

Abstract

Is American Foreign Policy Ethnocentric?
Notes Toward a Propositional Inventory

by

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Psychologists and political scientists have recently been pursuing an unusually valuable line of research, the possibility that foreign policy decision making may be systematically flawed by cognitive biases. If there should prove to be merit to this line of investigation, it might be of extraordinary practical benefit.

This paper discusses a set of issues concerning one set of biases ethnocentric biases which might be found in American foreign policy. It proposes there are 4 major types of ethnocentric biases in American foreign policy which may be observed at 4 locations. It also considers the nature of the methods that will be needed to develop case studies that include multiple versions of reality and are sensitive to theoretical issues raised in the analysis of ethnocentric bias.

"The United States must be careful not to interpret events occurring in a different land in terms of its own history, politics, culture, and morals.

- Robert S. McNamara
(Response to a questionnaire concerning lessons of the Vietnam War; in McCloud (1988), p. 68.)

The stimulus to this paper has been an extraordinary initiative, by the Pew Charitable Trusts (Pew, 1988), to commission a major rewriting of the history of post World War II international relations via 125 case studies of international negotiations. These studies are being offered as a new basis of university curricula, especially designed for professional schools seeking to train future practitioners in international relations.

This detailed rewriting of international relations affords an extraordinary opportunity to begin the systematic and cumulative study of cognitive processes and biases in international relations decision making. And it also suggests an unusually attractive second-phase - because most of these cases, in their original versions, have been written by Americans or scholars teaching at American universities - to study, both in the original events and their progressive reconstructions, the possibility of ethnocentric biases in American perceptions of the world.

The question of ethnocentric bias is important for practical reasons:

1. One would like to identify ethnocentric misperceptions, now, to prevent students from being mis-informed, with the result that any American ethnocentric biases are locked-in for another generation.

2. The results will also be consequential because they bear directly upon the professional training of political decision makers, their staffs, and the career diplomats upon whom they rely. And conclusions about naturally-occurring ethnocentric biases will partly outline the (corrective) briefings which diplomats and the White House staff need to prepare for an American decision maker to help him (or her) understand events in other areas of the world. <1>

3. A rigorous, historically cumulative, study of ethnocentric biases in bi-lateral relations may have practical benefits for university education and practitioner training in other countries. One need not require that misperception models explain all wars or major conflicts to appreciate that they may identify crucial contributors to some unnecessary wars and major conflicts. At present, there are 23 wars in the world (an approximately uniform rate since World War II); if only 10% of them have resulted from misperception, and this

rate of organized violence could be reduced by better professional training, the inquiry will have saved thousands of lives.

The question is also important for theoretical reasons. The discovery of these biases - if they exist - is an exciting research enterprise that could substantially enrich (and perhaps alter) international relations theory. <2>

The scientific agenda includes an immediate methodological challenge, the need for a systematic technology to write different versions of reality, and with alert sensitivity to diverse types of cognitive (and other) processes and biases which may give the cases their deep structures. <3>

Ethnocentric Bias in Context

The concept of ethnocentrism was initially proposed by William Graham Sumner in 1906. He thought it a universal syndrome - a kind of arrogant and hostile egocentrism at the group level, in which in-group solidarity was linked with denigration of, and hostility toward, outgroups. <4> Rather than focus simply on these mechanisms, I believe it is useful to create a broader, and more systematic analysis of ethnocentric biases, defined as biases which are culturally-based or nationally-based. <5>

The study of ethnocentric biases can be bracketed by two null hypotheses:

Null Hypothesis (1): No Bias

De facto, most of international systems theory assumes - and tells students - that culturally-based perceptions are irrelevant to the analysis of international relations. An American can readily analyze the international behavior of country A or country B, or a hegemon, or a client state, without much regard to the name of the country, its history, languages, customs, or cultures. Just as economists tell us that profit maximization behavior is universal, and use models with the (alleged) power to transcend time, place, and circumstance, so an international systems theorist would tell us that power-maximization behavior (subject to security dilemma constraints) embodies a universal grammar. One can tell - and understand the story of power and politics, in the same terms, regardless of century or culture.

Thus, Piscatori ((1985), p. 320)) is probably representative of most international relations theorists when he asserts that "Muslim statesmen, like all statesmen, are guided more by the cold calculations of national interests than by the passionate commitment to ideological values... Muslim leaders invariably go about determining their business as

everyone else does.

There may be much to say for this null hypothesis. Certainly, standard world histories use a set of conventional categories to tell the story of most international events across cultures and millenia (e.g., Roberts (1984), Kennedy (1988)). American behavioral theorists and political anthropologists, alike, have readily adopted similar categories and ideas about power to discuss a wide range of cases (e.g., Bailey (1969), Riker (1962): coalition-formation, authority relations, dominance and dependency, leadership and followership, deterrence and revolution (etc.), are taken to be categories that represent cross-cultural and trans-historical universals:

Null Hypothesis 2: Inability to Reach Any Conclusion

There is, of course, an opposite view held - if I judge correctly - by many area specialists in universities. This view is that cultures are so different that it may take years of study, immersion in language and history, and extensive travel and residence, before one even begins to think like a Frenchman, or a Russian or a Chinese and is competent to forecast the international behavior of these countries.

The view suggests an extreme form of another null hypothesis - that no American could ever discover whether (or how) he (or she) is ethnocentric - and perhaps that no one can ever understand another person or another culture at all.

While this null hypothesis - especially directed as a criticism against Westerners (e.g., Scholte (1978)) - may be worrisome to some philosophers and anthropologists, I believe it can be (tentatively) ruled-out. A preliminary review of the literature suggests that, while the evidence against it is not conclusive, it is suggestive:

- Many aspects of the basic grammar of human behavior appear to be universal - for example, human emotions and their facial expression (Izard (1980));

- The international laws of commercial transaction seem to work well, with good matches (or at least effective translations) between cultures, even (in Ogura's (1979) discussion of the Japanese and Chinese), when "the inscrutable deal with the inscrutable."

- Whatever case might ultimately be made concerning the learning necessary to understand a foreign people or government - a 40-minute briefing in the White House, a couple of courses plus 6 months residence, or a lifetime of study, I have- the impression that most practitioners believe mutual understanding is possible.

- Dore (1985) notes the increasing similarity of urban middle-class cultures around the world and the universalizing of Western practices of diplomacy, both trends serving to reduce any ethnocentrism as a source of bias. <6>

With this background, I now turn to the question: "Is American foreign policy ethnocentric?. Where does one look?"

Locating Types of Ethnocentric Bias

Ethnocentric biases, like other forms, can be studied at four levels: 1.) The committed student or entering diplomat who must begin to develop, and reformulate, his or her understanding of the world, given an initial socialization in country x ; 2.) The senior diplomatic practitioner, academic scholar, or intelligence analyst of country x who represents the most accurate and experienced judgments a society can produce; 3.) Presidents and key political decision makers in country x , who routinely follow such accounts of international events as appear in equivalents of The New York Times or CBS Nightly News but are not area specialists and who must be briefed prior to making a foreign policy decision; 4.) The types of key symbols, myths, internal interests, and self-presentations which a culture or nation require the government of country x honor in foreign affairs and which lead to policies embodying a politically-generated ethnocentrism partially independent of the preferences of political decision makers themselves.

Types of Ethnocentric Bias

There are four types of ethnocentric biases which might be distinguished:

A. Cognitive ethnocentrism

By cognitive ethnocentrism I refer to "innocent" errors in which the categories for understanding the world unwittingly and erroneously generalize from one's own culture. Rather than being objective, the decision maker uses overlays for understanding the world which, like the use of alchemy rather than chemistry, lead to repeated policy failure.

We might imagine three levels at which this type of pr might be observed in case material:

1. The simple generalization of one's experience with others in one's own culture. Thus Harry Truman, for example, is said to have thought Joseph Stalin was similar to Boss Pendergast of Missouri and erroneously expected Stalin to behave like an American party boss (Larson (1987)). <7>

2. The broader overlay of political categories that reflect the naive assumption that other nations, and leaders can be understood readily by using the model of one's own political system. <8>

Thus, for example, we might predict that American foreign policy has only been grounded in realism and worked well in one specialized arena Western Europe in the period since World War II. A similarity between political cultures (plus the teaching, in America, of its European cultural heritage) has helped to create a local match between what Shepard (1987) has, in another context, called "the principles of the mind and the regularities of the world." The categories and theories of America's political culture generalized successfully in circumstances where decision makers could pursue American security interests, work through established governments which are democratic (and in countries whose elites wish them to be), and champion freedom, stability, and economic growth in the same coherent package without troubling trade-offs. The Marshall Plan reconstruction of Western European economies after World War II and the NATO alliance against the Soviet Union effectively served American security, political stability, economic growth, and other shared values.

Such an American template, transferred elsewhere, is probably a good candidate to introduce ethnocentric biases. It may not organize realistic analyses and effective choices for successful policies in areas of the world with other principles of cultural and political organization; instead, it will produce policies impeded by irrelevant categories. (E. g. Wiarda (1985), Etheredge (1985), p. 172) .

3. Category errors may be simple, relatively innocent, errors. But they may also arise because the world is understood through scripts which place America at the vanguard of the forces of history with the belief that political forces and human aspirations in other countries tend, naturally to press their political development toward becoming like the United States. <9> The analysis of the concept of "political development," for example, presents numerous arguments that American-derived cognitive templates have been used inappropriately for understanding developing countries. <10>

[Perceptions may arise ethnocentrically, but they are not, by that reason alone, biased. Thus one must, I think, be cautious about labeling the American concept of political development a misperception: recent developments in China and Russia suggest that the case for the market system has now been universally accepted. If Gorbachev is a reliable guide, it may be that genuine political democracy ~ a natural yearning of peoples everywhere (even if they did not - as the Soviet Union did not - go through the Enlightenment). The Enlightenment-based Universal Declaration for Human Rights may be genuinely universal in its appeal. <11>

B. Nationally-created Dramatic Templates

A second type of ethnocentric perception - and possible misperception - can arise from power-drama templates, constructions of international reality which define one's own nation and other nations as enacting distinctive roles. Both the encoding of information, and the construction of permissible or desired policies, reflect a committed effort to create (and sometimes to enforce) a definition of political reality with which other actors may disagree. Thus, rather than being simple errors in a scientific sense, the grammar of perception follows from (and is held in place by) intense commitments to the political role one wishes to play - and assigns others to play in relation to one's own state. <12>

Here, as an example, is Charles De Gaulle lecturing Dean Rusk (in private) about the nature of European political reality:

"Well, what is Europe?' Pointing with his finger as if at an imaginary map, he said, 'Here are the Benelux countries.' And he brushed them aside with a wave of his hand. 'In the south, there is Italy,' and he scoffed, 'Psshhh. Then, there is Germany,' the continued, 'and Germany must be kept in its place. And there are the British. But the British are not Europeans, they are Anglo-Saxons.' Then he smiled benignly, 'And here is France at the heart of Europe, the soul of European culture.'" (Schoenbaum (1988), p. 359).

Another example of such a template: the traditional Chinese view of (what Westerners call) international relations:

"The Confucian view of the foreigner depends partly on the stress given to the unique nature of the earthly authority delegated to the Son of Heaven. Such authority precludes the need for or the legality of other political units, and comprizes a temporal power over all members' of the civilized world.... Thus once a barbarian people has shown itself sufficiently well educated to appreciate the benefits of Chinese authority, it qualifies to become a full member of the empire. Subject peoples can acknowledge his [Emperor's] authority by the payment of material tribute whose presence at court serves to enhance the Emperor's majesty and to demonstrate the universal acceptance of his title to power.. (Michael Loewe, quoted in Bell (1985), pp. 266 - 267). 13

Obviously more is involved here than a simple scientific process of describing an external reality: the master categories reflect an act of political creation, a joint structuring of oneself, other actors, and the power and status relationships between them. <14> This type of power-drama structuring of perceptions (and misperceptions) has been used to explain the "top-down" relations between America and leftist revolutionaries in Central America (Etheredge (1985)). It has also been proposed to explain features of alliance relations, in

which lower-status allies and client states are perceived (and misperceived) in characteristic ways by hegemon and other alliance leaders (Ethereidge (1988)).

[Each of these power-template examples include arrogance and superiority, and the designation of lower-status states as less reasonable and responsible. Whether all nations manage feelings of superiority in their international dealings, along the lines suggested by Sumner is, I think, an open question: Christopher (1983), for example, believes this is true of the Japanese (although they keep such thoughts to themselves.)]

C. Distinctive Weights

The third type of ethnocentric perception involves the designation of what is valuable - a distinctive weighting of costs and benefits so that, for example, the outcomes beneficial to, or costly to, Americans are more salient than the costs or benefits to a foreign people. (Linked to this may be a weighting algorithm that gives greater salience to costs and benefits the more closely the foreign country resembles the United States.) A stark example of this mechanism is Chester Cooper's assertion that, because the Vietnamese were a non-European race (and poor) the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese deaths, and the devastation, involved in the American conduct of the Vietnam War were more acceptable to American decision makers than if the war were being fought on the mainland of Europe, with the deaths and destruction being visited upon people considered more similar to Americans.

I think it will be useful to analyze the weighting process as two issues: a.) awareness and interest, and then b.) the weights attached to alternate outcomes. Thus, different ethnocentric (and political) processes are at work! I think, when a.) American farmers' interests are weighted more heavily than those of French farmers at the end of a decision process, and when b.) no one tells a President (and he does not ask) how badly French farmers will be hurt by a decision.

D. Autistic International Behavior

A fourth type of ethnocentric perception may be a simple breakdown of political intelligence at the water's edge. Thus, for example, American politicians know how to be elected to positions of leadership - one learns the constituency, stays in touch, develops a vision and program to deliver what people want, produces results. But this intelligence concerning leadership may stop at the water's edge, so that concerns about American power in the world are met primarily by symbolic devices (such as defense build-ups) which are essentially autistic and self-referential (e. g., Kennedy (1988)) .

This "failure to attend" to external international reality and to invoice normal (domestic) political intelligence may, in retrospect, be especially important in breakdowns of deterrence - e.g., the insularity and failure of Chinese message-sending that was intended to deter the American expansion of the Korean War, and President Kennedy's failure to deter Russian introduction of nuclear missiles into Cuba. <15>

Endnotes

<1.> Similar implications might hold for American Senators and Congressmen, the Editorial Board of the Times, and other influential elites.

<2.> There is also substantial relevance from the efforts to study past negotiations (with the retrospective assessments of participants from both sides) and develop improved training on the basis of experience. See, for example, the useful series of monographs from the Department of State, e.g., Bendahmane and McDonald (1984). The results would also have relevance to the theory of adult competence - e.g., Holliday and Chandler (1987).

<3.> The versions of reality may be partly incommensurable. This technology has not been systematically and rigorously attempted, although there have been partial semi-formal efforts to specify what the different generating grammars of different nations in conflict might be. (E. g., Neustadt (1970), Nye (1984), Hare (1985), Etheredge (1985), White (1986), Alker (1987), Mefford (1987), Alker and Sylvan (this panel and references cited therein)).

<4.> For an excellent general review, see LeVine and Campbell (1972). For a recent discussion of individual differences in ethnocentrism as an emotion-linked characteristic of personality, see Heaven, Rajab, and Ray (1985). Ethnic conflict per se is the subject of an outstanding study by Horowitz (1985). See also the earlier proposal by Campbell and LeVine (1961). See also van der Denner (1986).

<5.> These biases will be a sub-set of potential biases. Among other sources which have been studied are: a.) the personality of the decision maker (Etheredge (1976), Shepard (1988), Holsti (1976)); b.) Stress effects (e.g., Hermann (1979)); c.) Characteristic biases which may be introduced by small group dynamics (Janis (1983)); and d.) the strong distinctive dramatizations associated with national security sub-cultures, especially "over-dramatized and oddly-wired" power dramatizations (Etheredge (1985), Frank (1987).

The current emphasis is e) deviations from the analysis of variance standards developed

in the natural sciences (e.g., Jervis (1976), Kahneman et al. (1982)).

<6.> Note, however, his sensitive discussion of potential inhibitors of "fellow feeling."

<7.> Another example may be the American belief that foreign revolutionaries - demonstrably willing to give their lives for their cause - will behave as pragmatic American politicians and abandon their cause if the "cost" of their revolution is increased. It is a plausible, "rational" analysis but (e.g., Vietnam, Nicaragua) it has proven wrong.

<8.> See Pye (1985) for a sensitive illustration.

<9.> In the Soviet case, the Soviet Union; in the Chinese case, China; in the Cuban case, Cuba...

<10.> A useful checklist of American ethnocentric bias in understanding developing nations can be derived from Eisenstadt (1981). A stimulating critique of Western models can be found Wiarda (1985).

<11.> Note that, until recent developments in the Soviet Union and China, it was a common practice of American conservatives to be skeptical of the capacity of "totalitarian" regimes to reform themselves - in retrospect, perhaps, a serious and complex set of American misperceptions were involved. See, for example, Berger (1979), p. 103.

<12.> Thus a scientific conception of the enterprise, as might be proposed by Geertz (1984), p. 125 - "The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to." - may be only a subset of the conceptions that political decision makers have for their tasks.

<13.> Bell, *ibid.*, p. 267 speculates that this classic vision "may prove the more lasting one. but believes the current pragmatic implications of the vision fit so well with Western strategy that the difference with the Western conception of an open and pluralistic society of states will not lead to any disturbing consequences until far into the future.

<14.> See also Frank (1987).

<15.> For a discussion of the "failure to attend" phenomenon, see the discussion of the invisibility of poor (and lower status) Central American nations and peoples between crises in Etheredge (1985).

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