

*Political Psychology and the Three "ISMS"*

The forty years since the publication of *Perception and Misperception* have seen the battle among the "isms" of Realism, Liberalism, and Constructivism in the study of international politics, and so an obvious question is how perception and political psychology relate to them. The overlap is greatest with Constructivism, but is not absent from the other two. Psychology, like so much else, is absent from Waltz's version of Realism because it is so parsimonious and does not claim to be able to explain states' foreign policies. Psychology in the form of concern with human nature is central to classical Realism, however. This is a topic I do not discuss in *Perception and Misperception* and will only touch later on in this preface. But for scholars like Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, the evil and drive to dominate that is latent in all of us was a central cause of strife in the social world, and especially among nations where inhibitions were fewer. Furthermore, human beings seem hard-wired to distinguish between in-groups and out-groups, and not only to disfavor the latter but also to find them hard to empathize with. Even without the compounding influence of nationalism, leaders and members of the mass public tend to be self-righteous and to have difficulty understanding the hopes and grievances of others, with unfortunate consequences for international relations. The more current incarnation of Realism in the form of Neoclassical Realism places less stress on human nature but, by including large roles for domestic politics and decision-making, it opens the door to political psychology. Although lacking hypotheses or arguments about exactly what and how people are likely to perceive and think, this form of Realism could easily accommodate a role for perceptual distortions. All forms, furthermore, would lead us to expect that international anarchy and the driving concern for security would lead decision-makers to be highly sensitive to threats, and therefore likely to overperceive them.

Liberalism sees major sources of the state's foreign policy as emanating from the nature of its regime, its political institutions, and the interests in its society, and so also leaves room for political psychology without explicitly delving into it. The worldviews and fundamental ideas about politics that leaders have in their heads are largely formed domestically, and so we should expect significant differences between dictatorships and democracies (and among different types of these regimes) in how they view international politics and in the images of others that they hold. An obvious example is the argument that democratic leaders are prone to see that compromises and lasting agreements are possible, at least with other democracies. Highly ideological regimes will view the world through glasses tinted by their beliefs, and we can better understand their perceptions by their ideologies than by examining the actual external environment. As in so many areas, Nazi Germany provides a horribly clear example. Hitler and his colleagues associated Judaism with Bolshevism, and this made them see the Soviet Union as a regime that had to be destroyed. American policy was also believed to be dominated by Jewish interests, and for the Nazis this explained why America was both hostile and weak.

The driving idea in Soviet policy before Gorbachev was that class conflict was the dominant axis of politics: although temporary bargains with capitalist countries were possible, in the long run only one of these systems could survive, and while the triumph of communism was inevitable, good communists had the duty to hasten history along. More specific perceptions were shaped by derivative ideas. For example, Stalin overestimated the likelihood that the United States would grant him a large loan after World War II because he thought that the capitalist economy needed this in order to avoid lapsing back into a depression. A few years later, he found the Marshall Plan particularly alarming: since capitalist regimes were inevitably rivalrous, such aid could be explained only by the intention to move against the Soviet Union in the near future. The United States is not without its ideology, either. Being not only a liberal democracy, but also one that has unusual social origins in its founding by a middle-class "fragment" and so never having experienced a bourgeois revolution, it is particularly ill-equipped to understand most other countries. During the Cold War it was hard for the United States to distinguish nationalism from communism, and later its unusual history led it to believe that democracy could be exported relatively easily because it was the "natural order" that would prevail if artificial obstacles were removed.

Democracies, liberals argue, are also strongly influenced by the distribution of interests within them and the structure of the institutions that mediate between society and policy. Although perceptions are not a focus of liberal theorists, one can argue that the interests and ways of thinking of powerful groups will strongly influence the prevailing images of others and beliefs about how international politics does (and should) work. According to Karl Marx, "The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of the ruling class," and while liberals find this formulation crude and reductionist, much of their theorizing depends on an alignment between interests and perceptions. A founding argument of modern liberalism is that economic interdependence is conducive to peace, and this rests on the assumption that businessmen will see their interests as liberal theorists think they should. Less obvious beliefs also can be involved, as those whose businesses have strong international ties involving multiple and complex transactions have a greater element of trust and are more open to multilateral institutions. Even deeper psychological connections are built by the economy as well, as the growth in commerce is reciprocally related to the increased normative value placed on material interest and its perceived role on taming destructive passions. Perceptions are also involved in the formation of interests outside of the economic area, and the obvious example is that ethnic groups, unless they are exiles, are likely to view their home countries with favor and to see them as the victims of any foreign conflicts. Domestic institutions are crucial to the policy process, and they not only mediate the impact of interest groups but also have their own interests and perceptions of the world. Diplomats are prone to believe in the efficacy of negotiation and compromise; militaries, although hesitant to actually use force, are predisposed to believe that threats and military power are central tools of foreign policy. A corollary is that the latter are likely to judge other states' intentions by their military postures.

Perhaps even more than the other schools of thought, Constructivism is a "they" rather than an "it." In the more empirical variants of Constructivism, the overlap with political psychology is great, although often unacknowledged. Ideas and self-fulfilling prophecies are important to both, and the concept of identities, central to Constructivism, is treated by political psychology under the headings of self-images

and self-conceptions. Emotions, important in Constructivism, have also reemerged in the current generation of political psychology, as I will discuss below. Since Constructivism is built around how people construct their views of the world, if not their own worlds, it is hard to see how it can thrive without building on or developing arguments that are heavily psychological.

This is not to claim that the two approaches are identical. Much political psychology treats individuals as individuals with less attention to the context or their existence as social beings. The experimental paradigm that this research utilizes is designed to remove as many contextual factors as possible with the object of getting at the “pure” cognitive processes being sought. By contrast, “Constructivism” is a shorthand for “Social Constructivism,” and with good reason. In politics as in everyday life, people form their ideas and habits through social processes by reacting to and often adopting the views that prevail in their social milieu, and because many of these ways of thinking have been absorbed by osmosis, they often become taken for granted (although I believe that Constructivists exaggerate the lack of self-consciousness here). Our world is social in that how we think and act cannot be understood apart from the interactions that have nurtured them. This perspective, which I believe is correct, does not fit easily with psychology's search for the heuristics and biases people deploy, but is quite compatible with the outlook of social psychology, which agrees that looking only within people's minds will not get us very far. People learn from, react to, and are formed by what others are saying and doing to them and how others respond to them. Human beings are highly social animals and are finely attuned to their human environments, and Constructivism's stress on the importance of socialization for both individuals and organizations will not surprise political psychologists who study these processes as a vital shaper and transmitter of political attitudes.

One additional parallel, itself of a sociological nature, is worth noting, although whether it is accidental I cannot tell. Both Constructivism and social psychology inhabit the left of the political spectrum. Conservative variants of both can be found (Constructivists fail to acknowledge the resemblance between their position and conservative arguments for the importance of culture), but they are a distinct minority. Social psychology blossomed in the 1930s and the 1940s by studying prejudice and what was then called race relations, and for these scholars the purpose was not to achieve an antiseptic academic understanding, but rather to make American society more just and racially equal. Most Constructivists are similarly deeply critical of the conduct of world politics in general and American foreign policy in particular, and indeed much of their animus toward Realism stems from the belief that it justifies and perpetuates dangerous and repressive patterns by socializing leaders and the public into accepting this view of international politics as natural. In parallel, in arguing for the power of socialization both social psychologists and Constructivists are confronted with the tension between their belief in the possibility of change and their stress on the ways in which structures, values, and beliefs reproduce themselves.