

How to Sell Conservatism: Lesson 1 – Pretend You’re a Reformer (##)

October 20, 2010

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Lesson 1 – Pretend You’re a Reformer

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If you somehow neglected to renew your subscription to the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, you may have missed a couple of interesting articles last year. A series of studies conducted by two independent groups of researchers (published in the September and November 2009 issues, respectively) added to an already substantial collection of evidence showing that “people are motivated to perceive existing social arrangements as just and legitimate.”

As is common with social psych studies, all the subjects were college students, so extrapolate to every other member of our species at your peril. Still, in a variety of different experiments, everything from the formula used by a university for funding its departments to unequal gender arrangements in business or politics was likely to be regarded as fair simply because, well, that’s how things are already being done. Subjects also tended to prefer the taste of a beverage if

they were told it was an established brand than if they were told it was new.

If possession is nine-tenths of the law, then existence apparently is nine-tenths of rightness. At the same time, though, we seem to enjoy the smell of fresh paint (as Sartre put it). There's something undeniably alluring about the new-and-improved version of whatever product we're used to buying – as long as the product itself hasn't changed too much. We may be seized by an urge to throw the bums out every other November, but don't ask us to question the two-party system itself. After all, if that's how things are done, it must be for good reason.

For a shrewd policy maker, then, the ideal formula would seem to be to let people enjoy the invigorating experience of demanding reform without having to give up whatever they're used to. And that's precisely what both liberals and conservatives manage to do: Advertise as a daring departure from the status quo what is actually just a slightly new twist on it.

But conservatives have gone a step further. They've figured out how to take policies that actually represent an intensification of the status quo and dress them up as something that's long overdue. In many cases the values and practices they endorse have already been accepted, but they try to convince us they've lost so they can win even more.

This phenomenon is easiest to notice in the realm of public policy. It's pretty obvious to all but the most doctrinaire libertarian that the financial cataclysm of 2007, from which we've yet to recover, was a direct result of inadequate regulation of the investment banking industry. (Even Ayn Rand protégé Alan Greenspan admitted that his faith in the free market was, er, somewhat misplaced.) This failure to regulate, in turn, reflects a sneering distrust of government that has been carefully cultivated at least since Ronald

Reagan took office 30 years ago. And of course it's not limited to banking. The private sector's license to function with minimal oversight seems to have played a leading role in one recent disaster after another: the catastrophic BP oil spill, the deadly West Virginia mine explosion, the recall of half a billion eggs following a salmonella outbreak, and the San Bruno gas line explosion, to name only the most prominent examples from only the last half year.

Yet those who have drunk the ideological Kool-Aid – a lot more than tea is served at these parties – portray themselves as revolutionaries by virtue of demanding even further restrictions on the ability of democratically elected officials to regulate corporate conduct in the public interest. By framing the primary threat to our well-being as Big Government, conservatives succeed in marketing as something qualitatively new and different what is actually a ramped-up version of the very free-market dogma whose consequences we've been experiencing for quite some time.

Interestingly, this same artful maneuver also shows up far from the domain of Goldman Sachs and BP. Consider the way children are raised in our culture. I think it can be argued that the dominant problem with parenting isn't permissiveness; it's a fear of permissiveness that leads us to be excessively controlling. For every example of a child who is permitted to run wild in a public place, there are hundreds of examples of children being restricted unnecessarily, yelled at, threatened, or bullied by their parents, children whose protests are routinely ignored and whose questions are dismissed out of hand, children who have become accustomed to hearing an automatic "No!" in response to their requests, and a "Because I said so!" if they ask for a reason.

But traditionalists – who, when it comes to children, include a discouraging number of political liberals – have persuaded us to ignore the epidemic of punitive parenting and focus

instead on the occasional example of overindulgence – sometimes even to the point of pronouncing an entire generation spoiled. (It’s revealing that similar alarms have been raised for decades, if not centuries.) To create the impression that kids today are out of control is to justify a call for even tighter restrictions, tougher discipline, more punishment. And, again, this is billed as a courageous departure from contemporary parenting practices rather than identified for what it is: an intensification of the control-oriented model that, as I’ve argued elsewhere, has already done incalculable damage.

Consider, finally, the case of education. Seymour Papert, known for his work on artificial intelligence, began one of his books by inviting us to imagine a group of surgeons and a group of teachers, both from a century ago, who are magically transported to the present day. The surgeons visit a modern operating room and struggle to understand what’s going on, but the teachers feel right at home in today’s schools. Kids, they discover, are still segregated by age in rows of classrooms; are still made to sit passively and listen (or practice skills) most of the time; are still tested and graded, rewarded or punished; still set against one another in contests and deprived of any real say about what they’re doing.

Those tempted to point defensively to updates in the delivery system only end up underscoring how education is still about delivering knowledge to empty receptacles. In fact, snazzier technology – say, posting grades or homework assignments online – mostly serves to distract us from rethinking the pedagogy. Interactive whiteboards in classrooms amount to a 21st-century veneer on old-fashioned, teacher-centered instruction.

But enter now the school “reformers”: big-city superintendents like Joel Klein and, until recently, Michelle Rhee; big-money people like Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, and a

batch of hedge fund managers; Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and his ideological soulmates who preceded him in the Bush Administration; Waiting for 'Superman' director Davis Guggenheim; and the reporters, editorial writers, and producers at just about every mass media outlet in the U.S. School reform, as these people understand it, and as I've discussed in a *previous post*, involves a relentless regimen of standardized testing; a push to direct funds to charter schools, many of them run by for-profit corporations; a weakening of teachers' job protection – and the vilification of unions that represent teachers – so that those who have failed to raise their students' test scores can be publicly humiliated or fired; threats to shut down low-scoring schools; initiatives to dangle money in front of teachers who follow orders and raise scores, or even in front of certain (low-income) students; and a contest for funding in which only (some) states willing to adopt this bribe-and-threat agenda will receive desperately needed federal money.

This business-style version of reform is routinely described as “bold” or “daring” – in contrast to the “failed status quo,” which is blamed on the teachers' unions. (With education, just as with parenting, even people who are reasonably progressive on other issues suddenly sound as if they're auditioning for Fox News.) There's much to be said about each of the policies I've listed, but for now the point to be emphasized is that, just as with the Tea Partyers who rally to stop the “tyranny” of mild federal checks on corporate power, or the parenting writers who urge us to “dare to discipline” our children (even though 94 percent of parents of preschoolers admit to spanking their children), the school reformers are in fact accelerating what has already been happening over the last couple of decades.

Even before the implementation of what should be called the Many Children Left Behind Act, states and school districts were busy standardizing curricula, imposing more

and more tests, and using an array of rewards and punishments to pressure teachers and students to fall in line – with the most extreme version of this effort reserved for the inner cities. Before anyone outside of Texas had heard of George W. Bush, many of us had been calling attention to the fact that these policies were turning schools into glorified test-prep centers, driving some of the most innovative teachers to leave the profession, and increasing the drop-out rate among kids of color.

Yet the so-called reformers have succeeded in convincing people that their top-down, test-driven approach – in effect, the status quo on steroids – is a courageous rejection of what we've been doing.

Here's what would be new: questioning all the stuff that Papert's early 20th-century visitors would immediately recognize: a regimen of memorizing facts and practicing skills that features lectures, worksheets, quizzes, report cards and homework. But the Gates-Bush-Obama version of "school reform" not only fails to call those things into question; it actually intensifies them, particularly in urban schools. The message, as educator Harvey Daniels observed, consists of saying in effect that "what we're doing [in the classroom] is OK, we just need to do it harder, longer, stronger, louder, meaner..."

Real education reform would require us to consider the elimination of many features that we've come to associate with school, so perhaps the reluctance to take such suggestions seriously is just a specific instance of the "whatever is, is right" bias that psychologists keep documenting. At the same time, traditionalists – educational or otherwise – know that it's politically advantageous to position themselves as being outside the establishment. Our challenge is to peer through the fog of rhetoric, to realize that what's being billed as reform should seem distinctly familiar – and not particularly welcome.

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