

Some Thoughts on the Misuse of Our Political Language

One can only wonder how the recent election would have turned out if the political labels of liberal and conservative had been used in a more accurate and historically accountable way. Newspapers ranging from the New York Times, the Washington Post to papers serving the smaller communities across America continue to label President George W. Bush and Vice-President Cheney as conservatives. In a recent New York Times article, for example, Cheney was referred to as a “free-market conservative”. In one of these nationally prominent papers the so-called conservatives in Congress were described as organizing to overturn of the Endangered Species Act. The formulaic thinking of the reporter required stating that resistance was coming from the “liberal” environmentalists. The same mindless use of our two most prominent political labels is exhibited in the way the American Civil Liberties Union is labeled as liberal, and such think tanks at the American Enterprise Institute as conservative. Both misconceptions are particularly surprising as the ACLU has as its primary goal the conserving of the civil rights guaranteed in the Constitution, while the American Enterprise Institute promotes the liberal idea that unrestricted market forces are the engine of social progress.

It is hard to determine whether the extremist radio talk show hosts such as Rush Limbaugh mislabel themselves out of general ignorance or because they follow the money—which is largely controlled by corporations. Surely, universities must share a major portion of the blame for the twin sins of omission and commission. The omission is in the failure to present students with an understanding of the history of political thought in the West—from such founders of liberalism as John Locke, Adam Smith, and John Stuart Mill to Milton Freidman and the current CATO libertarian think tank. A university graduate, for example, should understand how Adam Smith’s idea of a free market within the small communities of his era, where the patterns of moral reciprocity that accompany face-to-face relationships with neighbors that must be relied upon in future situations, has been transformed into universal doctrine that combines a competitive, survival of the fittest form of individualism with the myth of social progress. His economic theory is now being used to undermine both cultural diversity and the community’s traditions of moral reciprocity that served as a constraint on the relentless drive to exploit markets and the environmental commons that the community relied upon. A university education should also include studying the history of philosophic conservatism, from Edmund Burke and the authors of *The*

Federalist Papers, to contemporary environmental writers such as Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder. The failure of commission is in the way most university faculty repeat the formulaic thinking that reinforces identifying Republicans and corporations with conservatism, and the efforts to achieve social justice as the expression of liberalism.

This mindless habit of identifying the efforts to achieve social justice with liberalism and the centers of economic and political power with conservatism is reinforced in many other ways. A case can easily be made that universities simply reinforce this more widely held set of misunderstandings. The irony is that historically the core values and assumptions of these early liberal thinkers upheld the central role that competitive markets play in achieving progress, just as the rules of critical discourse within universities today are based on the assumption that competition between ideas ensures that most progressive ideas will emerge. Other core liberal ideas, which go back to John Stuart Mill, hold that individuals should be free to create themselves, and that change is necessary for progressing beyond the constraints of traditions and intergenerational bonds. The idea of a linear form of progress, which has the same standing as the acceptance of gravity, underlies the liberal's proclivity toward innovation and experimentation—and their indifference toward asking about the importance of what is being overturned—in the workplace, in community patterns of self-sufficiency, and in the self-renewing capacity of natural systems.

The twin foundations of conservatism, according to Edmund Burke, include the idea that each generation has a responsibility to carry forward the achievements of the past and to ensure that the prospects of future generations are not diminished. The other core value is to be cautious in adopting change. The guiding principle that Burke gave us was to ensure that the innovation represented a genuine improvement—and not be embraced on the basis of some outside expert's claim that it represents progress. Environmental conservatives such as Wendell Berry and Vandana Shiva, while subscribing to the core ideas of Burkean conservatism, place special emphasis on conserving community (that is, intergenerational knowledge and systems of mutual aid) that have a smaller environmental impact. Berry writes eloquently about the dangers of a form of individualism that does not put roots down, and that continually searches for opportunities to turn the environment into an exploitable resource. For Shiva, the patenting of indigenous knowledge, which forces more of everyday life into a money-based economy, is a form of piracy—which she calls “biopiracy”.

The basic differences between liberalism and conservatism continue today, except journalists and others continue to get the labels wrong. President George W. Bush and his supporters, while being labeled as conservatives, pursue policies that support the free-market orientation of corporations and such colonizing institutions as the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. Indeed, President Bush and his market liberal supporters are unstinting in their efforts to further privatize what remains of the commons. Their liberalism can also be seen in their reliance on abstract ideas, rather than proven traditions of international cooperation, as the basis of foreign policy. In effect, they embrace another core feature of traditional and contemporary liberalism: the idea that change is inherently progressive in nature. Their agenda for average Americans is to reduce what remains of the government's safety net, thus forcing them to rely upon their own resources in a competitive environment where the fittest will survive and the supposedly less deserving will experience the full consequences of their lack of initiative and responsibility.

The genuine conservatives are focused on sustaining what remains of the commons—those aspects of the human and natural communities that are mutually supportive and freely available to all. This may take the form of upholding intergenerational knowledge as providing alternatives to being dependent upon industrial approaches to food, health care, entertainment, and so on. In addition, they take seriously the Burkean emphasis on the genuine and hard-won achievements of the past, such as protecting the gains in the labor movement, the rights guaranteed in the Constitution, the social security system, and the overturning of institutional sources of racial and gender inequality. The fundamental difference between the liberalism that supports the right of corporations to exploit the environment in ways that diminish the prospect of future generations and the conservatism that is reflected in the efforts to achieve greater social justice and to renew the intergenerational knowledge of how to preserve the commons can be seen in the continued liberal assaults on the commons, such as Monsanto's ownership of genetically altered seeds that the farmer must purchase anew each year. The traditional responsibility of the farmer to save from the current crop the seeds that are best suited to the nature of the local soil, moisture, and length of growing season is thus being replaced by the logic of industrial/liberal culture. The liberalism is expressed in the quest for new technologies that will return a greater profit, while the conservatism of the farmer is expressed in balancing the needs of the family

and community with the needs of the environment to renew itself on a long-term sustainable basis.

The widespread nature of the distemper that is causing market liberals to be labeled as conservatives (and letting the self-labeling of extremists such as Rush Limbaugh to go unchallenged) can even be seen in the writings of otherwise perceptive political observers. Thomas Frank's recent book, What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America, is typical. The main focus of his analysis—that is, why Biblical fundamentalists in Kansas vote for Republicans whose economic policies drive many working class and rural fundamentalists to the edge of economic ruin—is highly insightful. Frank, however, perpetuates the basic confusion that plagues American political discourse by identifying “business rationality” with conservatism. He further reinforces the confused thinking that most Americans accept as a basic truism by also identifying social justice activists with liberalism. Frank pins the label of conservative on both the Republicans of George W. Bush's persuasion and on the Biblical fundamentalists whose main political agenda is to impose on the rest of society their moral extrapolations from what they assume is a literal interpretation of the Bible—a book that encodes the culturally influenced interpretations of the men who translated even earlier translations of a printed text that began as an oral tradition. Frank acknowledges that there are differences in the politics of various groups in “conservative” Kansas, which leads him to identify the more reflective and less doctrinaire Republicans in the urban areas of Kansas as the “mods” (meaning moderate) and the free-market/ corporate supporters who align themselves with the moral agenda of the Biblical fundamentalists as “cons” (meaning hard-core conservatives). Frank, like the journalists and media pundits, does not recognize that the limited political language that he forces his analysis to fit into carries forward long and widely held misunderstandings that reduce the accuracy and thus the importance of his analysis.

His two categories of conservatism are fundamentally misleading. The Republicans who promote the primacy of a market economy over all else should have been referred to as free-market liberals, and the people who want to impose the moral certainties they find from their reading of the Bible should be identified as reactionary religious extremists. That is, the latter group wants to make the present fit a past that supposedly is the source of the unchanging moral templates we all should live by. And they are extremists in wanting to impose their

reactionary position on the rest of society—an effort that is partially succeeding at the expense of our country’s tradition of separation of church and state. Their efforts to replace our less than perfect traditions of democratic decision making with a theocracy that is led by a political leader who bases the country’s foreign policies on personal communication with God can in no way be identified with the conservatism of Burke, the authors of *The Federalist Papers*, and the people who currently are working to renew the cultural and biological commons.

What is needed today is an expanded political vocabulary, one that more accurately designates what people stand for, and thus what they should be held accountable for. The libertarians are the one group that identify themselves correctly—even though journalists and others continue to refer to them as conservatives. For example, in the “about us” section of the CATO Institute website, there is a statement that says that only in America is their political philosophy identified as conservative. What is now needed is a political language that more accurately identifies the values, assumptions, and agenda of other politically-oriented groups. Instead of referring to Christian fundamentalists as social conservatives, they should be named “religious conservatives.” As this may still be too general perhaps the specific religious tradition should also be designated, such as Catholic conservatives, Orthodox Jewish conservatives, Evangelical conservatives, Muslim conservatives, and so on. The word “reactionary” should also be used when referring to groups that want to make the supposedly unchanging present fit a past of which we have little accurate knowledge. “Traditionalist” should also become part of our political vocabulary, as this is the word that refers to the mistaken belief that traditions do not and should not change—and there are many people who hold this view. Thus, some groups in the Christian fundamentalist camp might be more accurately referred to as “traditionalist” or even “reactionary” Christians—just as the word orthodox indicates a distinctive set of beliefs and practices within the Jewish community. “Reactionary” may be the more accurate term as it communicates to the average reader that these Christians want to force everybody to live in accordance with what they interpret as the absolutes of the past.

People working to conserve habitats, species, and to reduce the adverse human impact on the viability of natural systems should be identified as environmental conservatives. Those working to revitalize the commons (the non-monetized aspects of cultural and natural systems) should be called mindful conservatives in that their task is to reflect on how new

technologies and policies (such as the promotion of economic globalization) will affect the community's networks of mutual support and intergenerational knowledge that provide alternatives to being dependent upon the continuing spread of consumer culture. The phrase cultural conservatism is also accurate when it is used to designate how learning the language systems of the culture that one is born into reproduces (conserves) the taken-for-granted ways of thinking and acting in ways that generally involve only minor individualized reinterpretation. An example of this process of linguistically based cultural conservatism can be seen in how scientists working on the cutting edge of brain research continue to rely upon the same mechanistic metaphors that Newton and Kepler used to understand natural phenomena. There is another expression of conservatism that we all share; namely, the temperamental conservatism of being comfortable with certain kinds of food, friends, patterns of interaction, ways of communicating ourselves to others, and so forth.

Most people have difficulty in recognizing various forms of social activism as the expression of conservatism. Activists who address issues of social justice, which have ranged from creating safer working environments and a sustainable wage to eliminating the racial and gender barriers that encode centuries of prejudice and exploitation, have a long tradition of identifying themselves as liberals and progressives. The moral legitimacy that these groups now associate with liberalism, which ironically is also shared by many environmentalists who identify themselves as liberals, has caused them to ignore the contradiction between the community strengthening nature of their activism and the core liberal assumptions that are used to justify the exploitation of others—as we can now see in the Bush Administration's energy, drug, and tax policies. For generations now the idea that liberals work to improve the well-being of others, and that the conservatives are the perpetrators of exploitive and self-serving practices has resulted in a formulaic way of thinking that is now seemingly encoded in the genetic make-up of people who identify themselves as liberals. But the key issue of whether a person is a liberal or a conservative turns on the fundamental distinction of whether the activism is directed toward strengthening the community (and the cultural and natural commons) or is strengthening the market-oriented industrial culture that places more value on profits and efficiency than on the well-being of workers, more value on exploiting the environment for immediate gain than on the practices that do not degrade the self-renewing capacity of natural systems, and that requires a form of education that perpetuates the core

abstract liberal values of individualism, progress, and freedom that are essential to a consumer dependent lifestyle. If we take this distinction seriously, it would be more accurate to identify social justice activists as social justice conservatives, and if their activism is in conserving the viability of natural systems they should be called environmental conservatives. And if their formulaic use of language has made it too difficult for these activists to combine “social justice” with “conservatism”, then they should simply identify themselves as social or, better yet, eco-justice activists, and call the faux conservatives what they really are: market liberals.

This expanded political vocabulary should also include the philosophical conservatives, and there are many of them who have addressed the tensions and double binds that accompany the impact of modernization on the traditions of the world’s cultural and environmental commons. This group includes, among others, Edmund Burke, T. S. Eliot, Michael Oakeshott, Ivan Illich, Alasdair MacIntyre, Robert Bellah, and Gregory Bateson. And if we were to consider the important conservative thinkers of non-Western cultures, we would have to include Mahatma Gandhi and Masanobu Fukuoka as sources of wisdom that we in the West should learn from.

To return to the earlier question: namely, what would have been the likely impact on the recent presidential election if journalists and media pundits had used the political vocabulary in a more accurate and accountable way? Would President Bush’s chance of being re-elected have been improved if he were correctly labeled as a free-market liberal, or would John Kerry have encountered a ground swell of support if his agenda had been labeled as that of a social justice conservative? Unfortunately, we will not be able to answer this question because of the long-standing tradition of misusing our political language by journalists, media pundits, and the general public. The question, nevertheless, is worth considering.

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