy, progress, anthropocentrism, and, now, evolution. The root metaphors of patriarchy and anthropocentrism (both still held by the market-liberal, fundamentalist Christian coalition) are being challenged by social justice advocates, while "ecology" is beginning to be used as a root metaphor by people concerned with conserving the environmental and the cultural commons.

If Lakoff had adopted an historical perspective on how metaphors carry forward over many generations the analogs that made sense before there was an awareness of environmental limits, and before the various forms of social inequalities were challenged, he might have avoided creating the linguistic double bind that he now wants to saddle social justice and environmental advocates with. That is, his use of "progressive" as the label for many groups, such as environmentalists and civil libertarians , precludes using the vocabulary that foregrounds the real political issues that are on the verge of being decided by the market-liberal and Christian fundamentalists' understanding of what constitutes progress. Referring to progressive civil libertarians suggests that they are oriented toward change. This frame hides what they are really about, which is conserving the liberties and protections that the Constitutional guarantees. Instead of using "progress" as a context-free metaphor (that is, a metaphor that has no historically-grounded analogs) that market-liberals have a history of identifying with, Lakoff should have used social and eco-justice as his umbrella (root) metaphors. Civil libertarians are

concerned with using the law to achieve social justice; while environmentalists are concerned with eco-justice (that is, conserving the cultural and environmental commons for future generations of humans and natural systems). Tagging environmentalists with the same context-free metaphor that the timber industry uses to justify cutting what remains of the old growth forests, and that corporations use to describe the special relationship they have with the Bush administration that allows them to help role-back environmental legislation, is equally problematic.

Lakoff's insights into the connection between language (essentially vocabulary and the root metaphors that provide the interpretative framework) and communicative competence in the political realm is basically correct. His mistake, which he shares with most journalists, media pundits, along with other university graduates that should know better, is in not recognizing the many ways the different expressions of conservatism are an inescapable aspect of everyday life. These include temperamental conservatism which we all share in various ways: the food, conversations, friends, place-based experiences, degree of privacy, and so on, that we are comfortable with. This form of conservatism has no specific ideological orientation—but it is a form of conservatism shared even by ideologues that ignore their own experiences in rejecting all forms of conservatism. In speaking and thinking within the language of our cultural group, we carry forward (conserve) the taken-for-granted patterns of the culture's multiple forms of communication. Depending upon the culture, these taken-for-granted patterns may be given individualized expression, with some of the patterns being made explicit in ways that lead to reform or to conscious efforts at conserving them. There is also the misnamed "conservatism" that is based on the free-market, progress-oriented ideology promoted by the CATO and American Enterprise Institutes that emphasize the autonomous individual as the basic unit of rational decision-making and social change. And there is a long-standing tradition of philosophic conservatism that began with Burke, and has included critics of de-humanizing technology such as Michael Oakeshott. In America, philosophic conservatives presented the cautionary warnings that led to a system of indirect democracy, checks and balances, separation of church and state. As environmental conservatives such as Wendell Berry and Aldo Leopold have appeared on the scene more recently, their writings can also be legitimately included in the category

of philosophical conservatism. The oldest form of conservatism that needs to be revitalized is the conserving of the non-monetized intergenerational knowledge, skills, and activities that enabled people to live more mutually supportive and less money dependent lives.

Lakoff's limited political vocabulary not only misrepresents who his label of conservative is supposed to fit, but it also leads to a continuation of the intellectual poverty that now characterizes today's political discourse. Most university professors share Lakoff's formulaic misuse of the term conservative, which they use as the label for President George W. Bush's domestic and foreign policies, fundamentalist Christians, Supreme Court justices such as Scalia and Thomas, and the efforts of most corporations to promote the globalization of the West's industrial, consumer-dependent culture. A consequence of this formulaic thinking is that few university professors take seriously the need for university graduates to have a knowledge of the history of political thought in the West.

The cultural root metaphors of mechanism, individualism, progress, anthropocentrism , as well as the ethnocentrism that frames so much of the content of university courses, contributes to why so many graduates make what appears as the seamless transition from the classroom to working for the market-liberal goals of the Bush administration. Without this historical knowledge of what separates the tradition of philosophic conservatism from the thinking of classical liberalism, many self-labeled "conservative" students on university campuses are unaware that their ideas are derived from the classical liberal thinkers, plus more contemporary libertarian theorists. And many of the professors that continue to misrepresent what today's faux conservatives stand for fail to recognize that their liberalism shares many of the assumptions that underlie the industrial culture they criticize for the social and environmental injustices they perpetuate.

In light of the scale of environmental changes that are now impacting people's lives, what universities should be helping students to understand is the nature and importance of revitalizing what remains of the cultural and environmental commons—for reasons that have to do with learning how to live more community-centered and less money dependent lives, with reducing our ecological foot-print by becoming less

dependent upon industrial foods, health care, leisure activities, and so on, and with ensuring that the diversity of the world's cultural commons (including the diversity of cultural languages) are not further diminished. The potential of the world's diverse cultural commons to become sites of resistance to the further expansion of economic globalization is not learned in most universities. The importance of the cultural commons as alternatives to the very real possibility of ecological collapse that Jared Diamond writes about will continue to be marginalized by the way Lakoff reinforces the formulaic thinking of most university professors. The irony is that both the mislabeled conservatives and the self-identified liberals (again a form of mislabeling) possess the liberal vocabulary that came into existence before there was an awareness of environmental limits, and that there are different cultural ways of knowing. A further irony is that their shared liberal vocabulary, where the emphasis is placed either on the metaphors that justify expanding markets and profits or on addressing unresolved social justice issues that prevent people from participating more fully in a market economy, has been used in the past to further undermine the cultural commons with a consumer-dependent existence.

C. A. Bowers has written 19 books on the cultural roots of the ecological crisis. His most recent books include Let Them Eat Data (2000), Educating for Eco-Justice and Community (2001), Mindful Conservatism: Rethinking the Ideological and Educational Basis of an Ecologically Sustainable Future (2003), The False Promises of Constructivist Theories of Learning: A Global and Ecological Critique (2005) Revitalizing the Commons: Cultural and Educational Sites of Resistance and Affirmation (in press), and with Frederique Apffel-Marglin, is editor of a collection of essays by Third World activists that found Freire's ideas to have a colonizing impact on indigenous cultures. The title is Rethinking Freire: Globalization and the Environmental Crisis (2005). Two reviews of Mindful Conservatism originally published in environmental journals are available at www.c-a-bowers.com/