

# Chico Marxism

*Freedom isn't just another word for winning elections.*

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**WHOSE FREEDOM? THE BATTLE OVER AMERICA'S MOST IMPORTANT IDEA**  
BY GEORGE LAKOFF • FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX • 2006 • 288 PAGES • \$23

**T**here is a scene in the Marx Brothers' film *Duck Soup* in which Mrs. Teasdale (the redoubtable Margaret Dumont), believing she is alone, begins undressing. When Chicolini (Chico Marx) emerges from under her bed, the following exchange ensues:

Mrs. Teasdale: I thought you left.

Chicolini: Oh no. I don't leave.

Mrs. Teasdale: But I saw you leave with my own eyes.

Chicolini: Well, who you gonna believe, me or your own eyes?

George Lakoff is on Chico's side. To the Berkeley linguist-cum-Democratic guru, what matters are not the facts, but the frames through which the facts

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WILLIAM GALSTON is Senior Fellow, Governance Studies Program, The Brookings Institution, and College Park Professor, University of Maryland. From 1993 to 1995, he served as Deputy Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy in the Clinton Administration.

are viewed. As he assures us in his new book, *Whose Freedom?*, “frames trump facts”—that, if facts are inconsistent with frames, they will be ignored. In his view, what ails progressives is that conservatives are far more aware of their guiding assumptions and more self-conscious about using language to “frame” issues to their advantage—regardless of the facts. To regain effectiveness, then, progressives must fight fire with fire. Instead of arguing the facts, Lakoff says, they must substitute their frame for that of the conservatives and reclaim the concept of freedom—in his words, “America’s most important idea.”

Lakoff is entirely correct in placing freedom at the center of American identity and politics, yet like Chico, he ignores reality and only endorses as facts the assertions that are consistent with his worldview. *Whose Freedom?* could have been a provocative book from one of the few members of academia with real influence on Democratic leaders; instead, it is a jerry-rigged polemic built to fit Lakoff’s political agenda. And that’s a shame, because progressives can—and should—enter the debate about what freedom means in America today.

Lakoff’s analysis—as previously laid out in his best-selling *Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*—has proved appealing to many Democrats. Its underlying message is reassuring: Forget about rethinking anything except your rhetoric; there’s nothing wrong with the party that a more self-conscious and aggressive articulation of the progressive frame can’t cure. Indeed, Lakoff dominated the post-2004-election post-mortems and was showered with invitations to brief Democratic lawmakers and strategists.

Yet, as critics pointed out in reviewing his first book, there is a limit to how much analysis can fit into a frame; facts do matter. Lakoff is blind to this truth. For example, here’s my favorite of Lakoff’s assertions masquerading as facts: He blithely assures us that the percentage of “strongly progressive Democrats” equals that of “strongly conservative Republicans”—roughly 35 to 40 percent. Alas, surveys consistently show that conservatives outnumber liberals by a margin of at least three to two and have done so for the past three decades. According to the National Election Survey, liberals hover around 20 percent of the population, while conservatives typically score in the low 30s. The remainder (45 to 50 percent) describe themselves as moderates. This asymmetry, a basic structural feature of contemporary politics, helps define the arithmetic of party competition at the national level. Because the Democrats’ base is so much smaller than that of the Republicans, they must win not just a majority, but a supermajority, of the voters in between. John Kerry received almost all the liberal vote and about 55 percent of the moderates; it wasn’t enough. Unless conservatives are so demoralized that they don’t turn out, Democrats need upward of 60 percent of the moderate vote. And a Berkeley-style “progressive” agenda is unlikely to get them there.

In addition to ignoring facts, Lakoff underestimates their power; facts can—and do—trump frames. Take Iraq. No war has ever been more deliberately framed than the 2003 U.S. invasion, and it initially enjoyed strong public support. But facts on the ground proved inconsistent with the expectations the Bush Administration’s frames had engendered. Weapons of mass destruction were nowhere to be found; our troops were not greeted as liberators; and Iraqis seemed more interested in settling ethno-religious scores than in embracing the democracy we so earnestly proffered. And, famously, the “mission” turned out to be anything but “accomplished.” As the months went by and reality sank in, Americans turned against the war in droves.

Lakoff believes that Chico-style politicians can get away with their misdeeds indefinitely, if only they frame them correctly. But they can’t; they can deny reality for only so long before citizens begin trusting the evidence of their own senses.

**W**hile his approach in answering the question “Whose Freedom?” is deeply flawed, Lakoff’s point of departure—that freedom “defines what America is”—is one with which I agree. It was no accident that Franklin D. Roosevelt described the Allies’ war aims as the “four freedoms.” It was to ensure the survival and success of liberty that John F. Kennedy declared that we were prepared to “pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe.” Yet during the past generation, as liberals and progressives have abandoned the language of freedom in favor of justice, equality, and diversity, conservatives have appropriated it. Freedom, at home and abroad, was the theme of George W. Bush’s second inaugural address, which Lakoff rightly regards as a document meriting close analysis. In response, thinkers who cannot accept the conservative interpretation of freedom, such as University of Arizona political scientist John Schwarz, are trying to take back the term. Lakoff argues (and again I agree) that the definition of freedom has become a matter of political contestation and is now “up for grabs.”

This tug of war is no accident, Lakoff argues. Decades ago, the British scholar W. B. Gallie posited that many concepts are “essentially contested”—that is, they can be fleshed out in many different ways. Philosophers distinguish between abstract “concepts” and concrete “conceptions”: Equality is a concept; equality of moral worth or of opportunity are conceptions. And so for freedom: While individuals agree on the core concept, they disagree on how to specify it. In a public culture like ours, in which freedom occupies an honored central place, winning the conceptual battle is a matter of practical political significance.

Despite this complexity, however, Lakoff offers only the crudest of dichotomies. For him, there is conservative freedom, part of the “strict father” metaphor,

and progressive freedom, embedded in the “nurturant parent” metaphor. And then there are “biconceptuals,” who mix the two in different parts of their lives. That’s it—a political periodic table with only two elements. But Lakoff barely even tries to show how conservative and progressive freedom, or their associated policy agendas, flow from these two elements and their combination. Instead, he asserts these connections over and over again on every page, as though repetition were a substitute for argument. The result is conceptual hypertrophy: Conservative freedom becomes a summary of everything he dislikes about conservatism, while progressive freedom expands to encompass everything he thinks is good about human beings and the world. And thus we learn that when nurturant values are identity-defining, freedom is (among many other things) “security and health.” Disregarding Isaiah Berlin’s dictum that “every-

thing is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality or fairness or justice,” Lakoff merges these and many other values into a conceptual blob. While freedom, so conceived, promises to illuminate the political landscape, it is in fact an example of Hegel’s night in which all cows are black.

**To regain the initiative, today’s liberals must return to their historic mission of modernizing and promoting freedom.**

Among its other faults, this structuralist reductionism reflects a deep indifference to history. Well into the twentieth century, for example, many Americans continued to embrace a civic conception of freedom that emphasized participation in self-government and that differed fundamentally both from the rights-based conception that dominates today’s progressive thought and the market-based conception of modern conservatism. Lakoff’s assertion that his version of progressive freedom is “traditional” and has “always dominated American life” is breathtakingly wrong.

Inevitably, Lakoff’s two-valued structuralism leads to a political outlook that can only be described as Manichean. Goodness and virtue are all on one side, evil and vice all on the other. The wicked conservatives understand causation as “direct,” virtuous progressives as “systemic.” Accordingly, conservatives endorse individual responsibility (bad) while progressives invoke social responsibility (good). And thus we learn that the conservatives’ “economic liberty myth” about “individual initiative, individual responsibility, and pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” is “nonsense.”

If Lakoff thinks that reframing the economic debate will persuade a majority of Americans to abandon the ideas of individual initiative and responsibility, he and I are living in different countries. There are even some (dare I say it?)

facts that bear on this question. By a margin of two to one, according to the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, Americans reject the proposition that success in life is determined by forces outside our control; by a margin of nearly seven to one, they endorse the proposition that lack of success is due more to individual than to societal factors. Sensible public policy, of course, recognizes the importance of both factors; achieving a sustainable new balance between individual and social responsibility was at the heart of, for instance, President Clinton's approach to welfare reform.

Lakoff's Manichean outlook also leads to outright distortion of the choices we face. For example, he quotes a line from President Bush's second inaugural, "Self-government relies, in the end, on the government of the self;" a thought he characterizes as an "alien worldview" that is not only "radically different" from traditional views of freedom but also "frightening" and "extremist." Not so. The President was invoking a debate that goes all the way back to the founding of the American republic: Can liberty be preserved through the artful arrangement of individual and institutional self-interest, or does free government depend as well on certain traits of character—virtues—among its citizens? A traditional view is that some internalized restraint on the pursuit of self-interest and the expression of our passions—if you will, government of the self—is among those necessary traits. Far from being "alien," this is a position that many progressives—such as Louis D. Brandeis and Theodore Roosevelt—have espoused in the past, and one that today's progressives would do well to take more seriously than Lakoff does.

**D**espite *Whose Freedom?*'s deep flaws, the premise animating Lakoff's enterprise is valid and important: Because freedom is central to what defines us as Americans, a continuing political struggle to seize the high ground of freedom is inevitable.

At the heart of the conservative understanding of liberty is the presumption that government and individual freedom are fundamentally at odds. At the heart of the liberal vision must be a subtler but more realistic proposition: Public power can promote as well as threaten liberty.

Recall FDR's famous four freedoms: freedom *of* speech and worship; freedom *from* want and fear. Liberals need to understand that "freedom of" and "freedom from" have distinctly different structures and implications. "Freedom of" points toward spheres of action in which individuals make choices—for example, which faith to embrace or whether to endorse any faith at all. The task of government is to secure those spheres against interference by individuals, groups, or government itself. By contrast, "freedom from" points toward

circumstances that (it is presumed) all wish to avoid. In such instances, the task of government is to immunize individuals against undesired circumstances, so far as possible. Here government acts to protect, not individual agency and choice, but rather individuals' life circumstances against outcomes that no one would choose or willingly endure. During the New Deal, for example, we made a collective decision that no senior would willingly live in poverty and that no senior should have to, and, in response, created Social Security.

The point is that any society that takes freedom from want and fear seriously has made a collective decision: Certain conditions are objectively bad; its citizens should not have to endure them if the means of their abatement are in hand; and individual choice is not a necessary component of, and may be a hindrance to attaining, these freedoms.

Not only can "freedom from" clash with "freedom to," but also A's "freedom to" may clash with B's. So when government protects the weak against the depredations of the powerful and acts to ward off, or break up, excessive concentrations of private power, it does not diminish, but rather enhances, liberty rightly understood.

Consider also that specific freedoms have conditions for their effective exercise, and liberal democratic government must act to ensure broad access to those conditions. As Stephen Holmes and Cass Sunstein argued in *The Cost of Rights*, our system of rights is a public good secured by government and administered by tax-funded courts. The rule of law is central to safeguarding liberty, and a central aspect of the rule of law is the guarantee of fair trials, including the right to "assistance of counsel" as provided in the Sixth Amendment. But many Americans are too poor to afford adequate defense, and pro bono work doesn't fill in the gap. So the government taxes the better-off to provide that legal defense. Such taxes restrict the freedom of those taxed, but does anyone seriously doubt that this use of government's taxing power enhances the sum of freedom in our country?

Unfortunately, few liberals are willing to make this case—but we must. To regain the initiative, in short, today's liberals must return to their historic mission of modernizing and promoting freedom. In this effort, they should be guided by three principles.

First, liberals must recognize that many of their traditional policy instruments hold the promise of advancing freedom as well as other goals. Social Security not only undergirds a decent retirement for the elderly, it expands their choices. If cold winters restrict their mobility as they age, they can consider leaving for warmer parts of the country. If seniors do not want to move in with their children, they can live independently as long as they are physically able.

Second, liberals should recognize that individual choice, while not always synonymous with freedom, and sometimes contrary to it, is also highly appealing to average Americans. And rightly so: Suitably constrained, choice allows us to express our individuality while respecting others' opportunity to do the same. Liberals should therefore look for opportunities to embrace individual choice in ways that embody their principles and promote their objectives. A good example—one many Democrats have already gotten behind—is adding individual retirement savings accounts as a complement to Social Security. Greater choice in public schools is another—allowing parents to send their children to schools outside their districts would enhance their education options while keeping them within the public school system.

The third principle that should guide a center-left freedom agenda is the notion that freedom often requires sacrifice. Contemporary conservatism, with its free-lunch mentality, has a hard time admitting this. Liberals should embrace it. In his second inaugural address, President Bush eloquently invoked the sacrifices made by young Americans fighting for freedom abroad. Unfortunately, he asked nothing of the rest of us. By contrast, FDR expended political capital to maintain the military draft. And in his 1941 State of the Union speech, at the threshold of the greatest struggle for liberty in the history of the world, he forthrightly stated that “I have called for personal sacrifice,” acknowledging that financing national defense would require higher taxation.

We have never heard that kind of candor from President Bush and his supporters, only the continuing pretense that freedom is free. Can freedom really be sustained by a handful of troops, cheered on by a nation of spectators, and financed by Chinese loans? In an America living up to its own ideal of freedom, all citizens would share the risks and burdens of its defense. That is what a courageous leader of a free people would propose. And that—not an army of framing consultants—is the approach progressives need today. ▀