

SPINNING OUR WAY TO SUSTAINABILITY?

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In a widely read article, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus critiqued the environmental movement for focusing on piecemeal technocratic solutions and failing to articulate a broader political vision, declaring it irrelevant if not already “dead.” To get off the defensive, they argue, it needs to reframe its solutions to global warming and related environmental problems by appealing to core progressive values and to reformulate itself as part of a larger progressive movement. This repackaging, they say, will create a broader coalition with a shared political vision and greater political power. There is much to be said for their critique of traditional technocratic environmentalism, much of which we agree with. However, we will argue, their focus on rhetorical reform without addressing other aspects of environmental strategy is logically flawed and also undermines their commitment to democratic values.

Keywords: *environmental movement; social movements; resource mobilization; discourse analysis; cognitive linguistics; political opportunity structure; death of environmentalism*

In a widely read article, Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus (hereafter S&N; 2004) critiqued the environmental movement for focusing on piecemeal technocratic solutions and failing to articulate a broader political vision, declaring it irrelevant if not already “dead.” For the environmental movement to get off the defensive, they argue, it needs to reframe its solutions to global warming and related environmental problems by appealing to core progressive values and to reformulate itself as part of a larger progressive movement. This repackaging, they say, will create a broader coalition with a shared political vision and greater political power. A core part of their program—the “New Apollo Project”—promises job creation, research and development, and infrastructure creation based on decentralized use of renewable energy. As proof of the potential for this Apollo Project, they point to its endorsement by 17 of the leading labor unions and environmental groups. There is much to be said for their critique of traditional technocratic environmentalism, much of which we agree with (Brulle & Jenkins, 2005). And the idea of promoting renewable energy is likewise a positive. However, their focus on rhetorical reform without addressing other aspects of environmental strategy is logically flawed.

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THE RHETORICAL RECONSTRUCTION OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

To understand S&N's underlying logic, one needs to view their essay in the context of professional message development. S&N's stance is fundamentally an application of the approach of George Lakoff (2004), a cognitive linguist at the University of California, Berkeley, to the field of environmentalism. In his work, Lakoff takes a postmodern structural linguistic perspective on social change. He argues that "frames are the mental structures that shape the way we see the world. In politics our frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies. To change our frames is to change all of this. Reframing is social change" (p. xv).

Lakoff dismisses the 18th-century enlightenment idea of science, arguing that because people think in frames, ideas and facts that run counter to these frames will be rejected even if true. Thus, a movement that grounds its claims based on scientific evidence that does not fit prevailing popular frames will be irrelevant (Lakoff, 2004). To be politically effective, progressives need to develop a simple unified frame that resonates with existing identities and unifies various political proposals. Lakoff proposes a dichotomous model of American politics. The right wing is based on a "strict father morality" in which government functions as a strong protector and disciplinarian. In contrast, the progressive movement is predicated on a "nurturing parent" identity, concerned with providing support for self-development and individual fulfillment.

According to Lakoff, the right has achieved political power by developing well-crafted messages that appeal to this strict father morality. Progressives have squandered political power by failing to frame their proposals around the nurturing parent metaphor, instead advancing piecemeal proposals that assume that the scientific and technical merits alone will win the debate. This piecemeal approach lacks a unifying vision. When such proposals enter into competition with the unified frame of the right, they lose, because they lack coherence, fail to resonate with existing identities, and do not draw broad popular support. The solution is for progressives to create a unifying frame based on the nurturing parent concept.

To realize this program, Lakoff and associates seek to "refram[e] the public debate and facilitat[e] consensus toward progressive policy goals." They accomplish this goal by using cognitive linguistics to "reveal the underlying frames and assumptions that structure American political discourse." Based on their analysis, they provide a definition of the "core values of progressivism" and various rhetorical strategies to generate political support for progressive policies (see <http://www.rockridge.org>). Thus, Lakoff's argument is a one-size-fits-all approach to the difficulties of progressive movements, all of which can be resolved by mimicking the right in simply reframing their arguments.

S&N's proposals are essentially an application of Lakoff's argument to environmentalism. In fact, in a recent update on their essay, S&N argue, "By now it should go without saying that we could just as easily have written a 'death of' report about any of the special interests that comprise the liberal coalition (see <http://www.prospect.org/web/page.ww?section=root&name=ViewPrint&articleId=10320>). Following Lakoff, it is no surprise that S&N see environmentalism as a piecemeal, technocratic approach lacking connections to progressive values, and argue for a unified approach that can, in turn, create a unified progressive movement. Their New Apollo Project—a large public works effort to develop

renewable energy—is intended to cut across the divisions of the current multiple and competing “special interest” progressive factions.

LIMITATIONS

There is no doubt that the environmental movement and the left as a whole are currently on the defensive. It is also clear that organized environmentalism needs to rethink its basic political approach. However, it is not at all evident that following the advice of S&N or Lakoff would result in the revitalization of the environmental movement or progressive politics.

First, their entire analysis is premised on changing cultural beliefs without addressing political and economic change. Social reality is defined simply in terms of how we *perceive* reality. If we just get the right frames out there, it will create political consensus, and the progressive alliance can then take power. However comforting this idea might sound, it is a form of linguistic mysticism that assumes that social institutions can be transformed by cultural redefinition alone. As several have noted (Brulle & Jenkins, 2005; Orr, 2005; Schmitt, 2005), the rise of the right is also based on increased concentration of social power, both in the economy generally and in the mass media. Pouring new rhetoric into the same socioeconomic system will accomplish little (Luke, 2005). The structure of power has to be changed as part of the process, and any rhetorical strategy that promises to be effective must link its rhetoric to a broader political strategy that includes grassroots organizing at its base. S&N are correct that the environmental movement needs to repackage itself so it is no longer viewed as just another special interest, but this alone will accomplish little.

Second, S&N assume a unity of perspectives about “core progressive values.” The empirical existence of these values and their link to environmentalism is highly problematic. Internally, the environmental movement includes advocates for multiple discourses, including preservationists, ecospiritualists, and others who support the protection of biodiversity and wilderness for its own sake (Brulle, 2000). There are also significant divisions within the environmental movement between “hook and gun” wildlife advocates and preservationists and so on. The environmentalism of S&N is anthropocentric, concerned only with providing a healthy and safe environment for humans. It also neglects the plurality of values that support contemporary environmentalism. Many argue that there is an economic left and right that crosscuts the cultural left and right that S&N emphasize. Environmentalism is often justified in terms of both conservation (i.e., an economic value) and self-fulfillment (i.e., a cultural value; Brooks & Manza, 1995).

Third, S&N do not explain how to handle the inevitable economic trade-offs involved with addressing global warming. Although avoiding carbon taxes may make their Apollo Plan more popular, they do not address how to counter the strong vested interests and sunk costs in the existing carbon-intensive economy. In the period since their Apollo Plan was first presented, several of the union and consumer sponsors have backed away from the plan, reflecting the real economic costs that it will impose (Little, 2005). Moreover, the plan ultimately assumes that we can have economic growth and counter global warming without significant financial cost, which is simply misleading. Their assumption is that a renewable-energy plan can be sold solely on the grounds of energy independence, but powerful vested interests in the existing carbon-based economy and major sunk costs in existing transportation and production technology will continue to define values

and shape self-interest for some time to come. Finally, there is the question posed by Luke (2005) about the self-interestedness of the mainstream liberal environmentalists that S&N see as core to their strategy. While blasting the environmental movement for being narrow and technocratic, they point with delight to the endorsement of their plan by many of the same technocratic environmental groups. If these groups are part of the problem, then what is the likelihood that their backing is going to help introduce the plan?

The fourth, and most critical, problem is an implicit elitism that undermines the very progressive values that S&N claim to champion. They do not explicitly address how this change in worldviews will be organized or who will get to define core progressive values, but it is evident that they assume it will be professional experts such as themselves. A glimpse of how this process works is provided on the Web site for Lakoff's consultancy. The Rockridge Institute partners with

advocates, activists, and policy professionals to . . . empower people to effect positive change by reframing the public debate and facilitating consensus toward policy goals. We do this by applying the discipline of cognitive linguistics to reveal the underlying frames and assumptions that structure American political discourse. (see <http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org/aboutus>)

In other words, professionals in cognitive linguistics become the arbiters of progressive values and the public become simply an audience for the marketing of these ideas. S&N's partnership with many of the same technocratic environmental groups that they criticize indicates their implicit strategy.

This approach contradicts the participatory ethos that S&N purport to champion. In place of sustained dialogue and interaction between environmental leaders and various publics, we get a progressive self-development frame sold by technocrats through clever spin techniques. This strategy reinforces the professionalization of political discourse that is one of the key liabilities of the existing environmental movement. All the other effective social movements of the 20th century—labor, civil rights, women's, consumerism, peace, and so on—prevailed by grassroots organizing that entailed direct interaction between leaders, activists, and the various publics. Professionalism was often useful, but it was always harnessed to a broader movement energized by popular mobilization. In place of this dialogue and grassroots mobilization, S&N propose enlisting alternative spin-doctors with progressive values.

The fundamental problem with S&N's proposal is its lack of democracy. Movements are more effective if they engage citizens in a sustained dialogue rather than treating them as mass opinion to be manipulated. There is considerable evidence that the general public lacks a coherent understanding of environmental problems and that proenvironmental attitudes lack depth (Guber, 2003). Is the cure to create new spin-doctors who promote different unified progressive frames? Or is it better to generate a genuine dialogue that creates value change and better understanding of both self and public interest? S&N opt for the former, which is much easier but, we think, ineffective.

Lakoff's work indicates that he anticipated our critique. In his book, Lakoff (2004) argues that his approach is not spinning, because spinning is the deceptive use of language to make something "sound good and normal." The difference between framing and spinning is that framers represent "what their moral views really are." In other words, the right wing does not believe its own rhetoric, and so it generates spin. We believe in ours, and so it is not spin. But this argument is not

convincing. Both S&N and many right-wing rhetoricians are elitist in their approach, trying to mobilize supporters as if they were isolated consumers of ideas rather than citizens. If there is a lesson to be learned from the contemporary right, it is that engaging people around values that they hold dear is more effective than trying to mobilize around abstract concerns that lack relevance to everyday life. S&N are correct that environmental activists need to be principled as well as scientific, but they also need to address tangible concerns that real people experience.

Most important of all, S&N fail to provide an effective model of social change, which unfortunately is echoed throughout most of the contemporary environmental movement. Most environmental organizations are professional-advocacy efforts, treating supporters as donors rather than citizens. Most environmental leaders have little engagement with or interest in grassroots organizing. This situation creates social distance between the leadership and supporters of the organization. Supporters of environmental organizations display little understanding of environmental issues or intensity of commitment to finding solutions (Shaiko, 1999). The environmental movement also confronts an intense problem with free-riders who are unwilling to contribute to the public good of environmental protection (Hardin, 1982). At the same time, much of the free-rider problem is self-inflicted by an environmental movement unwilling to engage citizens in a serious dialogue or to engage in grassroots organizing. They much prefer to rely on professional advocacy. Following S&N's advice will worsen this problem, leaving a politically weak environmental movement.

This point is clearly made by Luke (2005) in his critique of S&N. He argues that the core problem is a narrowing of the public sphere and an understanding of public interest. Hence, in place of S&N's endorsement of private initiatives, Luke calls for a "public ecology" that would engage citizens in a collective effort to rebalance the sociotechnical order with human and natural needs. One of the first targets of this renewal of public action would be a democratization of the environmental movement, making it capable of engaging citizens and developing a healthy dialogue about long-term solutions.

There is ample evidence that this strategy would have a greater likelihood of success. Shaiko (1999) shows that grassroots mobilization is more effective. The credibility of environmental lobbying in Congress depends on being seen as engaged with a broad cross-section of the public. Moreover, the greater the participation, the greater the understanding of environmental problems and the awareness of the need to contribute. So boosting participation should improve public willingness to pay for environmental change. Cable, Mix, and Hasting (2005) show that coalitions between local environmental justice groups and the Sierra Club have been one of the few successful local/national partnerships, due primarily to the participatory nature of the Sierra Club. Other oligarchic national groups have been unable to form these types of political coalitions and this has severely limited their political effectiveness.

Although better framing would be useful, alone it can do little. We need to move beyond simplistic analyses and clever spin tactics. What is needed is a new organizational strategy that engages citizens and fosters the development of enlightened self-interest and an awareness of long-term community interests.

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