
Reviewed by

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“To lose freedom is awful; to lose the idea of freedom is even worse.” This statement by George Lakoff is at the core of his attention in his last book. And his opinion is that the loss of the concept of freedom is a tragic incident that has struck a large part of the American people, not least since September 11, 2001.

The Bush administration has monopolized the word “freedom” and at the same time redefined the concept by connecting it to clearly right-wing values. And as Lakoff puts it, republican manoeuvres have almost paralyzed the party’s political opponents. In this way the democrats have lost their idea of freedom. In Lakoff’s book Whose Freedom? The Battle Over America’s Most Important Idea the messages are clear and strong; “Ownership of the word means ownership of the idea that goes with the word, and with it, domination of the culture defined by that idea” (p. 17).

Whose Freedom? might be seen as a prolongation of themes and work that have characterised most of Lakoff’s academic career. George Lakoff is a professor of linguistics at University of California Berkeley. He has focused on cognitive linguistics, especially the relevance of metaphors to human thinking. His first best seller written with Mark Johnsen, Metaphors we live by (1980), explores how profoundly metaphors in general shape our view of life, how they structure our perceptions and understanding. Through many years Lakoff has also been deeply engaged with American politics, political behaviour and the different values and attitudes underpinning the key concepts of the public debate. These concerns contribute important parts of at least two of his previous books: Moral Politics. How Liberals and Conservatives Think (1996) and Don’t Think of an Elephant (2004). He has also been used as an adviser by profiled democratic politicians, presidential candidate Howard Dean in his 2004 campaign and Nancy Pelosi as House Minority Leader in her efforts to stand up against conservative attempts to frame the current issues of the political debates.

In his latest book Lakoff concentrates on “freedom” as it has been promoted as a key concept by the Republican Party. The Bush administration uses the concept almost constantly, and to a large extent related to “the war on terror”. In speech after speech George W. Bush has made it clear that the main focus of his presidency is defending and spreading freedom. In doing so, he explicitly...
makes use of the uncontested core of the concept referring to commonly shared American values. On the other hand, “freedom” is redefined and adjusted to a conservative ideology. Lakoff documents these changes in a quite fascinating manner, obviously making it highly relevant to anyone taking an interest in American politics. But Lakoff’s studies and reflections are fruitful for everyone socially engaged, not least researchers in both the humanities and the social sciences. The contributions made by George Lakoff through thirty years are important parts of the linguistic turn in science. Lakoff goes beyond general statements about how meaning is constructed and into detailed and concrete analysis of some of the most important political debates of today and how they shape our perspectives of the world and human relations in general.

Whose Freedom? contains many examples of how the concept of freedom is used by Bush and the republicans, and how it is linked to political ambitions of maximum individual freedom, but also individualisation of responsibility, to economic freedom, free trade and free-market. Conservative ideology is based on an underlying assumption that the American people are not really free. They are oppressed by public authorities, by laws and regulations, and the democrats are made responsible for this oppression as being a part of an “elite” opposed to “the people”. Consequently, liberals have been branded as “limousine liberals, Hollywood liberals, Volvo-driving Birkenstock-wearing latte-sipping sushi-eating liberals” (p. 135).

At the core of the conservatives’ assumptions of freedom is the ideal of the strict father. Their worldview is structured by family values, in particular, “the values of the strict father family applied to politics via the nation-as-family metaphor” (p. 96). The strict father knows right from wrong and can stand up against immoral behaviour and all other kinds of threats. Morality, discipline and order are seen as basic conditions for freedom, and a consequence of this is that the strict father, if necessary, has to use power against anyone showing non-acceptable behaviour. This goes for the family as well as for the nation and the international community. The strict father also constitutes the ideal competitor within the economic market as morality correlates with prosperity. If you’re disciplined enough to be prosperous, you’re disciplined enough to be moral. Then you deserve success in business. Quite a large number of the guidelines for the strict father are found in fundamentalist Christianity. In this way the radical conservatives create links between personal life, religion, economics and global politics. And these are the basic premises for the Bush administration’s battle for freedom and for the shift from “the traditional American progressive idea of freedom” toward “a radically conservative view of freedom” (p. 72).

Lakoff presents the 2005 presidential inaugural as a kind of crescendo in regard to the focusing of “freedom”. During President Bush’s twenty-minute speech the words “freedom”, “free” and “liberty” were used forty-nine times. Most interesting is how the words were used. Lakoff describes the speech as “a work of rhetorical art” (p. 229). More than half of the time these concepts were used in contexts associated with uncontested, traditional American values. As Lakoff sees it, the same arguments and phrases could have been applied by any of the political opponents among the democrats. Gradually throughout the speech the references to a radical conservative understanding of freedom appear. “Freedom” is connected to the battle of good against evil, to God’s commandments, to discipline, the necessity of using power, full individual and economic freedom. However, on the rhetorical level the speech as a whole manages to keep a balance between progressive ideals and radical conservatism.

Lakoff doesn’t see this kind of rhetorical masterpiece as a part of the Bush administration’s efforts alone, but more as a result of a long-term development within the Republican Party stretching beyond the presidency of George W. Bush. Over the last thirty years the conservatives have been working
systematically to develop their basic ideas and a language to give their reflections credible expression. They have set up “foundations”, “institutes” and “think tanks”, and huge amounts of money have been spent on building TV studios and infrastructure, on funding media productions and commercials, hiring intellectuals, initiating research projects and on buying many books to get them on the best seller lists, etc.

Altogether Lakoff’s book gives a broad insight into the conservatives’ investments in ideas and language on a wide scale. But most of all the book is a unique and fascinating analysis of how language is used to construct meaning and to establish a world view aiming at dominating the political debate but also of the way we in general reflect upon our surroundings.

However, reading Whose Freedom? also generates some disturbing questions: How is it that the conservative rhetoric has reached such a dominating position? And how can the democrats take freedom back? A basic premise for Lakoff’s reflections seems to be the existence of independent subjects capable of defining their goals and working rationally to achieve them. This is far from the assumptions of discourse analysts such as Michel Foucault who claim that the dominating discourses or discourse formation in society to a large extent shape the way each of us talk and think. Lakoff doesn’t attempt to address these challenges.

The possibilities for the democrats to make a change are related to the first question. The main proposition put forward by Lakoff is to engage in the development of language and ideas in much the same way as the conservatives have done. Lakoff has played his part. Six years ago he and some colleagues at UC Berkeley and the neighbour university UC Davies established The Rockridge Institute, one of few “progressive think tanks” in the US. However, compared to the overwhelming number of conservative initiatives through decades, efforts like these seem quite modest.

Lakoff’s main strategy for taking freedom back is on the one hand to reveal the republicans’ attempts to redefine the concept and on the other to fully integrate the traditional ideas of freedom into our everyday thinking and our language. The question is if this is sufficient, facing as we do the unique challenges of a new kind of society containing increasing individualisation and complexity, uncertainty and anxiety. To some extent it would appear that the democrats are thereby applying a remedy more suitable for the kind of society we are in the process of leaving behind, and that the conservatives after all have developed a way of thinking and a language closer to how most Americans experience “reality”. On the other hand, these are questions going rather beyond the ambitions of Lakoff’s book. And the main impression of Whose Freedom? is that it provides a very inspiring analysis of current meaning production relevant to most socially engaged people, including researchers within the humanities and the social sciences. And the area of media, technology and education is certainly not excepted.