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How to Frame Yourself: A Framing Memo for Occupy Wall Street

by George Lakoff

I was asked weeks ago by some in the Occupy Wall Street movement to make suggestions for how to frame the movement. I have hesitated so far, because I think the movement should be framing itself. It's a general principle: Unless you frame yourself, others will frame you -- the media, your enemies, your competitors, your well-meaning friends. I have so far hesitated to offer suggestions. But the movement appears to maturing and entering a critical time when small framing errors could have large negative consequences. So I thought it might be helpful to accept the invitation and start a discussion of how the movement might think about framing itself.

About framing: It's normal. Everybody engages in it all the time. Frames are just structures of thought that we use every day. All words in all languages are defined in terms of frame-circuits in the brain. But, ultimately, framing is about ideas, about how we see the world, which determines how we act.

In politics, frames are part of competing moral systems that are used in political discourse and in charting political action. In short, framing is a moral enterprise: it says what the character of a movement is. All politics is moral. Political figures and movements always make policy recommendations claiming they are the right things to do. No political figure ever says, do what I say because it's wrong! Or because it doesn't matter! Some moral principles or other lie behind every political policy agenda.

Two Moral Framing Systems in Politics
Conservatives have figured out their moral basis and you see it on Wall Street: It includes: The primacy of self-interest. Individual responsibility, but not social responsibility. Hierarchical authority based on wealth or other forms of power. A moral hierarchy of who is "deserving," defined by success. And the highest principle is the primacy of this moral system itself, which goes beyond Wall Street and the economy to other arenas: family life, social life, religion, foreign policy, and especially government. Conservative "democracy" is seen as a system of governance and elections that fits this model.
Though OWS concerns go well beyond financial issues, your target is right: the application of these principles in Wall Street is central, since that is where the money comes from for elections, for media, and for right-wing policy-making institutions of all sorts on all issues.

The alternative view of democracy is progressive: Democracy starts with citizens caring about one another and acting responsibly on that sense of care, taking responsibility both for oneself and for one's family, community, country, people in general, and the planet. The role of government is to protect and empower all citizens equally via The Public: public infrastructure, laws and enforcement, health, education, scientific research, protection, public lands, transportation, resources, art and culture, trade policies, safety nets, and on and on. Nobody makes it one their own. If you got wealthy, you depended on The Public, and you have a responsibility to contribute significantly to The Public so that others can benefit in the future. Moreover, the wealthy depend on those who work, and who deserve a fair return for their contribution to our national life. Corporations exist to make life better for most people. Their reason for existing is as public as it is private.

A disproportionate distribution of wealth robs most citizens of access to the resources controlled by the wealthy. Immense wealth is a thief. It takes resources from the rest of the population -- the best places to live, the best food, the best educations, the best health facilities, access to the best in nature and culture, the best professionals, and on and on. Resources are limited, and great wealth greatly limits access to resources for most people.

It appears to me that OWS has a progressive moral vision and view of democracy, and that what it is protesting is the disastrous effects that have come from operating with a conservative moral, economic, and political worldview. I see OWS as primarily a moral movement, seeking economic and political changes to carry out that moral movement -- whatever those particular changes might be.

A Moral Focus for Occupy Wall Street

I think it is a good thing that the occupation movement is not making specific policy demands. If it did, the movement would become about those demands. If the demands were not met, the movement would be seen as having failed.

It seems to me that the OWS movement is moral in nature, that occupiers want the country to change its moral focus. It is easy to find useful policies; hundreds have been suggested. It is harder to find a moral focus and stick to it. If the movement is to frame itself, it should be on the basis of its moral focus, not a particular agenda or list of policy demands. If the moral focus of America changes, new people will be elected and the policies will follow. Without a change of moral focus, the conservative
worldview that has brought us to the present disastrous and dangerous moment will continue to prevail.

**We Love America. We're Here to Fix It**
I see OWS as a patriotic movement, based on a deep and abiding love of country -- a patriotism that it is not just about the self-interests of individuals, but about what the country is and is to be. Do Americans care about other citizens, or mainly just about themselves? That's what love of America is about. I therefore think it is important to be positive, to be clear about loving America, seeing it in need of fixing, and not just being willing to fix it, but being willing to take to the streets to fix it. A populist movement starts with the people seeing that they are all in the same boat and being ready to come together to fix the leaks.

**Publicize the Public**
Tell the truth about The Public, that nobody makes it purely on their own without The Public, that is, without public infrastructure, the justice system, health, education, scientific research, protections of all sorts, public lands, transportation, resources, art and culture, trade policies, safety nets, ... That is a truth to be told day after day. It is an idea that must take hold in public discourse. It must go beyond what I and others have written about it and beyond what Elizabeth Warren has said in her famous video. The Public is not opposed to The Private. The Public is what makes The Private possible. And it is what makes freedom possible. Wall Street exists only through public support. It has a moral obligation to direct itself to public needs.

All OWS approaches to policy follow from such a moral focus. Here are a handful examples.

**Democracy should be about the 99%**
Money directs our politics. In a democracy, that must end. We need publicly supported elections, however that is to be arranged.

**Strong Wages Make a Strong America**
Middle-class wages have not gone up significantly in 30 years, and there is conservative pressure to lower them. But when most people get more money, they spend it and spur the economy, making the economy and the country stronger, as well as making their individual lives better. This truth needs to be central to public economic discourse.

**Global Citizenship**
America has been a moral beacon to the world. It can function as such only if it sets an example of what a nation should be.
Do we have to spend more on the military that all other nations combined? Do we really need hundreds of military bases abroad?

**Nature**
We are part of nature. Nature makes us, and all that we love, possible. Yet we are destroying Nature through global warming and other forms of ecological destruction, like fracking and deep-water drilling.

At a global scale, nature is systemic: its effects are neither local nor linear. Global warming is causing the ferocity of the monster storms, tornados, floods, blizzards, heat waves, and fires that have devastated huge areas of our country. The hotter the atmosphere, the more evaporated water and the more energy going into storms, tornados, and blizzards. Global warming cannot be shown to cause any particular storm, but when a storm system forms, global warming will ramp up the power of the storm and the amount of water it carries. In winter, evaporated water from the overly heated Pacific will go into the atmosphere, blow northeast over the arctic, and fall as record snows.

We depend on nature -- on clean air, water, food, and a livable climate. And we find beauty and grandeur in nature, and a sense of awe that makes life worth living. A love of country requires a love of nature. And a fair and thriving economy requires the preservation of nature as we have known it.

**Summary**
OWS is a moral and patriotic movement. It sees Democracy as flowing from citizens caring about one another as well as themselves, and acting with both personal and social responsibility. Democratic governance is about The Public, and the liberty that The Public provides for a thriving Private Sphere. From such a democracy flows fairness, which is incompatible with a hugely disproportionate distribution of wealth. And from the sense of care implicit in such a democracy flows a commitment to the preservation of nature.

From what I have seen of most members of OWS, your individual concerns all flow from one moral focus.

**Elections**
The Tea Party solidified the power of the conservative worldview via elections. OWS will have no long-term effect unless it too brings its moral focus to the 2012 elections. Insist on supporting candidates that have your overall moral views, no matter what the local issues are.

**A Warning**
This movement could be destroyed by negativity, by calls for revenge, by chaos, or by having nothing positive to say. Be positive about all things and state the moral basis of all suggestions. Positive and moral in calling for debt relief. Positive and moral in upholding laws, as they apply to finances. Positive and moral in calling for fairness in acquiring needed revenue. Positive and moral in calling for clean elections. To be effective, your movement must be seen by all of the 99% as positive and moral. To get positive press, you must stress the positive and the moral.

Remember: The Tea Party sees itself as stressing only individual responsibility. The Occupation Movement is stressing both individual and social responsibility.

I believe, and I think you believe, that most Americans care about their fellow citizens as well as themselves. Let’s find out! Shout your moral and patriotic views out loud, regularly. Put them on your signs. Repeat them to the media. Tweet them. And tell everyone you know to do the same. You have to use your own language with your own framing and you have to repeat it over and over for the ideas to sink in.

Occupy elections: voter registration drives, town hall meetings, talk radio airtime, party organizations, nomination campaigns, election campaigns, and voting booths.

Above all: Frame yourselves before others frame you.