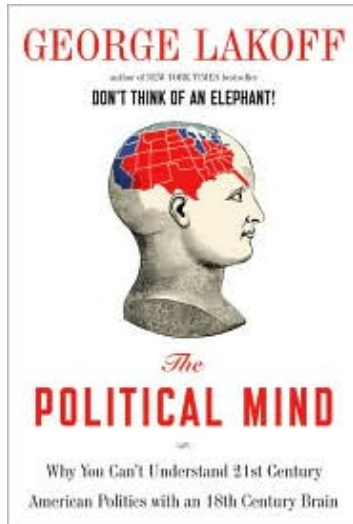


Book Review

The Political Mind

Why you can't understand 21st-Century American Politics with an 18th-
Century Brain

Penguin Group (USA), 2008



The study of the mind presents several implications; one of these is certainly political. Politics is not only an abstract concept concerning administration and power; it is also an embodied idea involving different cognitive functions instantiated by our brain. Any cognitive ability, like the communicative skills we use every day, as well as our aptitude to recur to moral evaluations, is strictly related to various bodily features characterizing each of us. Understanding the ways our natural constitution shapes our mind represents today a new challenge that could change the manner we approach the study of social phenomena in the future.

Lakoff's Book is a description of some of the main scientific theories that make possible a naturalistic analysis of different

aspects of our social world, revealing the importance of the unconscious mechanisms regulating political life. This book is an instrument for all readers interested in knowing how science can be successfully involved in the development of the social studies and, at the same time, it represents an acute analysis of the major cognitive strategies adopted by the principal political alignments of the United States. *The Political Mind* is principally a work about politics; but it's also an attempt to link together salient outcomes of *cognitive science*, *neurobiology* and *linguistics*, with the explicit philosophical aim of defining a more complete understanding of "what it means to be a human being".

For Lakoff we are facing the necessity to abandon the traditional way we conceive our rational thought, as well as to change the established role we attribute to rationality in the foundation of our democratic systems. The *old enlightenment's ideal* of (pure) reason, involving notions such as *universality*, *evidence* and *abstractness*, employed for many centuries to justify the main ideas of the progressive tradition, clashes today with evidences coming from empirical research. Recently, cognitive inquires, as well as functional and anatomical brain studies, have revealed a different imagine of rationality, characterized by *natural contingences*, *unconscious mechanisms* and *embodied aspects*. These represent a deep change of paradigm in the way we conceive rationality, involving necessarily modifications also in the way we understand aspects of our life, such as *communication*, *morality* and *politics*.

To understand what exactly drives Lakoff to propose an innovative *twenty-first-century* conception of the human mind, it's necessary to begin with one of the basic assumptions of his book. For Lakoff, an adequate analysis of the political context begins necessarily from the fact



that *we think with our brain*, that is, from the fact that we have no choice but to assume that all human cognitive life is subject to the rules governing the behavior of our neurons. In its practical dimension politics involves many cognitive abilities, such as communication, evaluation and conceptualization, all of these inseparably related with different natural features of our brain. For this reason, for Lakoff, the study of politics can be considered an analysis of a particular human activity about *changing the brain* through the individuation and the use of the adequate cognitive strategy.

One of the main purposes of Lakoff's work is to show how a deeper awareness of the way different brain mechanisms are involved in our cognitive life can be considered a useful instrument for the understanding and the development of a political behavior. Far to propose a kind of deterministic *neuro-politics*, or a sort of rhetorical *neuro-liberalism*, Lakoff intends to suggest an original way to analyze the political context introducing measures of evaluation updated to the actual level of scientific knowledge. To be aware of the *natural constraints* regulating fundamental aspects of our social life, such as emphatic attunements and moral judgments, is for Lakoff indispensable to promoting a mindful approach to the complex world of political thought.

Lakoff's argumentation follows two principal lines. On the one hand he develops an exam of some neurobiological features generally involved by political thought, on the other he produces an analysis of the main cognitive frames present within the actual American debate. At the end of his work Lakoff shows the possibility of creating a strict correlation between these two different approaches to the political discussion, underlining the role that a naturalistic point of view can assume in the examination of our social life.

At the basis of Lakoff's analysis is the relatively recent discover about the behavior of particular neural circuits present in the human brain (and in the brain of other primates) called Mirror Systems. Well confirmed experiments show the role of these kind of neurons for the development of imitative process involved by social abilities such as *intentional understanding* and *emphatic attunement*. In light of these results, Lakoff proposes an original unification between some aspects of his célèbre studies of cognitive linguistics and recent acquisitions of neuroscience, showing how an original description of the cognitive processes involved by the political thought (and praxis too) is starting to be available also from a biological level of description.

In Lakoff's Book politics assumes the aspect of a cognitive strategy involving both a qualified use of language and deep understanding of what determines moral evaluations. The first task passes through the introduction of the notion of *frame*, that is through the awareness that the understanding of any meaning is always strictly dependent from the understanding of the conceptual and evaluative parameters related to it. In this way, the success of a communicative process is made possible by the ability to evoke the right frame in whom the message is directed.

For Lakoff, language is a matter of neural connections. To be aware of the mechanisms with which our brain makes possible semantic understanding, that is by the activation and the neural recruitment of just present synaptic relations, as well as by the construction of new neural circuits, gives us a new appreciation for language, how it is exploited in different



circumstances and what the limits are for its use in communicative contexts such as politics for example. Political praxis involves the use of the right words within the opportune circumstances, pointing to “activate” the right cognitive associations between the semantic features characterizing any linguistic frame. Working within the framework of an adversary, evoking his cognitive associations rather than the proper, represents a typical error committed by politicians who ignore the basic cognitive and biological rules at the basis of any communicative process.

Questions concerning the explanation of our common social behaviors are central for Lakoff’s argumentation. The understanding of the natural processes that makes empathy a feature of our common social life represents, for the author, a crucial point in the definition of what he calls a *Cognitive Policy*. A Cognitive Policy, as Lakoff defines it, is a strategy to getting an idea, for example a moral idea, into the normal public discourse, using the adequate communicative approach to produce a desired “change in the brain of millions of people”.

Far from being a proposal involving the use of scientific knowledge to instill opinions or manipulate minds, Lakoff’s book intends to show with clear language what political understanding really involves on the biological ground, directing the attention of the reader to the presence of natural, but unconscious, mechanisms of our everyday thought. Lakoff’s aim is to make mindful both the general public and the politicians of the hidden dimension of any political process, making possible a more responsible way to understand and practice political life.

In his book Lakoff doesn’t hide his personal purpose to suggest a new way to intend the progressive conception of politics. Analyzing the contemporary political language he makes explicit the conceptual and moral differences that distinguish the two main ways to intend social life in United States, revealing the different cognitive metaphors used by the conservative and the progressive alignments. The book represents a criticism to the communicative strategy pursued by the American left during the last fifty years, underlining its inability to compete with the more efficacious tactics of the conservative part. Lakoff’s work also represents an analysis that, with the appropriate translation, could be adopted to describe the actual political state of many European countries, illuminating the presence of some shared critical aspects of the contemporary progressive strategy all around the world.

The supremacy of the conservative frames in the political discussion, beyond to be frequently imputable to a question of mass media control, is also the consequence of an inadequate communicative approach of the great part of the progressive movements. The choice to adopt a communicative strategy characterized by the evocation of enlightenment values, such as universal rationality, or logical evidence, is now revealing its cognitive limits, forcing the progressives to face the dominance of the more effectively conservative frames in the actual political language.

Beyond to be an excellent example of scientific popularization, Lakoff’s book represents a pioneering work in the definition of an original multidisciplinary approach to the world of politics, proposing a new interaction between natural and social sciences. In doing this, Lakoff is motivated by an optimistic stance about the possibility to give novel life to an Enlightenment revolution, based on the diffusion of a new conception about reason and cognition that, differently respect the past a priori stance, might be developed in accordance with the actual



scientific acquisitions. For Lakoff, furnishing a natural explanation of the hidden processes regulating our cognition, makes possible to consciously create a new conceptual framework, that is an imaginary and an emotional tone in which to develop a novel approach to the political dimension, characterized by moral consequence too.

Lakoff's book shows that we are in front of one of the most important challenges of the scientific history. The by now plausible possibility to develop a naturalistic approach to complex aspects of our everyday life represents an exciting promises concerning the future development of the scientific research toward a new understanding of our social nature. From some years *cultural* and *economical* interests together exert a great pressure in support of a rapid development of applicative outcomes of (Social) Neuroscience and in this field the expectations appear to be enormous. Now, to know what practical changes the diffusion of a "21st century" updated awareness of the social dimension will produce in our individual life is *just* a matter of time.

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