

The Double Bind of Environmentalists Who Identify Themselves as Liberals

Paul Krugman's ends his new book, The Conscience of a Liberal, with a startling statement. While claiming to be an activist with the energy of a progressive, he makes the claim that "to be a liberal is in a sense to be a conservative" (p. 70). The reader is partly prepared for this seeming contradiction by the opening paragraph of his last chapter, "The Conscience of a Liberal", where he states that one of the seeming paradoxes of America in the early twenty-first century is that the agenda of liberals is essentially a conservative one: to restore the middle class, to defend social security and Medicare, the rule of law and democratic principles. The agenda of today's conservatives, as he puts it, is to reverse the achievements of Roosevelt's New Deal and to promote the free enterprise system—no matter what the human cost. What George Lakoff referred to as the "Essential Guide for Progressives", which is the sub- title of his book Don't Think of an Elephant, also contains the same view of conservatives. But unlike Krugman, he sees no paradox in identifying as liberal progressives the advocates of conserving our traditions of civil liberties, species and habitats, and what remains of the traditions of ethnic groups.

Unfortunately, both Krugman and Lakoff reproduce today's formulaic thinking that represents the anti-democratic and anti-social justice agenda of President George W. Bush as the expression of modern conservatism. And both reinforce the widely held misconception that Adam Smith's principle of laissez-faire, with its magical "invisible hand", is one of the conceptual and moral foundations of today's conservatives—when it is a foundational belief of market liberals. While both Krugman and Lakoff also agree that the success of conservatives can be traced to what they refer to as the conservative think tanks, such as the CATO, American Enterprise, and Hoover Institutes, they fail to question whether they have correctly labeled the political agenda of these institutes.

For anyone who has read the writings of early theorists of classical liberalism such as John Locke, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill—as well as the writings of philosophical conservatives such as Edmund Burke, Samuel Coleridge (pejoratively identified as one of the "Romantics" when he was actually a critic of the dehumanizing

impact of the Industrial Revolution), the authors of The Federalists Papers, Michael Oakeshott and T. S. Eliot, the current use of political labels by self-identified liberals and conservatives is evidence of something fundamentally wrong with our educational system—especially our universities. Not to be outdone by Krugman, Lakoff, and other commentators who are mislabeling America’s retreat into the hell hole of friend/enemy politics, is the handy work of self-identified conservatives such as Rush Limbaugh who demonstrates a similar disregard for the fact that words have a history.

As most Americans are also unaware that words have a history, and that they can carry forward over many generations both the misconceptions as well as the wisdom of past thinkers, they are easily influenced by Limbaugh and the other faux conservative voices that have gained a strong foothold in the media. Thus, many people readily accept that the recent Supreme Court Justice appointments bent on reversing previous Supreme Court decisions are conservatives—because that is what journalists and political pundits tell them. That the doctrine of “original intent” is really part of the market liberal strategy for reversing laws that regulate business practices on the grounds that this function of government was not provided for by the men who wrote the Constitution will also go unrecognized. In effect, the faux conservative media voices, including otherwise intelligent observers of the American political scene such as Bill Moyers who also mis-identifies the market liberal agenda of President George W. Bush and his base of supporters, have taken on the role of educators of the nation as to which agenda fits under which political label. Unfortunately, universities largely have abdicated their responsibility for introducing students to the history of liberal and conservative thought. Without this background knowledge, which many academics also lack, the meaning of words such as liberal, progressive, tradition, conservative, become context free metaphors that can be reframed without any form of accountability other than what fits the interests of groups seeking to impose their agenda on others.

Ironically, while liberals such as Krugman and Lakoff are unconsciously complicit in reinforcing the current misuse of our political vocabulary, the institutes they identify as the seed beds of modern conservative thinking such as the CATO, American Enterprise, and Hoover Institutes, identify themselves in a way that acknowledges their classical liberal lineage. According to the mission statement of the Hoover Institute, its

primary purpose is to promote “the principles of individual, economic, and political freedom” and “private enterprise”. The American Enterprise Institute makes an identical claim on its website to defend the same classical liberal principles; but puts them in this order: “the institutions of American freedom and democratic capitalism—limited government, private enterprise, individual freedom and responsibility, vigilant and effective defense and foreign policies, political accountability, and open debate. The mission statement of the CATO Institute, which had a budget last year of 22.4 million dollars, includes what the institute explicitly acknowledges as its “market-liberal” agenda of promoting “limited government, individual liberty, free markets, and peace”. Its mission statement includes the observation that seems to have escaped the attention of liberal commentators who continue to identify the CATO institute as a conservative think tank. To quote directly: “ ‘Conservative’ smacks of an unwillingness to change, of a desire to preserve the status quo. Only in America do people seem to refer to free-market capitalism –the most progressive, dynamic, and ever –changing system the world has ever known –as conservative”.

The use of the label “neo-conservative” and now “neocons” is yet another example of formulaic word play. Awareness of the history of this group, which now justifies the invasion of Iraq, defends extraordinary rendition and the use of torture, and is promoting war with Iran, should originally have led to their being tagged with the label of market liberal—and, more recently, as anti-democratic extremists. Given their current political and economic agenda labeling them as neo-Fascists would not be too far off the mark. Two early books that were mislabeled as examples of neo-conservative thinking included George Gilder’s Wealth and Capitalism (1981) and Michael Novak’s The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism (1982). Neither one addressed the ideas of philosophic conservative thinkers such as Burke and Oakeshott. Other early spokespersons for what was mistakenly referred to as neoconservatism, such as Irving Kristol, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Norman Podhoretz, attacked what they considered as the social engineering approach of their former liberal colleagues. They revived the laissez-faire liberal argument for reducing the role of government in providing programs that enabled people to escape from poverty and limited opportunities. The true responsibility of government, as William Kristol would later put it, is to promote the “politics of liberty” and the “sociology of virtue”. What he and other neoconservatives meant by these high-sounding

phrases is that the government should eliminate the anti-poverty programs and, in their place, promote the social uplifting potential of capitalism.

The inability of our leading intellectuals to recognize the travesty in labeling this group as neoconservatives is now being repeated on a daily basis in the media. Every effort of the Bush Administration to dismantle our checks and balances system of government, and to turn the previous functions of government over to capitalists who place their own interests above those of the public, is identified with conservatism. The practices of extraordinary rendition and Presidential signing statements, along with putting in place the technology for achieving a total surveillance society, are similarly represented as carrying out the true mission of conservatism in an era of total warfare with the external enemies of the American way of life.

This current Orwellian political discourse serves two purposes. For many Americans who experience the rapid rate of cultural change as a threat to life as they know it, the constant references to the conservatism of the present administration is reassuring—even if they do not understand the political system that is at the end of the slippery slope President Bush and Vice-President Cheney are leading them down. In effect, the market liberal and anti-democratic extremists gain much of their support from this largely non-reflective segment of society. And as the term conservative becomes increasingly associated with an anti-social and anti-ecojustice agenda, advocates of social justice continue to identify themselves as liberals without questioning the double bind this puts them in.

The double bind that few liberals recognize is that the deep, largely taken-for-granted cultural assumptions that underlie Western liberalism are, with only a few exceptions, the same assumptions that gave conceptual direction and moral legitimacy to the Industrial Revolution that has now entered the digital phase of globalization. These assumptions underlie the liberal's penchant for equating change with progress, for representing the autonomous individual as the highest expression of human development, for thinking of the environment as needing to be brought under rational control, and for imposing their way of thinking on what they regard as the less developed cultures of the world. What is seldom recognized is that the Industrial Revolution required the autonomous individual who, in lacking the intergenerational knowledge and support of community, would be dependent upon consumerism to survive. Similarly, the driving force of the Industrial Revolution was the constant quest for progress in developing new technologies and markets. The Industrial Revolution also depended upon

advances in science and technology in order to further exploit the Earth's natural systems.. The liberal view of other cultures as needing to adopt the Western model of development also fits what the Industrial Revolution required.

Yet there continue to be differences between how liberals understand the nature of progress. A useful way of identifying these differences is to identify liberals working to alleviate poverty and various forms of exploitation as social justice liberals. Liberals who use critical inquiry to develop new technologies and to exploit new markets should be labeled as market liberals. The former were and continue to be critical of the exploitive nature of the free enterprise system, while the latter were and still are willing to let the “invisible hand” supposedly operating in the free market system distribute the benefits to the deserving—which usually means those who are already privileged. Given these differences, and they are hugely important, the two groups of liberals nevertheless share a common set of silences and prejudices. Already mentioned is their shared prejudice of the knowledge systems of other cultures—particularly indigenous cultures. They also share a very narrow and thus basic misunderstanding of the nature and importance of cultural traditions. In effect, they both fail to recognize the misconceptions of the Enlightenment thinkers who only identified oppressive traditions, and did not understand the intergenerational knowledge and skills that enabled communities to be more self-sufficient and to have complex symbolic lives. And both social justice and market liberals fail to understand that language is not simply a conduit in a sender/receiver process of communication, but instead is metaphorically layered in ways that reproduce past misconceptions in today's taken-for-granted patterns of thinking. This latter oversight accounts for how both social justice and market liberals are continually embracing whatever is represented as a progressive step forward—and not asking about which traditions vital to the well-being of community and to a sustainable future are being lost.

There are many unrecognized assumptions that are shared by students on university campuses who identify themselves as conservatives and the professors whom they regard as subverting the American way of life. Again, the failure to recognize the shared assumptions and silences can, in part, be traced to the failure of universities to engage students in a discussion of the writings of the early political theorists whose influence continues to today. The misunderstandings resulting from this lack of historical knowledge are particularly evident when the beliefs and values of the self-identified conservative students are compared with the

market liberal agenda promoted by the CATO and American Enterprise Institutes. Indeed, they turn out to be nearly identical—though some of these students balk at the idea of open debate as advocated by the American Enterprise Institute. As most university faculty embrace social justice liberalism they see no reason to introduce students to the thinking of philosophical conservatives or to the ideas of classical liberal thinkers. And the few social justice faculty who are introducing their students to the writings of environmental writers such as Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, Wendell Berry, and Vandana Shiva fail to clarify for students that these are essentially conservative environmental thinkers. By not engaging students in discussions of the different forms of conservatism, including the faux conservatism of President George W. Bush and his religious, corporate, and military base of support, students are more likely to accept without question Lakoff's designation of environmentalists as liberal progressive activists. And they will continue to perpetuate the silences and prejudices that have been an aspect of liberal thinking since the time of the Enlightenment—which will keep them from recognizing that revitalizing the diversity of the world's cultural commons will be a necessary part of achieving a sustainable future.

The reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Control, which reflect the consensus thinking of 600 scientists from more than 100 countries on the nature and causes of global warming, brings into focus another aspect of the slippery slope that both the market and social justice liberals are greasing. As the melting of the permafrost in the northern latitudes release the vast quantity of methane gas that is an even greater contributor to global warming than carbon dioxide, as the glaciers that are the source of fresh water for hundreds of millions of people disappear, as the temperature of the world's oceans rise and as the oceans absorb more CO₂ that contribute to their increased acidity, as droughts and changes in weather patterns forces the migration of plants, animals, and people, and as more of the world's major fisheries near collapse, the convergence of the slippery slope leading to environmental catastrophe with the slippery slope leading to a fascist form of government become a more likely possibility. What is not usually recognized is that the emergence of fascism between the two world wars resulted when democratic institutions became so weakened that they were no longer able to address the sources of economic and social unrest. People have demonstrated time and again that they prefer order over chaos, and they have often embraced the strong political leader who, as the supreme “decider”, does away with the seemingly endless debates

which are at the center of the democratic process. The convergence of economic unrest resulting from the globalization of the market liberal agenda with the deepening ecological crises could easily lead to a repeat of this earlier history.

Both market and social justice liberals carry forward the silences and prejudices that have been part of the legacy of Enlightenment thinkers—indeed some of these silences and prejudices can be traced back to the thinking of Plato who invented the idea of pure thinking that supposedly is free of cultural influences carried forward through narratives. These include the intergenerational knowledge, skills, and activities that enable members of communities to live more self-sufficient and thus less money and consumer dependent lives. Working to conserve the diversity of the world's languages and thus the diversity of knowledge of local ecosystems is yet another critical area of concern that is not being given adequate attention by social justice liberals who, unlike Krugman, refuse to consider anything that is associated with the word conservatism—partly because they lack knowledge of the many forms of conserving that are an inescapable part of daily life-- and partly because the word conservatism is now associated with authoritarian politics and the pursuit of economic self-interest.

There are many other analogs than those associated with the ideas and policies of market liberals that need to be considered in determining the different meanings of the word “conservatism”. Briefly, learning to think and communicate in the language of one's cultural groups conserves its many taken-for-granted patterns of thinking and values. Our DNA is also a powerful conserving force that influences the most fundamental aspects of our biology. The taken-for-granted nature of most of our cultural knowledge and values is also an inescapable aspect of what can be referred to as embodied conservatism. And then there is temperamental conservatism which is expressed in a preference for certain foods, wearing certain clothes, having certain friends, and so forth. These different expressions of conservatism are largely part of our embodied experiences, and are different in fundamental ways from conservative ideas of how societies should be organized and governed. In order to conserve the gains in social justice and civil liberties it is important to keep in mind that not all of conservative ideas, such as those advocating the right of states to enforce racist policies, the cultural tradition of child brides, honor killings, and poll taxes, should be carried forward. On the other hand, the current practice of using the word to stigmatize individuals and groups who are more aware of

the traditions that are the basis of their mutually supportive and intergenerationally connected communities should not be continued.

In order to make more informed judgments of about the different expressions of conservatism—judgments about what should be supported and what should be resisted—we need to expand our political vocabulary. In addition to rectifying our use of political terminology so that labels accurately reflect the beliefs and practices of different groups, we need to follow the practice of different religious groups who use adjectives that identify the religious group's specific orientation or the tradition it is part of. Examples include the distinction between Orthodox and Reform Judaism, Greek Orthodox Christians and Evangelical Christians, moderate and fundamentalists Muslims, and so forth. The adjectives are not always as accurate as we would like, but they avoid the problem of including a wide range of interpretations and agendas under a single rubric. The distinction between market and social justice liberals is an example that has been introduced here. Other examples might include environmental conservatives and indigenous conservatives. The problem of relying upon a single rubric can be seen in Thomas Frank's reference to the Christians in Kansas who support President George W. Bush's efforts to dismantle the separation of powers and the Constitution as conservative. Referring to them as members of the religious right would have brought into focus their political agenda, which included abolishing abortion, gays, separation of church and state, and equal opportunities for women and other previously marginalized groups. Journalists and media pundits need to use the label of extremists if it accurately represents the political agenda of certain individuals and groups. For example, Vice-President Richard Cheney and David Addington need to be identified as extremists. And there is a need to use the label of fascist when it accurately fits the ideas and political agenda of an individual or group. It is important to note that few graduates of our universities possess a knowledge of the core ideas and practices shared by different fascist regimes, and thus are unable to recognize political trends that are moving the society in that direction.

Most of all, we need to avoid the intellectual laziness that characterizes so much of our formulaic use of conservative and liberal. There is an urgent need for the more reflective people to criticize our universities for their failure to educate students about the history of ideas we now refer to as ideologies—including the need for them to understand which ideologies are contributing to overshooting the sustaining capacity of the Earth's natural systems. If we can't

get this figured out we will continue to be caught in the double bind of promoting the globalization of the consumer dependent lifestyle while at the same time searching for the technologies that will slow the rate of global warming partly being caused by consumerism. And our difficulties will be further exacerbated if the current misuse of our most prominent political language continues to marginalize the awareness that in this era of political uncertainties and deepening ecological crises we need a political discourse that addresses what needs to be conserved.

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