Thinking about Elephants

Toward a Dialogue with George Lakoff

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George Lakoff’s book, *Don’t Think of an Elephant!*\(^1\), has deservedly captured the imagination of mainstream Democrats and of many progressives as well. He offers us the promise that we can achieve our political vision if only we spent a little more time “framing” our messages to appeal to mainstream America.

For a large number of Americans, he argues, the Right creates a personal connection to policies such as tax cuts for the wealthy and the idea of small government by communicating values — values like personal responsibility and the importance of a strong "traditional" family rather than big government to solve most social problems.

But we shouldn’t get so excited about Lakoff’s contribution that we overlook some deafening silences or, to switch metaphors in midstream, some glaring blind spots in his way of framing American politics.

Lakoff is a cognitive psychologist but he weaves together insights shared by the sociologists, political scientists, and communications specialists who have been analyzing "framing contests" for the past 30 years. On the following points, he speaks for a broad interdisciplinary consensus:

**Facts never speak for themselves.** They take on their meaning by being embedded in frames, themes which organize thoughts, rendering some facts as relevant and significant and others as irrelevant and trivial. Framing matters and the contest is lost at the outset if one allows one’s adversaries to define the terms of the debate. To be selfconscious about framing strategy is not being manipulative. It gives coherent meaning to what is happening in the world. One can either do it unconsciously, or with deliberation and conscious thought.

A frame is a thought organizer. Like a picture frame, it puts a rim around some part of the world, highlighting certain events and facts as important and rendering others invisible. Like a building frame, it holds things together but is covered by insulation and walls. It provides coherence to an array of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is essential — what consequences and values are at stake. We do not see the frame directly, but infer its presence by its characteristic expressions and language.

The idea helps us understand why changing our political situation does not rest on just the media presenting the facts better or people paying better attention. Some progressives threw up their hands in dismay and frustration when polls showed that most Bush voters believed that there was a connection between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. The "facts" were clear that no connection had been found. If these voters didn’t know this it was because either the media had failed in its responsibility to inform them, or they were too lazy and inattentive to take it in.

But suppose one frames the world as a dangerous place in which the forces of evil — a hydra-headed monster labeled “terrorism” — confront the forces of good. This frame depicts Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda as two heads of the same monster. In this
We don't simply have one way of framing an issue or cultural themes operating in the United States, embodied in two competing family metaphors: the Strict Father vs. the Nurturant Parent. He sees these meta-frames as underlying, respectively, conservative and liberal thought more generally. But Lakoff is wise enough to recognize that we don't carry around just one of these in our heads but both of them. One may be much more easily triggered and habitually used but the other is also part of our cultural heritage and can be triggered and used as well, given the appropriate cues.

In a framing contest, such as between liberals supporting gay civil unions and conservatives opposing gay marriage, a successful framing strategy involves the ability to enter into the worldview of one's adversaries. Lakoff does not demonize conservatives but makes a successful effort to enter into their way of thinking. In doing so, he illustrates a useful rule of thumb: To reframe a message effectively, you should be able to describe a frame that you disagree with so that its advocates would say, "Yes, this is what I believe."

The Problem with Strict Fathers and Nurturant Parents

As critics have pointed out, part of Lakoff's appeal is the promise of a silver bullet through which liberals and progressives can rebuild their majority support if only they will follow the formula. Progressive values such as fairness, inclusiveness, empathy, and community have broad cultural appeal, Lakoff reminds us. Reframing political debate to focus on those values, then, is the roadmap to regaining power.

Well, yes and no. The family metaphor seems to work better as a metaframe for conservative thinkers than it does for progressives. But even here, there are fissures between conservatives who find it resonant and those who fear Big Brother rather than embracing Strict Father when thinking about the role of government. Some libertarian conservatives make common cause with liberals who don't like the government telling them what they can read or buy. It isn't very clear how the Strict Father model articulates with a free market meta-frame that underlies conservative support for the privatization of Social Security, for example. Strict fathers don't have invisible hands.

Furthermore, the nurturant parent embodied in the New Deal — America's soft version of the European style welfare state dating to the 1930s that brought us Social Security and federal labor regulation — resonates differently between those who call themselves liberals versus those who call themselves progressives. The nurturant parent metaphor doesn't really have a lot of resonance for people who see themselves on a quest for social justice. Nor is mutuality — a progressive goal or value — quite the same as nurturance. Locking arms and singing "We shall overcome" is about self-help and interdependence, about brotherhood and sisterhood, not parents.

Family metaphors are not the most likely frames for most people to use on foreign policy issues. Lakoff has little to say about another resonant meta-frame: The world is a dangerous place. Much has been written about the cultural roots of such a frame in supporting the Cold War and the nuclear arms race. One can substitute "terrorism" for "communism" and the same underlying frame remains serviceable. The superhero who rescues the innocents from unprovoked attacks by evil forces in children's cartoons isn't exactly a strict father or nurturant parent but a benevolent outsider who protects the whole family from outside threats. What to do about Osama and Saddam is not really about tough-love versus cocounseling.

What Lakoff Obscures

Like any frame, Lakoff's framing of contemporary American politics highlights some things and obscures others. Lakoff directs our attention to the message but he shifts attention away from the groups, political parties, governments and other carriers of those messages, and the complicated, uneven playing field on which they compete. Social movements and the advocacy groups they spawn successfully challenge official or dominant frames frequently. They compete on a playing field in which inequalities in power and resources play a major role in determining whether they succeed. Nevertheless, some movements were dramatically successful against long odds in reframing the terms of political debate and it behooves those engaged in reframing efforts to analyze their experience.

In failing to embed framing guides in this broader movement-building context, Lakoff asks us to ignore not only the elephant in the room but also the moles, ferrets, chipmunks, occasional black panthers, raging bulls and wild boars, and the more domesticated donkeys and carrier pigeons. There is a whole menagerie out there that Lakoff is not thinking about. And it is this multi-faceted complexity that the Christian Right has, at times, effectively traversed.
To succeed, challengers need to integrate their framing strategies with broader movement-building strategies. This means building and sustaining the carriers of these frames in various ways — for example, by helping groups figure out how to gain access where blocked, and how to strengthen their ability to collaborate better with groups sharing similar goals. Framing contests are about a lot more than staying on message.

There is an irony here because Lakoff, to his credit, has been spending a lot of his time over the past several years talking to many of the “carriers,” convincing the political groups of the importance of framing. The danger here is that the focus on message, divorced from movement-building, reduces framing strategy to a matter of pitching metaphors for electoral campaigns and policy debates, or perhaps contracting with think tanks like the Lakoff’s own Rockridge Institute to find the right hot buttons.

By focusing entirely on the content of the message, while ignoring the frame carriers and the playing field, Lakoff falls into the pitfalls of the social marketing model. Without a strategy to build a base or constituency, and without democratic media reform, framing can become simply a more sophisticated but still ungrounded variation on the belief that you just need to communicate the right ideas — i.e. “the truth will set you free.” To counter the assumption that the frame will set us free, framing strategies must not just address the content of the message or the style of debate but attend to base building and challenge the contours of the non-level playing field in which the contest is carried on.

The one intermediary that Lakoff recognizes is the think-tank that helps its political allies to shape their message through its clever marketing skills. He rightly appreciates the skill of conservative social marketers ensconced in their wellfunded think tanks like the Heritage Foundation or American Enterprise Institute. But he has nothing to say about the rise of broad-based social movements critical to reframing efforts, but such movements ensure that reframing remains an active process of engagement with shifting political realities.

People-driven framing

Lakoff’s narrowness leads him to such astounding claims as the one he makes in his introduction to Don’t Think of an Elephant: “There is only one progressive think tank engaged in a major reframing exercise: the Rockridge Institute.” Perhaps it is tunnel vision stemming from Lakoff’s roots in cognitive psychology that blinds him to the civil rights movement’s “major reframing” of Black American experience, the feminist movement’s “major reframing” of women’s experience, as well as the major reframing of gay, lesbian and transgendered experience, the reframing of labor (social unionism) and the major reframing of nuclear power.

The list of successful reframing efforts would be incomplete without mention of the Black feminist movement, that reframed the feminist reframing, and the environmental justice movement that reframed environmental organizing. In other words, not only are broad-based social movements critical to reframing efforts, but such movements ensure that reframing remains an active process of engagement with shifting political realities.

Nor does Lakoff acknowledge the rise of a media reform movement, whose participants engage in a variety of media critique, alternative and oppositional media, and media reform efforts. While we strongly agree with Lakoff that progressive framing efforts have lacked adequate resources, hundreds of organizations operating at the national, regional and local level have included reframing in their efforts to build progressive movements.

The central lessons to be learned from Lakoff’s omission is that building an effective framing strategy is not merely about more effective marketing expressed through catchy symbols that tap an emotional hot button and trigger the desired response. The problem isn’t that it doesn’t work — in the short run, it may — but that its singular focus on finesse in individual framing undermines the goal of increasing citizens’ sense that they can collectively change things. By treating potential participants as individuals whose citizenship involves voting and perhaps conveying their personal opinion to key decision-makers, citizens as collective actors are moved off of the screen.

In contrast, a participatory approach to promoting progressive frames looks at the failings of mass media with an eye on supporting a group’s strength in building longterm, on-going relationships with journalists. Building these working relationships are themselves opportunities for framing contests that, when successful, further the prominence of one’s preferred frame in the competitive media field.
An essential guide for progressives must address these issues as well as how framing strategies can draw out the latent sense of agency that people already carry around with them. In sum, a participatory communication model involves developing an ongoing capability of people to act collectively in framing contests. One doesn’t transform people who feel individually powerless into a group with a sense of collective efficacy by pushing hot buttons. Indeed, one doesn’t transform people at all. People transform themselves through movement building — the work of reflection, critique, dialog, relation building and infrastructure building that synergistically constitute a "major reframing effort."

**Conclusion**

Framing matters but it is not the only thing that matters. There is a danger of "quick fix" politics — the sexy frame as the new hot button. Just as conservatives worked slowly and patiently for three decades, progressives need to start small and build big, to win back our base of support. Framing work is critical to this process, but framing work itself must be framed in the context of movement building.

Integrating framing and other forms of movement building is necessary if the frame carriers are going to be able to compete successfully against the carriers of official frames with lots of resources and organization behind them. This involves an explicit recognition of power inequalities and how to challenge them and a recognition of citizens as potential collective actors, not just individual ones. Think tanks that want to help progressives are an important component of creating a supportive infrastructure but they will fail if they adopt a social marketing model that ignores the nature of the playing field and focuses only on the message.

There is a story circulating on the Internet, attributed to Jim France of the Pavilion Hotel Group in Bangkok. Elephant rides were one of the main attractions at a resort hotel in Phuket. About twenty minutes before the first wave of the tsunami hit, the nine elephants became extremely agitated and unruly. They broke out of their confinement, climbed a nearby hill, and started bellowing. Many people followed them up the hill before the waves hit.

After the waves had subsided, the elephants went down the hill as a group and started picking up children with their trunks and running them back up the hill. After the children were taken care of, the elephants started helping the adults. According to the account, they rescued 42 people. They wouldn't let their handlers mount them until the job was done.

To make the metaphor fit our message, let’s add a detail that didn’t actually happen. Let’s imagine that in carrying out their rescue mission, the elephants confronted a group of government soldiers assembled to enforce a law against elephants acting as a pack. And imagine further that these nine elephants just ran right by the soldiers, brushing them aside to complete their mission. Now there are some elephants to think about.
Endnotes


2 They are meta-frames because we often want to talk about the framing of issues and specific events as well. Lakoff aims his discussion at more general world views that cut across multiple issues.

3 Charlotte Ryan contrasts the social marketing, media advocacy, and participatory communication models in "Putting the Public in Public Health," forthcoming.


5 Our own modest network at MRAP (Movement/Media Research and Action Project) has included at one time or another: the Grassroots Policy Project, the Advocacy Institute, Frameworks Inc, Institute for Policy Studies, Political Research Associates, Poverty Race Research Action Council (PRRAC), Community Media Workshop, the Progressive Communicators Network, United for a Fair Economy, Massachusetts Labor Extension Program, Northeast Action, Health Care for All, and many others including researchers based in academic institutions. We have run framing workshops for over 400 organizations, one of which, the Rhode Island Coalition against Domestic Violence [www.ricadv.org] is publishing with us, a complete manual on participatory communication including framing processes. Also see Charlotte Ryan (1991) Prime Time Activism: Media Strategy for Organizers. Boston: South End Press.