

Lakoff and Frank—Looking at the Contemporary American Right

George Lakoff recounts that a conversation he had with a colleague was the catalyst for Lakoff's book, *Moral Politics*. "I asked Paul," Lakoff writes, "... if he could think of a single question, the answer to which would be the best indicator of liberal vs. conservative political attitudes. His response: 'If your baby cries at night, do you pick him up?'"¹

Lakoff's blockbuster, from 2004, is *Don't Think of an Elephant!* about how progressives can "reframe" the political debate in America and win back some of their considerably diminished power. *Moral Politics* is its longer, more academic precursor, first published in 1996. It is very good at explaining the foundations of conservative and progressive politics in the respective moral world views of their practitioners. Understanding the morality of politicians and their followers and seeing the links to their politics is an exceedingly useful exercise, particularly for progressives.

I will here look at both of these books and a third as well: Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* also published in 2004.

What ties these books together is the attempt to discern and describe the etiology and pathology of conservative politics. I use these medical terms purposely because it is my belief that conservatives—or as I and some others prefer to call them, the "right wing"—are in fact suffering from an illness: they have been raised in a typically cold and brutal manner, been conditioned to accept their injuries, been acculturated to filter out any information or feelings that do not accord with their worldview, and are deeply threatened by anything that is out of tune with that view. They are, in the words of Vamik Volkan, among others, regressed. Psychohistory teaches us that these folks, living together in a society, cause most of the trouble, to themselves and others. They are "regressed

large groups" as Volkan would term them, or as Lloyd deMause might say: lower "psychoclasses."

I used to be wholly insensitive to the importance of religion and "values" in politics. I thought that the secular values of the Enlightenment held complete sway, at least in American politics. Then I had an epiphany, as it were, in reading Garry Wills's *Under God*. This very important book clued me to the fact that there was a whole big world out there beyond my effete Eastern intellectual *weltanschauung*. In speaking of conservatives, Lakoff early on says that liberals have been politically helpless of late largely because "... they don't understand the conservative worldview and the role of moral idealism and the family within it."² I think that is an entirely true statement. He also says that the "... lack of conscious awareness of their own political worldview has been devastating to the liberal cause."³ Well along toward the end, Lakoff declares "... the challenge in contemporary America is to create a nurturant society when a significant portion of that society has been raised either by authoritarian or neglectful parents."⁴ Quite a challenge indeed as we have been learning in the past 26 years since the Reagan Revolution. (You can look at the timelines in the conservative ascendancy in different ways, tracing the origins to Barry Goldwater's radical candidacy in 1964, to Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy in 1968, and to the resurfacing of the Christian Right in American politics in the 1970's after lying politically dormant for decades from the time of the humiliating Scopes Trial in 1925.)

Lakoff practices "cognitive science," what he calls the "interdisciplinary study of the mind." His particular area is cognitive linguistics which concerns itself with "everyday conceptualization, reasoning, and language." Metaphor, "common sense," prototypes and stereotypes, categories, and exemplars are all terms of his art. He gives us a quick sketch of his field in the opening chapters, then plunges into the relationship of moral values to politics. He discusses the two models of family life that explain our society and politics: Strict Father Morality and Nurturant Parent Morality. Do you pick up the crying baby? (For psychohistorians, these categories should be axiomatic.)

Lakoff finds these worldviews are essentially irreconcilable, thus the extreme polarization of American culture and politics. He posits that the "Nation as Family" metaphor rules our public discourse. In a nutshell: The nation is a family, the government is a parent, and the citizens are the children. It is through this mechanism, this way that we all view the commons, that the two competing moral world views project themselves—and joust for power. He lays this out quite convincingly and then spends seven chapters explaining how issues—from abortion to taxes, from the death

penalty to the culture wars, and the “two models of Christianity,” among others—can and should be viewed through this prism. Further on, he discusses various flavors of conservative and liberal, including libertarian, but comes back to the position that the two fundamental poles—Strict Father and Nurturant Parent—are where the action is.

In the last part of the book, he declares his political loyalties—liberal—and gives us a taste of what his later work in *Don't Think of An Elephant!* will be about. He has a particularly interesting chapter called “Raising Real Children” in which he, among other things, quotes from the childrearing treatises of such prominent right-wing Christians as James Dobson and Gary Bauer. It reminds one of the extensive exegeses that Lloyd DeMause has given us on the history of childrearing and Alice Miller's discussions of “poisonous pedagogy.” Scary stuff.

The one fly in the ointment is that Lakoff seems to think he and his colleagues invented this line of inquiry. This statement about a third of the way along in the book jumped off the page at me: “Very few of those outside the cognitive sciences are used to thinking about social and political issues in terms of the human mind.”⁵ Indeed?! This statement is all the more surprising because his extensive bibliography cites folks like Brazelton, Ginott and Winnicott on nurturant childrearing, as well as Altemeyer, Fromm, Greven, and Adorno on the causes and effects of abusive childrearing. I presume that Lakoff has been further enlightened since 1996 to the contributions of social and political psychologists, and maybe even psychohistorians.

In *What's the Matter With Kansas?*, Thomas Frank looks dead on at the phenomenon of people working and voting against their own economic interests. He says that these folks are, in his word, deranged. They are the victims—and the acolytes—of the “Great Backlash.” The “High Priests of Conservatism,” Frank says, claim that it is the “free market” that has wrought all the economic changes—the “unseen hand” that Adam Smith visualized at work in economic life. (I want to say parenthetically that Adam Smith has gotten a bad rap. His economics were founded on profoundly moral tenets. His work exemplified the best of the Scottish Enlightenment. That's all for another paper though.)

It's not, to return to Frank, the unseen hand, driving things. “But in truth it is the carefully cultivated derangement of places like Kansas that has propelled their movement along.”⁶

... on closer inspection the country seems more like a panorama of madness and delusion worthy of Hieronymus Bosch: of sturdy blue collar patriots reciting the Pledge while they strangle their own life chances; of small farmers proudly voting themselves off the land; of devoted family men carefully

seeing to it that their children will never be able to afford college or proper health care; of working-class guys in Midwestern cities cheering as they deliver up a landslide for a candidate whose policies will end their way of life, will transform their region into a "rust belt," will strike people like them blows from which they will never recover.⁷

Frank's is a sociological study of considerable depth. We see the derangement of our brothers and sisters and one actually can't help but empathize with their plight. Frank himself is a Kansan and offers us his personal experience of how things have come to the pass they have.

The Great Backlash to which Thomas Frank refers is the deep feeling of estrangement and resentment against the "liberal elite" that has been cultivated among the yeoman guard of the right wing. Jason Epstein, in his review of *What's the Matter with Kansas?* in the "NY Review of Books," said that when the Soviet Union collapsed:

... the right wing was left without an external enemy against whom to mobilize. So it turned to a domestic substitute by demonizing the latte-drinking, Volvo-driving, school-bussing, fetus-killing, tree-hugging, gun-fearing, morally relativist and secularly humanist so-called liberal elitists ...⁸

So the "vast right-wing conspiracy,"⁹ to borrow Hillary Rodham Clinton's term, has waged the culture wars since Nixon's time primarily to take the focus off the fundamental issues of economic and social fairness. "They need a divided America,"¹⁰ Bill Clinton said of Republicans at the 2004 Democratic Convention. Lakoff says: "Without the cultural civil war, the conservatives cannot win."¹¹ Frank puts it this way:

A while back the *Wall Street Journal* ran an essay about a place "where hatred trumps bread," where a manipulative ruling class has for decades exploited an impoverished people while simultaneously fostering in them a culture of victimization that steers this people's fury back persistently toward a shadowy, cosmopolitan Other. In this tragic land unassuageable cultural grievances are elevated inexplicably over solid material ones, and basic economic self-interest is eclipsed by juicy myths of national authenticity and righteousness wronged. The essay was supposed to be a description of the Arab states in their conflict with Israel, but when I read it I thought immediately of dear old Kansas ...¹²

Wilhem Reich, like Frank, asks why the oppressed classes don't "get it"—to use a modern expression. What inhibits the development of their consciousness? Why don't the masses recognize the function of fascism? Why do they so often embrace it wholeheartedly? Part of his answer is that: "Every form of totalitarian-authoritarian rulership is based on the irrationalism inculcated in masses of people."¹³

Again, Jason Epstein, eloquently, in his review of Frank's book:

"People getting their fundamental interests wrong is what American political life is all about," Frank writes, though he might have gone further and implicated humanity in general, with its primordial fear of exile, abandonment, and death in a terrifying environment, and its corresponding submission to factitious gods and the deadly schemes of mad rulers, unvarying from before the Pharaohs to the present.¹⁴

Confusion, deception, division, irrationalism, derangement, fear, what Frank at one point calls "the bucking bronco of popular hatred"—these are all tools that ruling classes wield to keep the masses in thrall. Karl Marx went so far as to call religion the "opiate of the masses." One might argue that a sense of spirituality and a kinship with God are not poison, as Mao characterized religion to the young Dalai Lama, but rather an antidote to the cynical materialism of the corporate elites and their generals—and Lakoff does in fact argue precisely this in *Don't Think of An Elephant!*, and I will touch on that later. However, the way that "religion" is used in contemporary America by the right wing is clearly to foster an agenda that is narrow and cruel—not unlike the upbringing of the people who propagate and embrace the message. Chuck Strozier in his keynote address at the 2005 IPA convention, and his "Journal of Psychohistory" article from the fall of 2005 and numerous other writings, identified this misuse of religion for us. There are other terrific commentators on the confluence of the religious right and contemporary American politics, including my favorite, Garry Wills.

Frank, in this stark and compelling portrait of how things are for us today in America, does not really get to what the progressive response to these ills should be. For me, that's okay, because he's made such a thorough and poignant sketch of the regressed state of being that the right wing has created for itself.

Lakoff gets to the subject of how progressives can and must address the situation in his *Don't Think of An Elephant!* At the core of his arguments here is a quintessential principle of cognitive science: the frame. Frames are the filters through which we see the world. They are inculcated by the processes of childrearing and by the culture around us. Lakoff says:

You can't see or hear frames. They are part of what cognitive scientists call the "cognitive unconscious"—structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access, but know by their consequences: the way we reason and what counts as common sense.¹⁵

This penetrates to all levels of thought and consciousness, and language is the area in which Lakoff is the most expert. His formula for a progressive retaking of the political initiative in this country is to first know your val-

ues and second to “reframe” the political and cultural debate. Simple. (Maybe, or maybe not.)

He returns to his two models for people: those with “Strict Father Morality” and those with “Nurturant Parent Morality.” Do you pick up your child when it cries or do you not? The right wing has been speaking to its Strict Father constituency loudly and clearly for years. At the same time that the right wing have cultivated their “family values” of not sparing the rod, of treating women as second-class citizens, of promoting ignorance, poverty and ill health by their programs, they have cultivated a rich array of metaphors, buzzwords and themes to activate the fear and loathing of their base and to expand their reach into the twenty percent or so of the American body politic (Lakoff reckons) that has aspects of both Strict Father and Nurturant Parent morality in their makeups. They use terms like “tax relief,” “partial-birth abortion,” “pro-life,” “death tax,” “war on terror,” and come up with legislation they call the Clear Skies Initiative, Healthy Forests, and No Child Left Behind. These are manifestly Orwellian titles for laws that do quite the opposite of what they pretend to do. *Newspeak*. The right wing also keeps their yeomanry in thrall by focusing their hatred on the “liberal elite,” “the tax-and-spend Democrats,” “welfare cheats.”

Let’s revisit Thomas Frank’s question of why these folks are voting against their self-interest. Lakoff says a number of times: People don’t vote their self-interest. They vote their identity. If their identity is inextricably bound into the framework that their parents, their preachers, and their protofascist politicians and their publicists have wrought, then that’s where you will find their votes

In the end you can’t talk to these folks because they are locked inside these frameworks. If you come up with a *Democratic, middle class “tax relief” plan*, you will fail, because that language has already been appropriated by the right. If you try *progressive family values*, forget it, you can’t penetrate the force field around that frame. You’ve got to “reframe” the debate. You’ve got to identify and embrace the holistic and humane principles of the Enlightenment, of the New Deal, of the modern civil rights, anti-war, environmental and feminist struggles, and the emerging progressive movement that has been growing from anti-globalization activism and from “Left Blogostan,” among other places, and create new frames, or recreate the old frames that worked before—not discard these principles and the passionate and eloquent arguments and ideas that structured them, as the Democratic Leadership Council and the inaptly named Progressive Policy Institute would have us do. It struck me as peculiarly odd that John Kerry chose to hang his campaign hat on his Vietnam experience and run away from his passionate, nearly visionary anti-war per-

spective when he returned home and cofounded Vietnam Veterans Against the War. I was proud to march with those folks way back when. Read Kerry's Senate testimony from April 22, 1971 to get a glimpse of the President we might've had.

Take taxes for an example. You need to stay away from "tax relief" or even "tax reform" because the right has virtually copyrighted those. Start, in Lakoff's example, with a new way of seeing things: Taxes are investments or taxes are paying dues. Flesh that out with studies, proposals, examples. Really lay a foundation. Then you have to do the long, laborious, but eventually fruitful work of articulating the idea, of making the concepts instantly recognizable, first in the Nurturant Parent population, then to the folks that share both moralities, then, hopefully, you can begin to penetrate the Strict Father group and wean some of them away. That's the general idea.

I want to note one particularly fascinating aspect of the culture war for me and to say that Lakoff has shown me, finally, how to understand it. Why is gay marriage such a critical issue? I have understood for years that the anti-abortion movement has been about restricting the rights of women. (See the recent "NY Times Magazine" article¹⁶ on how the right is pushing back hard against contraception?! Yow!) I understood the fear generated by the war against the Godless Communists and now the Freedom-Hating Jihadists and how the fear is used to manipulate a regressed population. I even understand the twisted logic behind the hatred of the Liberal Elite. But the primal animus against gay marriage escaped me. It turns out that gay marriage threatens the very foundation of the Strict Father morality—it questions the necessity of having a Father as the primary element of the family. It threatens the very identity of the person caught in the Strict Father matrix. "But conservatives see the strict father family, and with it their political values, as under attack,"¹⁷ Lakoff says. The feeling of being under attack, of your large group being the target and the victim of some "shadowy, cosmopolitan Other" (to use Frank's language) is a pervasive symptom of large-group regression. Here's another telling sign of the regression that Volkan identifies: "The group's shared morality or belief system becomes increasingly absolutist and punitive toward those perceived to be in conflict with it."¹⁸

Much of the material in this book, and in Lakoff's subsequent efforts in print, on the speaking circuit, and through the Rockridge Institute, a think tank dedicated to supporting the progressive community, addresses how progressives can and should proceed to reassert ourselves. I won't go into some of the eloquent and focused ideas and arguments he's promulgating, and that are being echoed at the Center for American Progress, a little bit more these days at the Democratic National Committee with Howard Dean

pushing things, in Left Blogostan, and in scores of other places. I will note here though one thought that particularly resonates with me. In *Don't Think of An Elephant!*, we are reminded of the manifestly progressive ideals of the millions of Christians, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists who are not locked into the Strict Father straitjacket. Lakoff calls for unity, common cause among all progressives. "Not only do spiritual progressives need to unite with each other, they need to unite with secular progressives, who share the same moral system and political objectives."¹⁹ Hallelujah! It's high time, I might add, that psychohistorians add their voice.

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ENDNOTES

1. George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. xv.
2. *ibid*, p. 18.
3. *ibid*, p. 31.
4. *ibid*, p. 378.
5. *ibid*, p.158.
6. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2005, p. 10.
7. *ibid*, p. 10.
8. Jason Epstein, "Mystery in the Heartland" review of *What's the Matter with Kansas?* in "NY Review of Books," October 7, 2004.
9. Hillary Clinton on NBC-TV's "Today Show," January 27, 1998.
10. Bill Clinton at 2004 Democratic National Convention, July 26, 2004.
11. George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant!: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate: The Essential Guide for Progressives*. White River Jct., VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004, p. 88.
12. *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, p. 239.
13. Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970. p. 312.
14. "Mystery in the Heartland"
15. *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, p. xv.
16. Russell Shorto, "Contra-Contraception" in "The New York Times Magazine," May 7, 2006
17. *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, p. 48.
18. Vamik D. Volkan, *Blind Trust: Large Groups and Their Leaders in Times of Crisis and Terror*. Charlottesville, VA: Pitchstone Publishing, 2004, p. 60.
19. *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, p. 103.