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Metaphors We Think By: Conceptual Metaphors in the Architecture of Modern Ideologies (Liberalism, Marxism, Fascism)

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Number telp:

Abstract

This study offers a comparative cognitive-linguistic analysis of the conceptual metaphors that constitute the foundational architecture of three dominant modern ideologies: Liberalism, Marxism, and Fascism. Moving beyond traditional political theory, the research adopts the theoretical framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980) and Critical Metaphor Analysis (Charteris-Black, 2004) to argue that these ideologies are not merely systems of ideas but are fundamentally built from coherent, pre-conscious networks of metaphors that structure political reality, reasoning, and action. The methodology involves a systematic, three-phased analysis of canonical ideological texts: identification of linguistic metaphors, thematic synthesis into conceptual frameworks, and a comparative critical explanation.

The findings reveal three distinct metaphorical architectures: (1) Liberalism is structured by mechanistic and market-based metaphors (e.g., society as a self-regulating machine, history as a linear journey of progress); (2) Marxism is built upon an architectural-geological-war triad (e.g., base/superstructure, class struggle as the engine of history); and (3) Fascism is centered on the organic-purification framework (e.g., the nation as a pure biological body requiring cleansing from pathogens). Crucially, the comparative analysis demonstrates that these systems are incommensurable; they employ shared source domains (e.g., BODY, JOURNEY, WAR) to construct mutually exclusive political ontologies, explaining the depth of ideological conflict. Furthermore, the study explicitly theorizes the critical link from metaphor to political praxis, showing how these cognitive models logically justify specific actions—from laissez-faire policy and revolutionary violence to genocidal purification.

The study concludes that understanding modern political ideologies necessitates an examination of their deep metaphorical foundations. By making these constitutive architectures visible, the research provides a novel meta-understanding of political thought and underscores the critical importance of metaphorical literacy in political discourse. It contributes to transdisciplinary scholarship bridging cognitive science, linguistics, and political theory, highlighting how the metaphors we are compelled to think by ultimately shape the world we build and the actions we sanction.



Keywords Conceptual Metaphor, Ideology, Cognitive Linguistics, Critical Metaphor
Analysis, Liberalism, Marxism, Fascism, Political Discourse, Rhetoric.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The landscape of modern political thought has been predominantly mapped by the doctrines of Liberalism, Marxism, and Fascism. Traditional historiographical and philosophical analyses have dissected these ideologies through their economic postulates, historical claims, and sociological visions. However, such analyses often overlook a fundamental dimension of their construction and persuasive power: their deep reliance on conceptual metaphor. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) revolutionized cognitive science by asserting that "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action," they provided a crucial lens for understanding abstract systems. Ideologies, as complex systems for interpreting the world, are fundamentally built upon and communicated through networks of conceptual metaphors that structure political reality in intuitive, and often unexamined, ways.

These metaphors—such as the state-as-body (with its "head of state," "healthy society," or "social ills"), society-as-building (requiring "foundations," "support," or facing "collapse"), history-as-journey (toward "progress," "destiny," or through "revolutionary paths")—are not mere rhetorical flourishes. They constitute the cognitive architecture that allows abstract ideas like "freedom," "class struggle," or "national purity" to be comprehended, experienced, and mobilized. The "Market," the "Dialectic," and the "Organism" are not just concepts but metaphorical source domains that shape policy, justify action, and define in-groups and out-groups. Consequently, a rigorous analysis of the conceptual metaphors underpinning these competing ideologies is not a supplementary exercise in rhetoric but a critical inquiry into the very foundations of modern political imagination and its discursive enforcement. This study argues that a comparative cognitive-linguistic analysis reveals not only the internal coherence of each ideology but also the points of incommensurability and conflict between their worldviews, offering a novel explanation for the tenacity and emotional resonance of political belief systems.

Research intersecting conceptual metaphor theory and political discourse is rich, yet a systematic comparative analysis of the foundational metaphors of the three major modern ideologies remains underexplored. Previous studies can be categorized into three streams. First, Theoretical Foundations and Early Applications. The seminal work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and later Lakoff's political applications (e.g., *Moral Politics*, 1996, which explores the "Nation as Family" metaphor in US conservatism and liberalism) established the paradigm. This

demonstrated how metaphor structures moral and political reasoning. Charteris-Black (2004, 2011) extended this into Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), combining cognitive linguistics with critical discourse analysis to uncover ideological patterning in political texts. Musolff's (2004, 2016) extensive work on the "body politic" metaphor in European discourse provides a historical and cross-linguistic model for tracing the life of a single powerful metaphor.

Second, Ideology-Specific Metaphor Analyses. Numerous studies have examined metaphors within specific ideological traditions. For Liberalism, scholars have analyzed the MARKET metaphors (e.g., "free market," "invisible hand"), mechanistic metaphors of the state as a "machine" or "clock," and the JOURNEY metaphors of "progress" and "development" (McCloskey, 1998; Boers, 1999). For Marxism, the dominant focus has been on its ARCHITECTURAL and GEOLOGICAL metaphors ("base/superstructure," "erosion of capitalism," "seismic shifts"), its ORGANIC metaphors of "growth" and "decay," and its potent metaphors of struggle/war ("class war," "vanguard," "revolutionary front") (Eagleton, 1991; Jameson, 2008). For Fascism, analyses have centered on BIOLOGICAL and ORGANIC metaphors ("national body," "parasitic elements," "purity of the Volk"), RELIGIOUS metaphors ("sacrifice," "redemption," "cult of the leader"), and ENGINEERING metaphors of "forging," "shaping," and "cleansing" (Koonz, 2003; Wodak & Richardson, 2013).

While these studies are invaluable, they exhibit significant gaps this paper aims to address. First, lack of systematic comparison. Most studies remain siloed within one ideological tradition. A parallel, structured comparison of the metaphorical source domains (e.g., How is the "body" metaphor employed differently in Liberal organicism, Marxist analysis of a "sick" system, and Fascist obsession with a "pure" racial body?) is largely absent.

Second, focus on surface rhetoric vs. conceptual architecture. Many discourse-analytical studies catalog metaphors as persuasive devices without fully excavating how they form coherent, interdependent systems that constitute the ideology's cognitive blueprint.

Third, under-theorized link to action. The connection between deep conceptual metaphors and the justification of concrete political action (e.g., laissez-faire policy, revolutionary violence, genocidal purification) requires further theoretical elaboration within this framework.

This study positions itself to fill these gaps. It moves beyond cataloging metaphors within ideologies to analyzing them as the constitutive elements of ideological architecture. By placing Liberalism, Marxism, and Fascism in a comparative cognitive-linguistic framework, it seeks to provide a novel meta-understanding of how modern political thought has been built, communicated, and contested through the metaphors we are compelled to think by. This approach aligns with the transdisciplinary turn in humanities research, bridging cognitive science, political

theory, linguistics, and critical discourse studies—a synergy highly valued in top-tier Scopus-indexed journals.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Cognitive-Linguistic Paradigm: Metaphor as Thought

The departure point for any contemporary analysis of conceptual metaphor is the seminal work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Their cognitive theory challenged the classical view of metaphor as merely ornamental language, positing instead that metaphorical mappings from concrete source domains to abstract target domains are fundamental to human cognition. This paradigm shift established that our conceptual system is largely metaphorical, shaping not only how we speak but also how we think and act. Lakoff later extended this framework explicitly into the political sphere with *Moral Politics* (1996), arguing that contemporary American politics is structured by competing models of the family as a metaphor for the nation (the Nurturant Parent model for liberalism vs. the Strict Father model for conservatism). This work provided the crucial link between deep cognitive models and surface political values.

Building on this foundation, scholars have developed more nuanced methodologies for analyzing metaphor in discourse. Charteris-Black's (2004, 2011) *Critical Metaphor Analysis* (CMA) is particularly salient, as it integrates cognitive linguistics with the ideological concerns of *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA). CMA provides a three-stage model (metaphor identification, interpretation, and explanation) to systematically uncover how metaphors serve ideological functions, legitimize power, and persuade audiences. Complementarily, Musolff's (2004, 2016) historical-discourse approach has meticulously traced the evolution and cultural variation of key political metaphors, most notably the *BODY POLITIC*. His work demonstrates how such root metaphors are not static but are "scenario"-based, adaptable to different historical and political contexts, making them durable yet flexible tools for ideological expression.

2.2 Metaphor in the Fabric of Specific Ideologies

A substantial body of research has applied these theoretical lenses to dissect the metaphorical architecture of individual ideologies, providing the essential groundwork for any comparative endeavor.

Liberalism: The literature highlights Liberalism's reliance on metaphors drawn from mechanics, natural philosophy, and commerce. Scholars like McCloskey (1998) and Boers (1999) have detailed the pervasiveness of *MARKET* metaphors (the "invisible hand," "market forces," "human capital"), which frame social relations as exchanges and value as price. Simultaneously,

mechanistic metaphors portray society and the state as a well-designed "machine" or "clockwork," emphasizing balance, predictable laws, and minimal intervention. The JOURNEY metaphor, with its trajectory toward "progress," "development," and "enlightenment," further undergirds the liberal narrative of history as linear improvement, often intertwined with organic metaphors of societal "growth."

Marxism: Analysis of Marxist discourse, as seen in the work of Eagleton (1991) and Jameson (2008), reveals a distinct constellation of metaphors. The most famous is the ARCHITECTURAL metaphor of "base and superstructure," which spatializes the relationship between economics and culture. This is frequently supplemented by GEOLOGICAL metaphors ("seismic shifts," "erosion," "fault lines") to describe historical change and societal instability. Crucially, Marxism is fundamentally structured by metaphors of CONFLICT and WAR: "class struggle," "the vanguard," "revolutionary front," and "ideological combat." These are often coupled with ORGANIC metaphors of capitalism's inevitable "decay" and the "birth pangs" of a new society, framing history as a natural, yet violent, organic process.

Fascism: Studies of fascist discourse, such as those by Koonz (2003) and Wodak & Richardson (2013), identify a core reliance on BIOLOGICAL and HYGIENIC metaphors. The nation is conceptualized as a pure, unified "organism" or "body" (the *Volkskörper*), threatened by "parasites," "viruses," or "poison" (representing racial or ideological others). This necessitates metaphors of "cleansing," "purification," and "surgery." Furthermore, fascism heavily employs RELIGIOUS metaphors ("sacred soil," "martyrdom," "redemption," "cult of the leader") to sacralize politics and ENGINEERING metaphors ("forging the new man," "shaping the will," "building the empire") that emphasize totalitarian control and creation.

3. METHODS

This study employs a systematic, comparative analysis to identify, analyze, and synthesize the foundational conceptual metaphors within the canonical texts of Liberalism, Marxism, and Fascism. The method is designed to move beyond descriptive cataloguing toward a structured examination of metaphors as architectural systems, directly addressing the identified research gaps.

Relevant primary texts were selected to form a controlled, ideologically representative corpus. For Liberalism, core texts include John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1689), Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859). For Marxism, the corpus comprises Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx's *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), and Engels' *Anti-Dühring*

(1878). For Fascism, key doctrinal texts include Benito Mussolini and Giovanni Gentile's *The Doctrine of Fascism* (1932), Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (1925), and Alfred Rosenberg's *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* (1930).

The analytical procedure was conducted in three sequential, interconnected phases, guided by the principles of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA):

First, identification phase. A systematic close reading of each corpus was performed to identify linguistic metaphors. This involved tagging lexical units where a source-domain term (from concrete fields like biology, mechanics, architecture, or warfare) is used to describe a target-domain concept in politics, society, or history. Keywords and phrases such as "invisible hand," "base and superstructure," "body politic," "class struggle," "national purification," and "historical destiny" were flagged as potential metaphor indicators. These instances were recorded and provisionally categorized into conceptual metaphor families (e.g., SOCIETY IS A MACHINE, HISTORY IS A JOURNEY, THE STATE IS A BODY).

Second, interpretation and synthesis phase. The identified linguistic metaphors were interpreted to reconstruct the underlying conceptual mappings defining each ideology. This phase involved thematic analysis to synthesize the scattered linguistic evidence into coherent conceptual frameworks. The findings were categorized into key thematic domains: Mechanistic & Market Frameworks (for Liberalism), Architectural & Conflict Frameworks (for Marxism), and Organic & Purification Frameworks (for Fascism). This synthesis aimed to reveal not just individual metaphors, but their interdependencies and how they combine to form a distinctive cognitive "blueprint" for each ideology.

Third, comparative and critical explanation phase. In this final phase, a structured comparative analysis was conducted to juxtapose the three ideological frameworks. The explanatory power of CMA was employed to critically interrogate the ideological function and practical implications of each metaphorical system. This involved analyzing how specific conceptual mappings:

- Structure coherence and incommensurability: Comparing how shared source domains (e.g., BODY, JOURNEY) are mapped to radically different political targets, explaining points of deep ideological conflict.
- Link to political praxis: Explicitly tracing the logical pathway from root metaphors to the justification of concrete political action and policy, such as laissez-faire economics, revolutionary violence, or genocidal purification.
- Address challenges: Critically engaging with the ethical and epistemological implications of these metaphorical architectures, such as how they define in-groups/out-groups,

legitimize power, and constrain political imagination.

This systematic, three-phased method ensures a comprehensive and replicable analysis. It bridges the gap between surface-level rhetoric and deep cognitive structure, providing a novel meta-understanding of how modern political thought is fundamentally constructed and contested through conceptual metaphor. The comparative focus directly addresses the lack of systematic comparison in prior studies, while the critical explanation phase strengthens the under-theorized link between metaphor and political action.

4. RESULTS

The systematic analysis of the primary texts yielded three core findings, corresponding to the three methodological phases. These results demonstrate the distinct metaphorical architecture of each ideology, their points of profound incommensurability, and the logical pathways from metaphor to political action.

First, identified Conceptual Metaphor Frameworks. The thematic analysis revealed that each ideology is structured by a dominant, internally coherent metaphorical framework that dictates its core logic. Liberalism: The Framework of the Self-Regulating Mechanism. The liberal corpus is governed by metaphors drawn from Newtonian mechanics and market exchange. Society is conceptualized as a complex machine (e.g., Smith's "great machine") operating according to natural laws. Human interactions are framed through commercial transaction ("invisible hand," "market forces," "human capital"). History is a linear JOURNEY of "progress" and "improvement." The STATE-AS-BODY metaphor is subordinated to this mechanistic view, depicting a limited government that must not "over-engineer" the natural system, intervening only to cure "ills" that obstruct its spontaneous function.

Marxism: The Framework of Structural Conflict and Organic Transformation. Marxist discourse is built upon an ARCHITECTURAL-GEOLOGICAL-WAR triad. The foundational metaphor is ARCHITECTURAL: society is an edifice with an economic "base" determining the ideological "superstructure." Historical change is rendered through GEOLOGICAL forces: "erosion," "seismic shifts," and "fault lines" within this structure. This deterministic process, however, requires an agent, supplied by the pervasive CONFLICT/WAR metaphor: "class struggle," "vanguard," and "revolutionary front." These metaphors fuse into an ORGANIC narrative of the "birth pangs" of a new society from the "decaying" body of the old.

Fascism: The Framework of Organic Purity and Purifying Will. Fascist ideology is monolithic, centered on the metaphor of THE NATION AS A BIOLOGICAL ORGANISM (Volkskörper). This organism is defined by its purity of essence (blood, spirit, will). This central metaphor immediately

generates a network of subsidiary ones: threats are PATHOGENS ("parasites," "viruses"); the solution is HYGIENIC/SURGICAL ("cleansing," "purification," "excision"); the process is ENGINEERING/SCULPTING ("forging the new man," "shaping the will"); and the mission is a sacred JOURNEY of "destiny," "rebirth," and "redemption," led by the ARCHITECT-Leader.

Second, comparative Juxtaposition: Incommensurable Mappings of Shared Domains. The analysis starkly revealed that shared metaphorical source domains are mapped onto antithetical political realities, creating cognitive barriers between ideologies.

Conceptual Domain	Liberalism	Marxism	Fascism
BODY / ORGANISM	A self-regulating system whose health stems from the free motion of its parts. Illness is obstruction .	A sick system (capitalism) with an inherent disease (exploitation). Health requires radical surgery (revolution).	A pure, homogeneous organism . Health is racial-spiritual purity . Illness is contamination by foreign elements.
JOURNEY	A linear, progressive path toward universal betterment (prosperity, freedom).	A dialectical, deterministic path through historical stages, propelled by conflict.	A mythical, cyclical journey of decline and rebirth , requiring purifying violence to return to glory.
STRUGGLE / WAR	Largely absent or metaphorical (war on poverty). Competition is channeled into peaceful market exchange.	The central engine of history : a material, economic war between classes.	A permanent, spiritual-racial struggle for survival and dominance. War is a positive, purifying necessity.
ARCHITECTURE	Society has natural foundations (rights). The state is a minimal frame protecting them.	Base determines superstructure . Revolution demolishes and rebuilds the entire social edifice.	The Leader as sole Architect/Sculptor, forging the nation and the "new man" into a monolithic totality.

Third, Pathways to Political Praxis. The explanatory phase demonstrated a clear logical conduit from core metaphors to the justification of specific political actions.

- Liberalism: The MECHANISTIC-MARKET framework prescribes laissez-faire policies, deregulation, and free trade, as "tinkering" with the natural system is deemed harmful. Social welfare is often framed as addressing temporary "blockages."
- Marxism: The WAR metaphor, supported by the ARCHITECTURAL diagnosis, directly legitimizes revolutionary violence, the "dictatorship of the proletariat," and the suppression of opposing classes as acts in a necessary historical conflict.
- Fascism: The BIOLOGICAL-HYGIENIC framework dehumanizes out-groups, conceptually transforming them into pathogens. This provides the cognitive and moral basis for

policies from segregation and sterilization to genocide, framed as public health measures necessary for the survival of the national body. The ENGINEERING metaphor justifies totalitarian social control and indoctrination.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings confirm the central thesis that Liberalism, Marxism, and Fascism are not merely sets of ideas but are constituted by deep, pre-conscious metaphorical systems that function as cognitive architectures. This discussion elucidates the theoretical implications of these results, relating them back to the literature and articulating the study's contribution.

First, metaphors as constitutive architecture, not ornament. This study moves beyond the prevailing tendency in discourse analysis to treat metaphors as persuasive devices (Charteris-Black, 2011). Instead, it demonstrates they are generative. For example, Marxism's "base/superstructure" is not just a vivid image; it is a spatial-logical model that determines what counts as a primary cause (economics) and a secondary effect (culture), thereby organizing all subsequent analysis. Similarly, the fascist *Volkskörper* is not rhetorical flair but an ontological claim that defines the very nature of political community. This validates and extends Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) core premise into the realm of political ideology, showing that we do not just speak but reason politically through these embodied analogies.

Second, explaining incommensurability and conflict. The comparative table vividly illustrates why dialogue between these ideologies often reaches an impasse. Proponents are not simply debating policies; they are operating within different, mutually exclusive cognitive realities. A liberal arguing for individual rights (foundational "parts" of the machine) and a fascist arguing for the health of the organic whole are using the same source domain (BODY/SYSTEM) to reason toward diametrically opposed conclusions. This finding addresses the first identified research gap by providing a structured, cognitive-linguistic explanation for the fundamental conflicts of modern political history. The clash is not just over interests, but over the foundational metaphors that make interests intelligible.

Third, theorizing the metaphor-action link. This study's most significant theoretical contribution is explicitly forging the under-theorized link between conceptual metaphor and political action. As Musolff (2016) notes, metaphors frame scenarios. We have shown how these scenarios contain implicit directives. The MARKET scenario prescribes non-intervention. The WAR scenario prescribes mobilization and violence against an enemy. The PATHOGEN scenario prescribes eradication. This moves analysis from "what does this metaphor mean?" to "what does this metaphor compel?" It provides a mechanism to understand how dehumanizing language (e.g.,

"vermin," "parasite") is not merely hateful speech but a cognitive precondition for genocidal action—it re-categorizes the target from human to threat-to-life, making violence conceptually consistent with preserving the "health" of the body politic.

Fourth, limitations and future research. This study is intentionally focused on canonical theoretical texts to establish foundational architectures. Future research should apply this comparative framework to contemporary political discourse, examining how these deep metaphors are adapted in populist rhetoric, social media, or policy debates. Furthermore, a fruitful avenue would be to explore counter-metaphors or metaphorical innovation within dissident or hybrid ideologies. Finally, experimental research in political psychology could test the cognitive and persuasive power of these identified metaphorical frameworks on political belief and attitude formation.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has undertaken a systematic, comparative analysis of the conceptual metaphors underpinning Liberalism, Marxism, and Fascism. By applying the framework of Critical Metaphor Analysis to the canonical texts of these three ideologies, the research has moved beyond cataloguing rhetorical devices to reveal the deep cognitive architectures that constitute modern political thought. The central conclusion is that ideologies are, in essence, grand metaphorical constructs; they are not merely explained by metaphor but are fundamentally built from it.

The analysis confirmed that each ideology operates within a distinct and internally coherent metaphorical system. Liberalism is structured by the mechanistic and market-based metaphors of the self-regulating system, framing society as a natural order progressing on a linear journey. Marxism is architected through a triad of structural, geological, and conflict metaphors, portraying history as a deterministic yet violent process of demolition and rebirth. Fascism is monolithic, founded on the organic metaphor of the pure national body, which necessitates a perpetual campaign of hygienic purification and totalitarian engineering led by a predestined architect.

More significantly, the comparative juxtaposition demonstrated that these metaphorical systems are incommensurable. They employ shared source domains—such as the body, the journey, or war—to construct radically different, often mutually exclusive, political realities. This provides a profound explanation for the intractable nature of ideological conflict: disputants are not simply arguing over facts or values but are reasoning from within incompatible cognitive frames that define the very nature of society, history, and community.

Furthermore, this study has made a pivotal theoretical contribution by explicitly theorizing the link between conceptual metaphor and political praxis. It has shown that metaphors are not

inert figures of speech but are generative and prescriptive. They contain within their logic implicit directives for action: the market metaphor demands laissez-faire; the war metaphor justifies revolutionary violence; the pathogen metaphor authorizes eradication. By tracing this pathway, the research illuminates how dehumanizing language can act as a cognitive precondition for atrocity, reframing moral questions into matters of systemic mechanics, historical necessity, or biological survival.

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