

# The Struggle of Ideologies and the Evolution of Meaning (on the example of 'liberal' and 'conservative')

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# Introduction

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## The aims of this paper:

- to identify **general discursive tendencies** in the evolution of meaning of the words 'liberal' and 'conservative' in (web-accessed) American political commentary,
- to contextualize the findings within **semiotics and memetics**,
- to demonstrate that the **process of meaning evolution in political discourse may be accelerated** to accommodate the ideological preferences of dominant groups.

# The evolution of meaning in the context of semiotics and memetics

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- Semiotics – an interdisciplinary investigative perspective to explore and theorize how signs are created and used (cf. Wąsik);

## INFLUENTIAL THEORIES:

- Charles S. Peirce – the dynamic nature of signification, the triadic sign, evolution as generation of intermediating signs in the process of continuous semiosis;
- Jean Baudrillard – resulting superfluity of signs, blurring of distinction between reality and representation (hyperreality).

# The evolution of meaning in the context of semiotics and memetics

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- ❑ Memetics – a modern meta-discipline that explores evolutionary models of information transmission (cf. *Journal of Memetics*);
- ❑ Evolution pertains not only to biology or technology but also to language and culture: it is based on principles of selection and variability;
- ❑ Memes – units of cultural information (competitively selected and creatively modified by individuals in each generation) (cf. Dawkins, Blackmore);
- ❑ Memetic engineering - production/distribution of memes to suit ideological aims.

# Discourse as a site of ideological struggle

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- ❑ Discourse – language imbricated in the exercise of power relations and ideological struggle (cf. Fairclough);
- ❑ Critical discourse analysis – exposing through linguistic analysis the properties of texts and discursive conventions that are related to ideological meanings;
- ❑ Evolution of meaning as discursive innovation/denaturalization of conventions;
- ❑ Political labels as „unstable fields of meaning potential“ (cf. Fairclough).

## The evolution of meaning of 'liberal' and 'conservative'

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**Liberalism** – a political doctrine or ideology that advocates individual liberty, freedom of thought and civil rights (cf. *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics*);

**Liberal democracy** – a political system that ensures that the rights of individual citizens are legally defined (e.g. property rights) and the powers of elected governments are fairly limited (e.g. unrestricted private enterprise, free market economy)

# The evolution of meaning of 'liberal' and 'conservative'

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**Liberal values**, according to Liberal International, are:

...that the **state is only the instrument** of the citizens it serves; that any action of the state must respect the principles of **democratic accountability**; that constitutional liberty is based upon the principles of **separation of powers**; that justice requires that in all criminal prosecution the accused shall enjoy the right to a **speedy and public trial**, and to a **fair verdict** free from any political influence; that state control of the economy and private monopolies both threaten political liberty; that **rights and duties** go together, and that every citizen has a **moral responsibility** to others in society; and that a peaceful world can only be built upon respect for these principles. (cf. Oxford Manifesto)

## The evolution of meaning of 'liberal' and 'conservative'

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**Conservatism** – an attitude rather than a political doctrine that involves (cf. Michalkiewicz):

- ❑ reluctance to embrace change,
- ❑ protecting timeless human values from dangers of rapid civilizational advancement,
- ❑ ensuring the integrity and continuance of tradition.



## The evolution of meaning of 'liberal' and 'conservative'

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Some ideologically contentious *liberal* ideas criticized by *conservatives* in American political discourse (cf. Alterman):

- ❑ more government's influence in economy (control, licensing),
- ❑ anti-discrimination laws,
- ❑ general education,
- ❑ welfare programs (unemployment benefits, medical care),
- ❑ progressive taxation,
- ❑ redistribution of state revenues.

# The evolution of meaning of 'liberal' and 'conservative'

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Direction of meaning evolution:

- ❑ **Liberal** - from positive to negative
- ❑ **Conservative** - from negative to positive

# The evolution of meaning of 'liberal' and 'conservative'

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Examples of evolving meaning of *liberal* (cf. Chafe, Alterman, Pratkanis and Aronson):

- ❑ John F. Kennedy (1960 campaign speech): 'I'm proud to say I'm a Liberal',
- ❑ Richard Nixon/Ronald Reagan (about their Democratic adversaries): Liberal extremists,
- ❑ George Bush (1988, about Michael Dukakis): 'an ACLU liberal,... soft on crime'
- ❑ George W. Bush (2004, about John Kerry): 'most liberal member in Congress'

# The evolution of meaning of 'liberal' and 'conservative'

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**Liberal bias** – a label popularized to cast doubt on the objectivity of news coverage that is too critical of Republicans or too favorable to Democrats

## **Some bestsellers 'exposing' liberal bias**

Sean Hannity's *Let Freedom Ring: Winning the War of Liberty over Liberalism* (2002).

Ann Coulter's *Slander: Liberal Lies about the American Right* (2003) and *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism* (2004),

Michael Savage's *The Savage Nation: Saving America from the Liberal Assault on Our Borders, Languages and Culture* (2003),

Mona Charen's *Useful Idiots: How Liberals Got it Wrong in the Cold War and Still Blame America First* (2003),

David Limbaugh's *Persecution: How Liberals are Waging War Against Christianity* (2003),

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## Appreciation of *conservatism*:

- ❑ The rise of televangelism – disseminating conservative convictions;
- ❑ More conservative radio and television news outlets (Fox News Channel);
- ❑ Republicans' successful rhetoric – explicit connections between conservative politics and family values and morality (cf. Lakoff);
- ❑ Increase in the number of elected conservative officials (mayors, governors);
- ❑ *Neocon(servative)s* take the blame for Iraq.

# The evolution of meaning of 'liberal' and 'conservative'

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Examples of the use of *liberal* and *conservative* for political advantage (cf. Conway et al., Naureckas et al.):

- ❑ Talk radio (e.g. The Rush Limbaugh Show, The Savage Nation),
- ❑ TV (e.g. Fox News Channel – The O'Reilly Factor),
- ❑ Internet (e.g. Conservapedia).

# Conclusions

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The study identifies some **decisive shifts in the evolution of meaning** of the words *liberal* and *conservative*. It demonstrates that the terms' **unstable fields of meaning potential** are frequently activated to trigger desired **connotations** rather than to refer to their core denotations. Particularly, the terms *liberal* and *neocon* have been used as terms of **abuse**. This indicates that both terms function as **memes** that have been **engineered to suit ideological aims**.

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