
Misunderstanding in International Relations

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Since I agree with those who insist that social science is not only a science but also an art, I start my paper not with facts and concepts but with two metaphorical stories. These stories will point, symbolically, in the direction of those facts and issues which I later discuss conceptually.

The first story: A friend is visiting your city for the first time and he wants to gain a general view of the city. You take him first to the north end where there is a tall tower with a view commanding the whole area. Then you take him to a similar spot at the south end. At that point your friend exclaims with great amazement, "How very strange! The city looks quite different

from here!" Now, what is your reaction? Something of shock, for you rightly assume that every normal adult understands that things in physical space look different from differing points of view. You probably conclude that your friend is, to say the least, a bit unbalanced and in need of psychiatric attention.

Now, the really strange thing is that what every normal person understands by himself as far as things in *physical* space are concerned, most people do not understand, and even do not want to understand, as far as phenomena in *social* space are concerned. And any attempt to explain the relativity of social perspectives, and its full implications, usually meets with strong psychological resistance.

The second story: Here we approach the core of our problem. Assume that, pointing to a desk, I should say, "This is a chair," and in spite of all attempts on your part to correct me, I still insist it is a chair. You determine that I do know the English meaning for desk and chair. You prove my eyesight is not faulty. Still I insist. Now further assume that it is of utmost importance to you, both in terms of your own personal welfare and your moral values, to maintain for yourself and others that this is a desk, not a chair. Thus, my insistence to the contrary would threaten your whole external and inner security system. How then will you react to my insistence? You will probably contend that I am insane and suffer from hallucinations or that I am a dangerous and subversive person—in either case needing to be locked up; or being yourself a "tolerant" person you decide that, at the very least, I am a "queer" person and am to be avoided.

Does this story seem to you pointless? People, by and large, do agree as to what is a desk and what a chair; what a blackboard or a window, a pipe or a cigarette. So long as *physical* objects are concerned, we agree, but if we turn from physical objects to *social* facts then our story becomes pertinent and very realistic—in symbolic terms. For what to members of the one ethnic group looks like "aggression," to members of another group looks like "defense" or "revolt"; what to the one group looks like "liberation," to the other group looks like "enslavement"; what to the one group looks like "reeducation," to the other group looks like "persecution"; what to the one group looks like "dictatorship," to the other group looks like "true democracy"; what to the one group looks

like a "hero," to another group looks like a "criminal"—the list could be continued endlessly. The real problem is, why do people of different cultural and, particularly, national backgrounds see the social world in entirely different ways?

Before I answer this question by translating the metaphorical stories into the language of facts and concepts, two prefacing points are pertinent.

First, most of what is to be said in discussing the social psychology of misunderstandings in international relations applies also, with some slight modifications, to other intercultural relations; and some apply as well to all human relations.

Second, I refrain from discussing at this time those misunderstandings which have their roots in differences of ideologies which are not primarily culturally conditioned. I am, of course, fully aware that the disentanglement of nationalistic ideologies on the one hand, and non-nationalistic factors in ideologies on the other hand, is of utmost importance for a comprehensive understanding of certain basic issues of our age. What relationship, for instance, obtains between nationalistic or even racial factors, on the one hand, and communist-ideological factors, on the other hand, in the present revolutionary movements in Asia?

I proceed now to discuss first what might be called the two basic "dynamic systems" which are at the bottom of intercultural and international misunderstandings. These two dynamic systems are not the only ones which produce misunderstandings, but I am inclined to believe that they are two of the most important. And second, I discuss two types of nationalism, the *conscious* and the *unconscious*, which distinction is, in my opinion, also of crucial importance for an understanding of the whole problem.

The first of the two dynamic systems which are causing misunderstandings in international relations is related to a certain definite interdependence between culture, emotions, perceptions, and again emotions; the second dynamic system is related to what I called recently the limits of insight.

CULTURE, EMOTIONS, PERCEPTIONS, EMOTIONS

Cultural background is among the major factors which influence how we feel about things, that is, about the various aspects and contents of our immediate experience. The way we feel about

things—our likes and dislikes, our hopes and our fears, and so on— influences not only our motives, ideas, and actions, but our perceptions as well. This means that the way we perceive the world, what we see and to what we are blinded, what we emphasize and what we neglect, and a host of valences and characteristics of the perceptual world, are the expressions, projections, manifestations of our emotions. The scientific realization that our emotions significantly determine and thus distort our perceptions seems to be comparatively new, and is not yet fully understood in its far-reaching theoretical and practical implications.

Not only do our emotions influence our perceptions but, in turn, our perceptions evoke our emotions. We are confronted here with one of those numerous vicious circles operating frequently in human affairs. In consequence of this interdependence, not only do our emotions, culturally conditioned as they are, influence the organization of our perceptions but in turn our thus emotionally conditioned perceptions influence certain of our emotional reactions.

Of particular importance in this context is the fact that the law of the emotional, and thus indirectly cultural, conditioning of our perceptions and conceptions applies, of course, also to our perceptions and conceptions about other people and about ourselves. Hence, to limit our discussion here to the collective level only, and using an example, being a Frenchman means, among other things, having certain definite, collectively distorted perceptions and conceptions about, let us say, Englishmen on the one hand, and Frenchmen themselves, on the other, which distorted images, in turn, evoke certain specific emotional reactions.

As a rule, we are completely unaware of the silent organization of our perceptions (and conceptions) by our culturally conditioned emotions, and of the far-reaching implications of this state of affairs. Instead, we believe that we simply see things "as they really are." It is even fair to say that the culturally conditioned organization of our emotions and thus also of our perceptions is among those mechanisms which are the most hidden from our explicit awareness. (Particularly naive in this respect are the Marxians: they see that our "consciousness" is determined by the socio-economic system, but are altogether blinded to the more deep-seated fact that it is determined by our culture.)

If, therefore, members of two groups influenced by two different cultures meet, both, by and large, take it for granted that they themselves see the things, including themselves and each other, "as they really are." When they find, as they are bound to find, that others see things differently, both reach the conclusion that it is the other fellow who is unable to see the things "as they really are" and who has distorted conceptions about himself as well as about others.

The final step, which, in a way, closes the cycle of the intercultural misunderstandings (and irritations), consists in developing various defense mechanisms which serve the purpose of maintaining the belief in the validity of our own perception of reality by insisting and "proving" that something, intellectually or morally or both, is wrong with the other's. In order to prove that we are right and true and even sane, we have to prove that others are wrong and false, if not outright insane.

The intensity and amount of misunderstandings (and irritations) which will actually develop in this situation will depend, among other things, on the degree of the incompatibility of the respective cultural patterns; on the underlying ecological configuration; and on the distribution of power among the groups which are irritating each other.

Let us now turn to the second dynamic system.

LIMITS OF INSIGHT

We can, of course, communicate adequately only with those people whose symbols, that is, whose "language," in the broadest meaning of this term, we understand.

It is necessary to distinguish for this problem four types of symbols: first, those symbols we are able to identify as symbols and whose meaning we understand—for instance, a foreign language we speak; second, those we are able to identify as symbols the meaning of which we do not understand, yet are fully aware of our lack of understanding—for instance, a foreign language we do not speak; third, those we fail to identify as symbols, thus not understanding that we do not understand—for instance, not understanding that certain districts have a certain symbolical prestige for the members of another group; and fourth, those we are able to identify as symbols but

misinterpret as to their real meaning—for instance, misunderstanding of the meaning of certain religious symbols for those who share another creed.

The last two forms are the sources of the most important misunderstandings in intercultural and international relations. Not to understand is a frustrating experience, especially if we cannot help being in contact with those whom we do not understand and with whom we possibly have to cooperate; it leads to disappointments when the false expectations are disproved by the experience.

This being the case, it is inevitable that between members of different cultural groups who have different symbols expressing different meanings, certain peculiar forms of nonunderstanding and misunderstanding are likely to develop in addition to those which are operating even among the members of the same cultural (national) group. This state of affairs is aggravated by the fact that, in order to overcome their perplexity, people who are confronted by disagreements arising from misunderstandings tend to develop certain forms of pseudo-understanding in order to maintain the belief that it is the others and not they themselves (or both) who are responsible for all those disagreements, irritations, and disappointments.

Hence, again, the vicious circle is closed: differences in the systems of symbols lead to nonunderstanding and misunderstanding; nonunderstanding and misunderstanding lead to irritations; these, in turn, evoke defense mechanisms which serve the purpose of maintaining the belief that "we are right" and "they are wrong."

In approaching the same problem of misunderstandings in international relations from a somewhat different angle, I shall discuss now two types of nationalism, namely, the conscious and the unconscious, a distinction which, as already mentioned, is of great importance for an understanding of certain misunderstandings in international relations.

We are dealing with a *conscious* type of nationalism if members of a national group profess and emphasize in an open way certain particular national ideals, if they strive consciously and overtly toward certain particular national goals, at the same time rejecting in a more or less aggressive way the values, ideals, symbols, and goals of other national groups.

If, on the other hand, members of a national group are so deeply involved in a set of nationally determined assumptions, interpretations, conceptions that, even though not expressing in an articulate way any particular beliefs and ideals, they see in fact and judge everything from their own national point of view, then we are dealing with an *unconscious* type of nationalism.

The conscious nationalist, if he fights, fights in concrete terms and with full awareness—for America, or for France, or for Japan, or for whatever country. The unconscious nationalist, if he fights, fights always in the abstract for “humanity,” or “justice,” or “freedom,” and remains completely blinded to the fact that the way he defines these ideas and ideals is determined by his unconscious nationalistic frame of reference.

To put it another way, the conscious nationalist *is* a nationalist and *knows* that he is a nationalist. The unconscious nationalist is also a nationalist, but he either does not know it, or denies it, or even professes to be against nationalism. He is, in a way, the partner in crime of the notorious unprejudiced man in the domestic scene, and is among the most dangerous types of our age.¹

To understand the misunderstandings in international relations in the light of social psychology, we have, therefore, to analyze national attitudes, motives, conceptions, and actions on two levels. Ethnic and similar groups which, on the conscious level, believe themselves, or even appear, not to be nationalistic at all, nevertheless are often profoundly nationalistic as far as their unconscious presuppositions and motivations are concerned. This unconscious nationalism may manifest itself on the conscious level in the disguise of most perplexing and confusing transformations and rationalizations. So, for instance, “pacifism” may be sometimes only a rationalization of a nationalistic or even chauvinistic attitude of privileged ethnic groups which, being satisfied with the status quo, wish to enjoy it in peace. Or again, “internationalism” may be only a distorted manifestation of deep-seated, unconsciously nation-

¹ Ginsberg mentions that the famous German writer, G. E. Lessing, wrote in 1767 that the Germans seem not to have any national characteristics. Oddly enough, notes Ginsberg, David Hume, Lessing’s contemporary, made almost an identical statement about the English, which clearly shows how blinded we are to our own cultural characteristics (1948, p. 165).

alistic attitudes of certain ethnic or similar groups or subgroups which may hope, by participating in a pseudo-internationalistic movement, to improve the status of their ethnic group.

In spite of Marxian theories, unconscious nationalism is more deeply rooted in the personality structure than is class-consciousness. The Frenchman, for instance, might have some doubts as to whether he is a bourgeois or a proletarian; he might have his doubts as to whether he ought to be a democrat, a communist, or a fascist; but he cannot have any doubts as to whether he is (or whether he ought to be) a Frenchman. His nationality is so basically a part of his personality that it can never become a problem to him. He takes it for granted. A problem and dilemma can be only something which might be in doubt. Orthodox Marxism is mainly responsible for the confusion in the mind of many intellectuals concerning these obvious facts.

To repeat and summarize, the unconscious nationalist, not being aware of his own nationalistic frame of reference and its hidden presuppositions and motivations, believes that he is simply a human being, that he sees the facts as they really are, and as they are seen by all other reasonable people. He feels irritated that there are other ethnic groups who do not have the same objective and correct conceptions which he is happy to possess; he does not realize that he, in turn, irritates those others who are as sure as he is himself that not he but they themselves have objective and correct conceptions. Our unconscious nationalist then wonders how it happens that other people fail to realize their false ideas about things as they really are. Are these other people bad? Or are they stupid? Or are they misguided?

Now, some people might say that what I call unconscious nationalism is only another term for ethnocentrism. However, it seems to me that my concept emphasizes different aspects of the respective attitudes. First, the main point is not that the unconscious nationalist sees things from his own point of view but that he is not aware of it. Second, it is one thing to know about ethnocentrism in principle, and it is quite another story to know of what, concretely, our own ethnocentric attitudes, motives, assumptions, interpretations, and conceptions consist. And third, I insist upon the

importance of an analysis of the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious aspects of nationalism.

The question arises as to whether this present diagnosis refers to all interethnic relations or merely and specifically to the situation with which we are confronted in our age. My answer is that the described features of interethnic relations, and particularly of international relations, appear in our age in an aggravated form. There are several causes which are responsible for this aggravation. I wish, however, to mention briefly only two of them.

First (and this has been often said), the revolution of the technology of communication and transportation brought in its wake *physical* contacts among ethnic and similar groups which, psychologically, not only do not understand each other but, what is still more confusing, do not even understand that they do not understand each other. I hope and pray that we all shall begin as soon as possible to understand at least that we do not understand each other.

Second (and this point is often overlooked), social reality has become more and more complex, ambiguous, elusive, "invisible." In consequence, the social world we are confronted with looks more and more like an inkblot, like a Rorschach test which everybody can shape according to his own hopes, fears, hatreds, suspicions, and the like. And nobody knows in fact who is who and what is what. This, it seems to me, is one of the most fundamental, if not actually the most fundamental, dilemma of our age.

Now, what should we do about this situation, especially in terms of a sociology of education? My first, and very personal, answer is that I do not adhere to a radically pragmatic philosophy of life. This means that I would insist upon discussing this issue and upon maintaining, at least "esoterically," our intellectual integrity in a confused world even if I knew we could do little about this matter in terms of effective action. In contradiction to many colleagues, I am both for research and reflection without action and for action without research. However, I submit the following five practical suggestions:

First, it is a basic fact and fate of mankind that it is subdivided into ethnic and similar groups. This fact and fate must be

recognized and acknowledged. Men are not simply "human beings"—they are Americans, Frenchmen, Germans, Chinese, Japanese, Gentiles, Jews, Protestants, Catholics, and so on. This variety of cultural backgrounds is an essential and integral part of human personality. Hence, if we consider ourselves and each other simply as "human beings," then we either deceive or misunderstand ourselves and each other.

Second, since people *are* in fact nationalists, that is, since their perception of social reality is profoundly influenced by their cultural-national background, it would be much better if they would be at least aware of this state of affairs. What I actually suggest is that the best thing to do is to transform unconscious nationalists into conscious nationalists who are aware that they actually see things in the particular perspective of their national group. I repeat, not the conscious but the unconscious nationalist who strives for a "one world" defined in terms of his own nationalistic frame of reference to which he himself is blinded is the most dangerous fellow of our age.

Third, we should discard our naively optimistic presupposition that there is some kind of a "pre-established harmony" among various cultural patterns and among various ethnic groups. This presupposition—upon which, incidentally, the current trends in intercultural education are largely based—is obviously a counterpart of the presupposition of the classical (liberal) economists who assumed that there is a kind of pre-established harmony among various classes and between self-interests of the individuals and the interests of the society as a whole. Both presuppositions are entirely unrealistic. We should rather recognize the fact that tensions, antagonisms, conflicts, misunderstandings among various cultural groups are a normal state of affairs. This fact should not be camouflaged but should be taken into account in framing our ideas and actions.

Fourth, I also suggest that we cease lamenting and denouncing the "irrational factors" in personality and society. These so-called "irrational factors" are in the very core of our personality and many sacred meanings and values of life are rooted in them. A society without irrational beliefs is an unknown entity and in practical terms a complete impossibility.

Finally—and this is the most practical suggestion—I ur-

gently suggest that we should establish a committee, or a research group, in which social scientists (including psychologists, of course) of different cultural backgrounds would reach a solemn gentleman's agreement that, in a permissive atmosphere, they would tell each other frankly what they consider in each other to be a bias, false silent assumption, blind spot, culturally distorted interpretation, prejudice, and the like. For, obviously, not only the common man but also the social scientist is profoundly affected by his cultural background and his conditioned emotions in his perceptions and conceptions, in his research and theory. The illusion of a culturally independent objectivity is probably the most serious occupational disease of social scientists. I have not the slightest doubt that, if this suggestion would be accepted and translated into practice, what would come out of such an experiment would be of such a nature, as compared with it, the Kinsey Report would pale into insignificance.

Should I have the privilege of being invited to take part in such a discussion, in a permissive atmosphere and after a gentleman's agreement has been reached for being frank with one another, then, being of cautious nature, I would still ask for the special permission of being allowed to reveal only approximately fifty per cent of what I consider to be the truth.