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Selling the Free Market: The Rhetoric of Economic Correctness

James Arnt Aune
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The free-market economy has made great strides in recent years, and according to Aune, associate professor in the Department of Speech Communications at The Pennsylvania State University, rhetoric has been responsible for a large part of its success. Conservative rhetoric, funded by the various conservative organizations, research facilities, and endowments at colleges and universities, says Aune, has been pleading the case of an economic theory that has led to airline deregulation (and the resultant bad food, overcrowding, and horrendous delays the public now experiences); a drastic increase in the income gap among Americans; and a drive to privatize many public or government services, among them prisons, schools, and Social Security.

After positing that the American Right is doing a better job of using rhetoric than the left, Aune examines some of the prominent figures in economic rhetoric as well as offers a look at historians' classification of the Right into various categories: traditionalists (also called paleocons), libertarians, fusionists, and neoconservatives. Each of these groups has its own rhetoric and approach to the advancement of conservative values, and Aune reviews them as well as discusses "free-market rhetoric."

Despite the weightiness of the subject, Aune's writing keeps the text flowing, particularly in the discussion about Ayn Rand and her devotees and in his evaluation of Rothbard, Murray, and Herrnstein. Particularly biting is his witty evaluation of the latter two's work: "They want to restore local neighborhoods, where the stupid can find a place to make a contribution to society (I propose Murray's neighborhood)." Or, "Murray's great contribution to libertarian rhetoric is to find a set of appeals sufficiently coded that they can appeal simultaneously to white racists, recreational drug users, Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, and—well—the stupid."

Aune, also the author of Rhetoric and Marxism, questions an economic theory that can dismiss the need for social services as an invasion of individuals' rights and that regards the starvation of the handicapped as more moral than compelling someone to feed them.

A look at Reagan's rhetorical grasp of the Presidency, various modern "conspiracy theories," Newt Gingrich, Alvin Toffler's Third Wave, and the cyberpunk of Bruce Sterling and William Gibson bring the book to its conclusion; an appendix on Dierdre McCloskey's rhetoric of economics, along with ample footnotes and an extensive list of references, round out the supporting materials.

MARLENE SATTER (January / February 2001)

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