Revisiting Fusionism: <Freedom> and <Order> in Contemporary Conservative Rhetoric

In American political discourse, ideographs serve as powerful abstract terms that function as rhetorical shorthand to represent shared cultural values that are widely accepted. Words like <freedom> and <order> function as ideographs and often appear in political arguments as terms that seem self-evident or obvious to justify policies, mobilize individuals, and shape political commentary. Off of the bat, these two terms might appear as complete opposites. Rhetorical appeals to <freedom> emphasize personal autonomy and individual rights, encouraging people to exercise personal choice without fear of governmental interference or arbitrary coercion, while appeals to <order> might suggest the need for authority, hierarchy, and social restraint. Despite this apparent tension, conservative thinkers from the mid-twentieth-century have argued that freedom and order must coexist in order to sustain a healthy political system. This suggests that <freedom> and <order> might not be opposites, instead they could just be opposite sides on the same coin. In “In Defense of Freedom,” Frank S. Meyer nurtured a philosophy called fusionism, which sought to fuse libertarian commitments with individual liberty with traditionalist commitments to moral order.

It is first important before going any further to describe the ideologies of “order” and “freedom.” Thinkers such as Friedrich Hayek argue that <freedom> depends on legal structure and framework where individuals can act freely in a system of general rules. In “The Road to Serfdom,” he argues that economic planning will eventually lead to totalitarianism and that freedom itself cannot be separated from free-market competition. He says, “The more the state plans, the more difficult planning becomes for the individual,” (76) and “the individual's system of ends should be supreme and not subject to any dictation by others” (102). To him, true

freedom means personal responsibility and the ability to act by way of one's own discretion, warning that sacrificing choice and liberty leads to servitude. He elaborates on <freedom> and competition and says that "the functioning of a competition not only requires adequate organization of certain institutions like money, markets, and channels of information–some of which can be adequately provided by private enterprise–but it depends, above all, on the existence of an appropriate legal system, a legal system designed both to preserve competition and to make it operate as beneficially as possible," (102). This understanding of personal liberty aligns with fusionist thought by suggesting that freedom is not the absence of order, rather something that exists within it.

On the other side of the coin, Richard M. Weaver's "Ideas have Consequences," describes <order> as a "metaphysical dream" (18) and as a structured, hierarchical arrangement of life, rooted in objective, transcendental truths rather than egalitarian or subjective desires. For him, society can only flourish coherently when it is positioned around truths that regulate individual will. He explains that order depends on objective truth and believes that modern chaos is a product of abandoning these universal standards, prioritizing order over absolute freedom, and urging a return to piety to sustain society. He warns that if we as a society deviate from this "grand sense of order" suggested by Western traditionalist values then "our intensities turn to senseless affection and drain us, or to hatreds and consume us," (31). Understanding Weaver's ideology of <order> suggests that individual freedom must operate within hierarchical structure and moral boundaries.

<Order> and <freedom> are both representational ideographs as defined by Ryan Neville-Shepard and Skye de Saint Felix in their article "There They Go Again." They say a representational ideograph "function[s] as a representation of the terms more typically

recognized as ideographs, acting as a synecdoche embodying “abstract ideas, such as life or liberty” (4). When observing ideographs, previous analysts tend to look for similar coherent clusters of ideas as defined by Michael McGee in Dana Cloud’s “The Rhetoric of <Family Values>,” as an “ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective belief with a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable,” (389). By using McGee’s method of analysis, <order> and <freedom> function strategically as flexible abstractions that invoke a cluster of ideas. For <order>, clusters of similar ideas may be <law>, <stability>, <safety>, and <security> into a morally apparent symbol and for <freedom>, <independence>, <self-defense>, <liberty>, and <protection> may be related. This analysis makes <order> and <freedom> seem self-evident and desirable without needing a clear definition offered to the audience. Because <order> and <freedom> are framed as obvious and their meaning intentionally vague, they are able to justify political decisions and institutional authority without needing an extensive argument. Using McGee’s method to analyze <order> and <freedom> shows how ideographs have the potential to direct public action towards certain legitimacies and be able to obscure others all the while appearing as universally positive.

Contemporary conservative rhetoric often continues to connect these two ideographs, though it frequently does so in a way that is different from Meyer’s original idea. Modern debates around the Second Amendment and gun ownership, for example, often position gun rights as both an expression of individual liberty and a product of constitutional authority. In the *Associated Press* article titled “Supreme Court Expands Gun Rights, With Nation Divided” by

Jessica Gresko, the Court's decision is mapped out not just as a victory for personal freedom, but also as an affirmation of the authority of the Supreme Court and the Constitution. Therefore, this argument then positions <freedom> within a more general structure of legal and constitutional <order>. Through analyzing this argument through an ideographical lens, it is possible then to see how modern conservative rhetoric continues to connect these two appeals today. While earlier thinkers such as Richard M. Weaver grounded <order> in a metaphysical dream, hierarchy, and shared objective truth, contemporary discourse often repositions that authority within constitutional law. Because <order> functions as a flexible ideograph that different conservative groups define in different ways i.e. social hierarchy, constitutional authority, or legal enforcement, mid-century fusionism could possibly remain rhetorically viable today, but it does not always successfully pacify <freedom> and <order> in conservative discourse today.

The AP News article outlines the Supreme Court ruling that expanded gun ownership by giving Americans the right to openly carry firearms in public for self-defense. Supporters for the ruling have often weaponized the Constitution to justify the expansion of gun rights suggesting that it is a right and individual liberty that is protected under the Second Amendment and therefore cannot be taken away. This article fuses the ideographical ideas of <order> and <freedom> and shows how they can have a symbiotic relationship while appearing as poles apart. The article appeals to Hayek's <freedom> by suggesting that it is an individual right to carry firearms protected under the Constitution. It shows that one is entitled to open carry a firearm in the name of self-defense and personal liberty. On the other hand, the article appeals to Weaver's idea of <order> by showing the Supreme Court's authority to make society-effecting decisions that warrant what the individual is allowed to do. Similarly, it shows Constitutional hierarchy and Second-Amendment protection, implying that certain rights can be granted under

the legal structure and cannot be taken away. The key argument that is presented by the article, with regards to the ideologies discussed, is that <freedom> itself exists solely because constitutional <order> protects it.

Given the example of expanding gun ownership rights in the United States with regards to <freedom> and <order>, the concept of conservative fusionism can be considered as still viable today but its viability depends on its adaptation to new circumstances. Such adaptations need to yield to recent situations that have irrevocably altered modern society i.e. pandemic isolation, economic stagnation, persistent racial tensions, and yes, gun ownership. These present-day circumstances mentioned weaken the common bonds that once held conservatives and their shared beliefs together in midcentury. Yes, fusionism is still feasible in modern-day conservatism, as the synthesis of individual liberty and moral virtue are both essential to maximize human experience, but it's going to be a revitalized version of fusionism that is going to bring current conservatives back together. Meyer's concept of fusionism *worked* for his audience and with reference to his circumstances by bridging the gap between those that prioritized virtue and those that prioritized freedom to combat the post-New Deal "Liberal Establishment" and the Cold War threat of Soviet Communism. His fusionism *worked* because it provided a unifying intellectual framework that animated the post-war American Conservative movement. Meyer resolves the tension between <freedom> and <order> by arguing that individuals must be free in order to choose moral virtue, meaning that political freedom becomes a necessary condition for achieving moral order. This idea of New Fusionism needs to do the same thing. In the current political context, a new rhetorical fusion for contemporary conservatives would link <freedom> not just to moral virtue, as Meyer proposed, but to constitutional legitimacy, where individual rights are justified through legal authority. This new

fusionism appears in the AP News article as the right to bear arms is positioned as both an expression of personal liberty and a product of constitutional <order>, implying that <freedom> is most persuasive when it is presented as protected by law.

Even some contemporary political theorists are led to believe that fusionism today is still possible. In “We Need a New Fusionism,” Lee Edwards argues that contemporary conservatives, just like America, have been “split between divergent brands that range from traditional and social conservatism and libertarian and constitutional conservatism.” He claims that the conservative movement historically succeeded when these two groups worked together under fusionism. For example, he references supply-side economics and the ending of the Cold War through bargaining and not battle during the Reagan years. Edwards explains that Meyer’s core argument was that “the freedom of the person [is] the central and primary end of political society.” Edwards, however, argues that modern political crises i.e. the coronavirus pandemic, the struggling economy, and challenges faced by persisting racism have weakened that bond. As a result of these divisions, he claims that a “New Fusionism" would reunite these divided conservative groups around their shared principles such as a constitutional government, Western values, and free markets. To Edwards, the conservative movement is at its strongest when it practices fusionism. It is strongest when it builds up alliances between its differing sides rather than allowing those sides to compete against one another.

Ultimately, the relationship between <order> and <freedom> in conservative rhetorical discourse has not completely faded away, but it has been revitalized to fit new political conditions. Meyer argues in “In Defense of Freedom” that <freedom> and <order> are not entirely opposing, but mutually dependent. Present-day arguments such as the AP News article continue the ideas of fusionism, but redefine the relationship by grounding individual <freedom>

in constitutional <order>, framing liberty as protected by legal authority. However, because both <freedom> and <order> function as flexible, abstract ideographs with vague meanings across conservative groups, this fusion is not entirely persuasive. Fusionism remains viable today, yes, but only when a specific understanding of freedom is successfully aligned with compatible forms of order for a specific audience.

Citations

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