

# THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF FOREIGN POLICY AND THE POLITICS OF INTERNATIONAL IMAGES

By  
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In its January 27, 1981 issue, the *New York Times* printed excerpts from a confidential cable sent by Bruce Laingen, chargé d'affaires at the United States' Embassy in Tehran, to Secretary of State Vance on August 3, 1981. In this cable, Bruce Laingen had attempted to analyze the dominant aspects of the "Persian Psyche" by listing a number of personality traits which supposedly portrayed the "Persian National Character." This curious U.S. diplomatic document was sent to the State Department with the specific suggestion that it "be used to brief both USG [United States Government] personnel and private sector representatives who are required to do business with and in this country." The United States' chargé d'affaires, in his "analysis" of the "Persian Psyche" or "Persian Proclivity," characterizes Iranians as egotistical; insecure; opportunistic; incapable of comprehending causality, with a distorted perception of reality; and aversion to accepting responsibility; and a mind set that often ignores longer-term interests in favor of immediately obtainable advantages.

From this characterization, the U.S. chargé d'affaires derived a number of policy implications suggested to coordinate and structure the United States' ongoing and future dealings with Iran. These include:

- First, one should never assume that his side of the issue will be recognized, let alone that it will be conceded to have merits. Persian preoccupation with self precludes this.
- Second, one should not expect an Iranian readily to perceive the advantages of a long-term relationship based on trust.
- Third, interlocking relationships of all aspects of an issue must be painstakingly, forcefully and repeatedly developed. Linkages will be neither readily comprehended nor accepted by Persian negotiators.
- Fourth, cultivation of goodwill for goodwill's sake is a waste of time.
- Finally, one should be prepared for the threat of a breakdown in negotiations at any given moment and not be cowed by this possibility. Given the Persian negotiator's cultural and psychological limitations, he is going to resist the very concept of a rational (from the western point of view) negotiation process.

This is an excellent case of the workings of international images, perceptions, and attribution in the conduct of foreign policy. Although some writers (Kelman, 1966) have already argued for the critical function of such processes in international decisionmaking and conflict resolution, so far their work has not been taken seriously. Mystified by a conception of foreign policy as a rational-bureaucratic and strategic process, most analysts are reluctant to acknowledge the significant role of social-psychological, cultural and ideological forces in the

daily conduct of international affairs. Rather, they focus their attention on the formal analysis of so-called "objective geopolitical and economic variable.

In this paper, we shall argue that images and perceptions of other nations provide the basic framework within which the conduct of international relations and conflict resolution takes place. We shall then look at Americans' attitudes and perceptions of Iranians before the revolution in Iran, and their possible link with the post-revolutionary anti-Americanism in that country. We shall also attempt to analyze the sociological and social-psychological correlates of such attitudes and perceptions and examine their role in the conduct of foreign policy and their repercussions for the image of the United States in other parts of the Third World. The data reported in this paper come from a study of expatriates working and residing in Iran before the revolution in 1979.

Any foreign policy decision or strategy of conflict resolution is anchored in a system of cultural presuppositions and ideology. This system helps delineate national interests, define international conflicts, determine international events, and structure international perceptions. What may appear as "objective international reality" is primarily a subjective reconstruction. We do not take issue with the general premise that international conduct and foreign policy decisions are based on considerations of geopolitical, economic, and military factors. Our question concerns the status of such factors. We maintain that such factors are primarily ideological. Postulating an objective status for economic and political interests may serve as an expedient political or psychological defense, but represents a poor epistemology. 2

There is an often-quoted remark made by de Gaulle that "countries do not have permanent enemies or friends, they have permanent interests." There is no doubt that decisions are made in response to some interests, otherwise there would be no occasion for decision-making. However, although it is tautological to say that countries always have some interests, it is false to say that their interests are permanent vis-à-vis social and ideological changes. National interests are more capricious than what might appear to some analysts. The capriciousness of national interests is of course no more than that of the ideological orientation of those who occupy positions of power in a country. This is why countries national interests often change significantly after an ideologically-based revolution or political change. For instance, the theoreticians of Ayatollah Khomeini or Ronald Reagan have discovered everything but the 'true interests of Iran and the United States. Imposing their ideological systems on ambiguous national and international situations, they have simply redefined or refabricated these countries' social, economic, and political interests.

We are using the concept of ideology in a broad sense, similar to Garstin's (1954:3) notion, involving 'a philosophy of history, a view of man's present place in it, some estimates of *probable lines* of future development, and a set of prescriptions regarding how to hasten, retard, and/or modify that developmental direction.

The relationship between this ideology as a system of basic beliefs and international attitudes, perception, and attribution is circular and multidimensional. On the one hand, by structuring the possible interpretation of the world, an ideological system provides grounds and rationale for certain foreign policy decisions. The interpreted world involves elements of an action situation, including national interests and security as well as the intention, capability, and national characteristics of the other party, such a reliability, aggressiveness, and trustworthiness. On the other hand, international perceptions and attribution operate post hoc as a justificatory mechanism for the rationalization of many foreign policy decisions or actions taken in favor of or against another nation. 3 Here the mass media play a vital role. From this

standpoint, the function of the media may not be so much to brainwash the public and change public opinion in favor of a given policy as to provide the public with what C. Wright Mills (1940) called a new vocabulary of motives for the purpose of accounting for or rationalizing the policies and actions of the government.

Here it is essential to call attention to a formal distinction between perception and decision- or policymaking. In decision- or policy-making there are elements of choice. The decision-maker is aware of some of the alternatives of action and may be able to articulate the grounds for a particular choice. In perception, on the other hand, there is no choice or decision. The person is not aware that there are different and often conflicting possible interpretations of the world. One simply 'sees' it one way (de Rivera, 1968)

However, in the actual decision- or policy-making process, the element of choice is much more elusive than it might appear in a formal or mathematical model. To put it in March and Simon's (1965:341) words, 'choice is always exercised with respect to a particular definition of the situation, i.e., a limited, approximate, simplified, and distorted 'model' of the real situation.' The elements of the definition of the situation are themselves simply "the outcome of psychological and sociological processes, including the chooser's own activities, and the activities of others in his environment.

In addition, in a formal model, i.e., a mathematical model of administrative man, choice is defined in terms of its rationality. However, as pointed out by March and Simon (1965:341), 'we can speak of rationality only relative to a frame of reference; and this frame of reference will be determined by the limitations on the rational man's knowledge.

From this standpoint, an understanding of international conduct and foreign policy can be achieved through an understanding of the sociological and social psychological processes which structure the perception of the world situation. The factors which play a critical role in this process can be classified into two broad categories -- organizational and cultural. The following are some of the organizational factors which help shape the form, content, and direction of political knowledge: (a) the type of organization -State Department, Central Intelligence Agency, CIA affiliate research outfit, or an independent academic research institution; (b) the nature of the task -intelligence-gathering vis-b--vis cross-cultural or international research; (c) the relative ideological commitment or political disposition of the top decisionmakers for whom the information is produced or procured; and (d) the political ambiance within which an organization operates -- an ambiance of nationalism, jingoism, and cold war vis-à-vis an ambiance of internationalism and détente.

One should also take into account the psychology and sociology of recruits, i.e., the type of actor who is attracted to particular information-processing roles, as well as the particular psychological makeup which is expected of an individual filling such roles. However, regardless of what the actor may initially bring to the scene, he quickly tends to adopt the professional ideology of the organization and see the world in terms of predefined cognitive and emotive categories. This is more so the case of political organizations than any other organizations, for in the former, ideological loyalty is the most important aspect of the professional rite de passage.

Despite their critical role in the definition of international political situations, organizational factors are not the focus of the present analysis. We have addressed ourselves to the second category, viz., cultural factors. The aim has been to examine the extent to which cultural systems of beliefs, that is, shared cognitive and emotive categories, structure one's perception of social and political phenomena such as images, intentions, and programs. As a

point of departure, we concur with Walter Lippmann's (1922) classic remark that "in the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture."

Straton (1929) attempted over a half-century ago to bring social psychology into the formal analysis of international conduct and foreign policy. He began his pioneering venture by examining the fundamental western assumption that "an unbridgeable mental gulf between the chief races of the East and West makes it impossible that they shall ever meet." We believe that this assumption still underlies the western political world view. Today, of course, one does not speak of the "minds of the backward races," thanks to the sophisticated language of social scientists. Attribution of bizarre or exotic psychological traits is easily made using a more "respectable language to capture the political reality of other nations" (Said, 1979, 1981 Banuazizi, 1977)

Once again, note the United States' chargé d'affaires' characterization of Iranians in his letter to the State Department (*New York Times*, January 27, 1981)

*Somewhat surprisingly, even those Iranians educated in the Western style and perhaps with long experience outside Iran itself frequently have difficulty grasping the interrelationship of events.* Witness a Yazdi (Ibrahim Yazdi, who was Foreign Minister when the embassy was seized) resisting the idea that Iranian behavior has consequences on the perception of Iran in the U.S. or that this perception is somehow related to American policies regarding Iran (italics supplied).

What the former chargé d'affaires has failed to recognize is that the general direction of U.S. foreign policy toward the Soviet Union and the Third World nations has not been shaped so much by the behavior of those nations as by American social and political presuppositions. The friendly and supportive international gestures of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt have had little impact on the American anti-Arab ideology and foreign policy dispositions. Furthermore, as we shall show in the next part of this paper, Americans' image of Iranians and their attitudes toward them had been antipathetic and negative even during the peak of the United States' "friendly" relationship with the shah.

Spectacular international events, such as the Iranian hostage crisis, only help to reinforce the images people already hold. Whether such events can significantly change people's attitudes in the long run remains to be shown. In the conclusion of the analysis of their research on the effects of events on national and international images, Deutsch and Merritt (1966:182-183) write

Our findings tally well with the research results summarized by Berelson and Steiner... attesting to the resistance of human thinking and imagining to sudden environmental pressures. Men cling to their earlier memories and character. They call upon the support of their social groups to defend their images and beliefs. They distort many of their perceptions and deny much reality in order to call their prejudiced souls their own.

### *Attitude toward Iranians before the Revolution and Hostage Crisis*

Between 1977 and 1979, we conducted a large-scale research study on the social-psychological aspects of technology transfer in Iran (Movahedi, 1979). Primarily, we focused on the problem of attitudes, orientations, and social and professional adjustment of those expatriates who functioned directly or indirectly as agents of technology transfer.

We had begun with the assumption that these expatriates adaptability, their attitudes and dispositions toward the host country and its nationals occupy an important place in the set of problems associated with technological and economic development. The study involved a sample of 1,109 expatriates residing in five major industrialized cities of Iran: Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz, Ahwaz, and Kermanshah. The sample was composed of 87 per cent Americans; the rest were Europeans, with a few Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders. Out of the total sample, 97 expatriates were interviewed and the rest participated in the survey by filling out a 55-item research questionnaire. The sample represented the major American corporations, including a number of internationally known assembly, communication and defense industries. Members of the armed forces stationed in Iran were not included.

As a measure of attitudes toward Iranians, we followed the classic method of Katz and Braly (1965) by asking respondents for four or five traits which they thought were typical of Iranians. However, we did not provide the respondents with any list or categories of traits. The reported characterizations are entirely those of the respondents. The national portrait that emerged resembled quite closely that which was reported by the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Iran. However, it also contained some less hostile and even a few favorable traits.

The following are the most frequent negative traits that were attributed to Iranians: arrogant, argumentative, egoistic, sensitive to criticism, reluctance to admit mistakes or ignorance, a tendency to blame others for one's error, intolerant, rigid, authoritarian, dogmatic, aggressive, rude, inconsiderate of others in public, lack of proper work ethic, no sense of urgency, poor motivation, a tendency to delay and to put off a task for a later time, dishonest, cheating, unreliable, Machiavellian, manipulative, opportunistic, tells you what you want to hear, and male chauvinistic.

A relatively positive side of Iranians which emerged alongside the above portrait included such traits as: friendly, warm, generous, hospitable, kind, gentle, pleasant in informal person-to-person situations, helpful and eager to assist, outgoing, fun-loving, cheerful, and witty.

It should be noted that this portrait reflects the respondents' subjective judgments rather than an objective frequency distribution of Iranians' traits of character as measured by some kind of psycho-metric test. According to numerous studies, such judgments are associated with feelings of like or dislike.

People tend to assign desirable traits to groups or nations they like and undesirable traits to those they dislike (Scott, 1966).

To convert the characterizations of Iranians into an index of attitude towards them, we used a simple technique. We took the difference between the number of favorable and the number of unfavorable traits and to that we added a constant. More specifically, the index of attitude toward Iranians is taken to be: [(Number of Favorable Traits - Number of Unfavorable Traits) + 10].

The mean attitude score was 8.84, with a standard deviation of 2.63. That is, the average attitude scores represented an unfavorable attitude toward Iranians.

Here we should call attention to an important methodological point. The empirical nature of our attitude index is such that for this sample it tends to underestimate the unfavorable attitudes of the respondents. That is, the *magnitude* of mean attitude relative to the standard deviation should not be taken as an indicator of mild negative attitude.

To begin with, all the cited traits were considered to be of equal value. This assumption was based, of course, on nothing but technical expediency at the time of data analysis. However, theoretically it is an unwarranted and crude assumption. The attributed traits varied significantly in their intensity of attitude expression, and unfavorable traits were reported much more frequently and were much more emotionally loaded than the favorable traits. Outsiders are much more readily hated than loved.

Furthermore, the *number* of the traits used to characterize a group or a nation is as important a measure of attitude as is the *intensity* of the emotional charge. The more extreme one's disposition, the fewer the number of categories used to classify, differentiate or describe one's attitude object. People with strong feelings towards a group or nation tend to use relatively fewer traits to characterize the object (Sherif, 1967). In fact, some writers have defined the degree of 'stereotype' as an inverse function of the number of traits attributed to members of a group (Scott, 1966). There is a significant difference between the attitude of one who, for instance, lists five unfavorable and four favorable traits and one who simply reports one emotionally loaded negative trait such as 'just disgusting,' or 'dumb.' Our index fails to distinguish between the two individuals, both would receive a score of nine. Indeed, a substantial number of respondents reported one or two negative traits. This is why the degree of negative disposition toward Iranians was much more intense than what the index reveals.

### *Sociological and Psychological Correlates*

Our findings tend to correspond with the research results summarized by Scott (1966), in that images of other nations and attitudes towards members of other countries are related to a number of social and psychological variables. General satisfaction in life, satisfaction with life in Iran, satisfaction with one's job, type of job, nature of the task of the employing company, and a host of other variables were all significantly related to perceived characteristics of Iranians. Interestingly enough, some apparently important variables such as age, education, and knowledge of the host country's language were not significantly related to the overall attitude scores.

In general, given the friendly relationship and the close economic, political, and military alliance between the United States and Iran at the time of the survey, our data tend to disconfirm Buchanan's (1955) hypothesis that friendly or derogatory national stereotypes are symptomatic of friendly or unfriendly relationships between two governments.

Attribution of traits or motives to others is an ongoing feature of interpersonal relationships. Following Heider (1958), the attribution process has become a major theme of an increasing amount of social psychological research. Consequently, there exists today a sizable literature on the dynamics and mechanisms of this process. Attribution involves a process of inferring -- perceiving or interpreting -- dispositional properties such as personality traits, motives, emotions and attitudes in ourselves or in others on the basis of behavioral cues. The critical question which has attracted the attention of social psychologists is: "How can a person ascertain that his impression of an entity reflects the inherent dispositions of the thing itself and

not *his own idiosyncrasies or a peculiarity of a particular interaction* with the thing?" (Kelley and Thibaut, 1969; emphasis added).

Much experimental and quasi-experimental evidence indicates that the types of traits attributed to others highly correspond with observers' shared cognitive categories and cultural stereotypes, their own personality traits, and with the social or interpersonal situation in which behavioral cues occur (Mulaik, 1964; Dornbusch, 1965; Norman, 1969; Lay and Jackson, 1969).

The attribution process becomes more problematic and complex when it occurs within a cross-cultural context, where the probability of misperceiving or misinterpreting behavioral cues is enormous. The process is analogous to a scientist's attempt to make inferences from **data he can hardly understand**, or to decode certain information with the wrong codebook.

To determine the impact of the previous learning experience or the cognitive repertoires of the expatriates on their characterizations of Iranians, we compared the responses of a number of different groups with one another. Women in general had a more positive image of Iranians than did men. Women used a number of terms such as warm, gentle, helpful, emotional, expressive, fun-loving, witty, and male-chauvinist. Men, on the other hand, were more disposed to use terms such as rigid, intolerant, authoritarian, lacking proper work ethic.

There were also interesting statistically significant differences between the characterizations of Americans and Europeans. Americans on the whole were keener to perceive aggressiveness and rudeness in Iranians, while Europeans were more sensitized to detect distrustfulness and paranoia.

The most revealing findings had to do with the previous international experience of the respondents and also with the nature of the task they had to perform in Iran. Those who had lived or worked in Korea, Guam, Okinawa, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam -- all American military bases -- had significantly more unfavorable attitudes toward Iranians than others. Similarly, those Americans who were employed by Iranbased American defense industries held the most negative attitudes in the sample. They also had the highest tendency to perceive Iranians as prejudiced toward outsiders.

It should be noted that people from different countries form impressions and interpret one another's behavior in a social context usually characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and some degree of actual or perceived cultural hostility. There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that the symbolic nature of the social situation in which a stimulus occurs provides many important cues for the interpretation of the stimulus. Studies on attitude formation also demonstrate that the social context of an object of attitude determines its perceived properties. People are quite unlikely to be conscious of the influence of the surroundings on their perceptions or attitudes unless they are critically and analytically disposed toward their inner life and the external situation (Sherif, 1965; Brown, 1965; Mischel, 1971). Now one might see how military symbolism can function as a potent cue for the definition or interpretation of the defense workers' personal and interpersonal worlds.

Consequently, it is critical that in the analysis of international conduct one take into account the structure and dynamics of the social situations where behaviors are evoked, responses are interpreted, judgments are made, and impressions are formed. It is equally critical to be cognizant of the cultural and ideological perspectives that are instrumental in promoting such social situations. When the United States in an ideological crusade against communism makes its presence known to people in the Third world primarily through military hardware and software, these symbols of hostility and violence structure the context of international

perception. When international communication is conducted via the medium of death and destruction, the medium becomes the message.

The United States' foreign policy in the Third World is predicated on a general lack of respect for other nations' right to self-determination. Authoritarian regimes are supported and nationalist governments are overthrown or undermined. Such a foreign policy sets in motion an international chain reaction of hatred, hostility, and misperception. This foreign policy also is greatly in need of domestic rationalization and justification. Attribution of evil intention to people in other nations, devaluation of their choices, distortion of their political reality, and the use of empty cultural stereotypes have always been among the most effective strategies for the reduction of any possible cognitive dissonance.

Given the nature of American foreign policy in Iran for 25 years before the revolution; the social situation of fear and hostility wherein Iranians encountered Americans; and the attitude of disrespect and intolerance which they had for one another, the post-revolutionary anti-American escapade in Iran was not quite unexpected. Similar reactions in other countries in the middle east and Latin America have since surfaced.

With the rising national consciousness and militant mood in the Third World, those policies of the United States which are embodiments of an ethnocentric and jingoistic ideology will bring nothing but the increasing decline of America's prestige in the world. In fact, the growing anti-American sentiment in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and even Europe, is a natural by-product of the intensification of such elements in American foreign policy.

## FOOTNOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Center for Iranian Research and Analysis, Washington, D.C., 1982. Ali Banuazizi and Reza Fazel kindly reviewed the first draft of this paper. However, they bear no responsibility for the interpretations I propose.
2. This claim should not be construed as a Hegelian notion. There is no intention here to argue for the primacy of ideas over the material conditions of human existence. Nevertheless, at any given point in history, it is the consciousness of people that helps construct the social reality, albeit that consciousness is predicated on social existence. For instance, in the analysis of the impact of racism on the decision-making process in the criminal justice system, the past political economy of slavery in the United States would not be directly relevant.

The Reagan administration's white paper on El Salvador and its sensational charade of charges and countercharges about the so-called Libyan hit squad are excellent cases in point. It is interesting to note how in these cases evidence, information, or knowledge are manufactured post hoc to justify American foreign policy toward those nations. In the words of Hauness Johnson of the *Washington Post* (1981) : "The government continues to give the highest blessings to the widest circulation of the most sensational stories to reach the public in years. It's almost as if public opinion were being prepared for dramatic action -- say a strike against Libya or Khadafy himself." It is also interesting to note that the administration has claimed that two of the terrorists dispatched by Khadafy to kill the



American officials are Iranians. The choice of "Iranians" by the administration is quite a clever ploy. For the easy domestic provocation of hostility and anger, no other national group may have been as emotionally evocative as Iranians.

4. In their classic study, Katz and Braly (1965) asked a sample of Princeton University students to characterize ten different ethnic, racial, and national groups. They found a marked correspondence between the attitudes of their respondents toward a particular group and the desirability level of the traits ascribed to them.

For instance, white Americans were characterized as industrious, intelligent, materialistic, ambitious, progressive, pleasure-seeking, alert, efficient, aggressive, straightforward, practical, and sportsmanlike. Black Americans were, on the other hand, characterized as superstitious, lazy, happy-go-lucky, ignorant, musical, ostentatious, very religious, stupid, physically dirty, naive, slovenly, and unreliable.

The attributed traits were of course more reflective of the attitudes and prejudices of the Princeton University students than of the actual or potential social or psychological characteristics of blacks and whites in America. Curiously enough, the authors apologetically attempt to label the above characterization of blacks as a Southern description, by noting that Princeton University draws heavily upon the South for its enrollment.

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