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Contestable Categories and Public Opinion

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Abstract *The social world is a kaleidoscope of potential realities, which can be readily evoked by altering the ways in which observations are framed and categorized. Classification schemes are therefore central to political maneuver and political persuasion. Typically, they are driven by the dominant elite's ideology and prejudice rather than by rigorous analysis or the aspiration to solve social problems. This article provides examples of common questionable categorizations of government policies and contestable metaphors used for public figures.*

Keywords Categorization, Persian Gulf War, public opinion, reality construction

Governments grant benefits that are sometimes lavish to some and impose deprivations, pain, and misery upon many. They win public support for these actions only by creating and spreading beliefs about those who are deserving and those who are threats and about which policies will bring desirable results and which will be painful, unfair, or disastrous, in short, about what causes what.

We are seldom aware how easily and frequently our beliefs about causes and consequences are created and changed by subtle or unconscious cues. Quite the contrary: we ordinarily assume that we live in a world in which the causes and consequences of actions are stable and fairly well known. Neither the media nor academics pay much attention to the fundamental political work that makes benefits and deprivations politically possible: the creation and remolding of public beliefs about the causes of particular outcomes, thereby justifying some actions and building opposition to others.

That creation and remolding depends ultimately upon change in conception and perception: upon seeing something as a different entity or envisioning it from a transformed perspective. Such metamorphosis is common and easily brought about, for example, as with works of art. Art teaches us to see the world in new ways, and the creation of categories provides one kind of aesthetic lens through which conception and vision are constituted or reconstituted.

What we "know" about the nature of the social world depends upon how we frame and interpret the cues we receive about that world. Those cues would be very confusing if our minds did not give them particular meanings by focusing on a few and ignoring most and by placing those that receive attention into specific categories. A war may be named a noble crusade (in which case the killing of innocent civilians and the profiteering the conflict brings, for example, are minimized); or it may be labeled an act of unjustified aggression, in which case carnage and profiteering become a major focus of attention and claims about the national goals to be realized from victory are repressed.

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The character, causes, and consequences of any phenomenon becomes radically different as changes are made in what is prominently displayed, what is repressed, and especially in how observations are classified. Far from being stable, the social world is therefore a chameleon, or, to suggest a better metaphor, a kaleidoscope of potential realities, any of which can be readily evoked by altering the ways in which observations are framed and categorized. Because alternative categorizations win support for specific political beliefs and policies, classification schemes are central to political maneuver and persuasion.

Categorization is, in fact, the necessary condition of abstract thought and of the utilization of symbols In reasoning and in expression, the distinctive abilities of homo sapiens. With alternative categorizations, meanings change, often radically. But in statements about politics the choice of categories is typically driven by ideology and prejudice rather than by rigorous analysis or the aspiration to solve social problems.

Categories are especially powerful as shapers of political beliefs, enthusiasms, fears, and antagonisms when they appear to be natural, self-evident, or simple description rather than devised as propaganda tools. The labeling of a war either as "noble crusade" or as "naked aggression" reeks of polemics and so evokes suspicion and resistance in many. But its characterization as "foreign policy" or as "military action" looks at first blush simply like realistic description. Yet those labels are also examples of arbitrary highlighting and exclusion, and they are vital to the construction of public support. The category "foreign" excludes from attention the crucial ways in which domestic policy influences the outbreak and nature of war and is, in turn, decisively influenced by war or preparation for war. War is domestic, as much as foreign, policy, but to classify it that way immediately creates different beliefs about its causes and consequences. For the same kinds of reasons international economic conditions are both domestic and foreign in their origins and effects. The category "military" similarly minimizes the enormous effect of war on the civilian population. The skewed labels "foreign" and "military" win wide discretion for officials, diminishing popular influence upon policy.

Deliberate propaganda is therefore not the fundamental reason people are frequently misled about which governmental policies and which candidates for office will help them and which will hurt, which groups should be blamed for policy failures and social problems and which accepted as competent and deserving. Propaganda is effective or ineffective according to how well it reflects underlying beliefs about how desirable or undesirable policy outcomes can be brought about; and those beliefs flow, in turn, from the construction of special realities through categorization. The misrepresentations of soundbites, contrived images, lies, and other inventions of public relations consultants find a receptive audience only when they reinforce hopes and fears that classifications of people and actions have already created. Otherwise, they are recognized (and classified) as propaganda and dismissed.

Category Mistakes

A main reason for misreadings about central political issues lies in the dubious ways we classify news stories about public policy into discrete and autonomous spheres and so foster false beliefs about the causes of problems and the consequences of governmental actions. The prevailing classification schemes obscure the close links among developments that are routinely categorized into separate domains: domestic, foreign, military, economic,

crises or routine developments, benefits to particular groups, actions that reflect personality or individual character, or the promotion of widely supported goals, like education and environmental protection.

Each such label highlights some immediate, surface aspect of a governmental policy while obscuring the close links among related policies and related categories. The classification therefore misleads opinion about the origins of problems, their effects, their scope, and effective remedies. At the same time the conventional categories *are* effective in winning and maintaining public support for established hierarchies and inequalities, as discussed below. Whether they are perceived as mistakes therefore hinges upon the values and ideology of the observer. This pervasive influence upon public opinion is rarely noticed. Indeed, its remarkable power is closely tied to its invisibility and to the assumption that the common classifications and the cause-effect relationships they imply are objective and self-evident.

The Persian Gulf War

The Persian Gulf War of 1991 offers a revealing example of the influence of misleading categorization upon politics and opinion. The war was publicized as a military and foreign policy concern: a classification that encourages the public and Congress to grant the widest policy discretion to the White House and the Pentagon, as noted earlier, to accept public sacrifices as necessary and patriotic, and to focus upon military considerations as paramount. But this perspective, powerfully disseminated by a seemingly self-evident label, concealed most of the consequences of the war.

It obscured the remarkably unequal pattern of sacrifices and benefits by constructing a compelling metaphor of a foreign enemy threatening the interests or "way of life" of the United States. But the enlisted men and women and the junior officers sent to the Arabian desert were disproportionately lower middle class or poor and disproportionately black. They were in the armed forces largely because the high levels of unemployment and underemployment in the city ghettos and among young people over the last several decades have encouraged those with no other options to enlist or join the reserves in order to support themselves and their families or pay for their schooling. To describe people in this situation as "volunteering" for the armed forces or the reserves is formally accurate but blatantly deceptive in its psychological, political, and moral implications; it is still another instance of an ideological and contestable categorization.

In the language ordinarily used to describe the situation, economic conditions that amount to coercion to curtail civilian careers and risk lives disappeared from view, while a military label for governmental policies in the Gulf stimulated the media and the public to define the motives of the troops as patriotism and eagerness to "serve their country." By contrast, the recruitment literature that helped induce enlistment stressed a different categorization for the peacetime armed forces, constructing organizations that help enlistees pay for an education, learn useful skills, and see the world.

The labeling of the Gulf War as a military and foreign policy issue also obscured understanding of the monumental political and economic benefits that flowed to some from the preparations for war in the Gulf region. The "peace dividend" that threatened for a short time to restore some of the massive Reagan cuts in programs for the poor, the sick, the schools, the cities, housing, and the environment disappeared, while the military budget was rescued from steep cuts and could continue to enrich suppliers of military goods and services and to promote the careers of civilian and military officials in the Defense Department. The White House basked in rally-round-the-flag sentiment, especially

in Congress, while public wrath over the savings and loan scandal was diverted and blunted, as was the disposition to oppose other presidential actions like the sale of massive amounts of technologically sophisticated armaments to Saudi Arabia, the embracing of President Hafez el-Assad of Syria as an ally after American regimes had long denounced him as a vicious terrorist, and the restoration of military assistance to the repressive government of El Salvador. While there were certainly occasional media references inconsistent with the misleading but compelling set of categories, the latter radically restructured the political agenda and restored public support for conservative and militaristic policies.

The perverse effects of the dubious labeling go considerably farther because they convert controversial policies into self-fulfilling prophecies by sanctifying both their costs and their benefits. Young people and minorities eager to escape poverty and acquire an education or skills become patriots willing to risk their lives. The substantial profits of armaments contractors and the careers of public officials, bureaucrats, and Defense officials are transformed into courage, toughness, and patriotism. In a revealing sense both kinds of actors acquire a strong incentive to redefine their own motives along these lines. If poverty, money-making, easy promotions, and military dominance in civil society can so admirably be erased as problems and reconstructed as sources of patriotic actions, the incentive to do so becomes hard to resist.

Other Doubtful Classifications

The Gulf War example is an easy one to understand because it involves an exceptional development with immediate and dramatic consequences. But the more durable and more typical misconceptions about who benefits and who suffers from public policies rest on classifications that reflect both a failure to connect effects with their causes and strong emotions based on class, race, gender, and other readily aroused sources. These are even more likely than the Persian Gulf issue to be experienced as self-evident descriptions rather than contestable interpretations; they are therefore even more potent as influences on public support for policies and regimes.

Public alarm about violence in the streets, drug abuse, and uncontrollable crime exemplifies the point well. It is obvious from the "crime control" measures that are increasingly popular, in spite of their failure to make inroads on the incidence of crime, what model of cause and effect is paramount in the minds of legislators and much of the public. The fashionable belief, repeatedly revitalized by the rhetoric of public officials and candidates for elective office, is that crime springs from evil people who thrive upon muggings, robberies, drug abuse, and murders. This tough law enforcement, long prison sentences, capital punishment, and expansion of the criminal code to cover more and more kinds of behavior is logical. The imprisoned population of the United States more than doubled in the 1980s and is increasing at an ever faster rate in the nineties.

A controversial classification plays a decisive role in converting the land of the free into the home of the jailed. At the same time it helps office holders win reelection and helps conservatives defeat social programs. The facile evocation of inherently criminal types conceals the link between an economic and social system that denies large numbers of people the means to support themselves and their families and their resort to illegal action. To break the law is in part a way of surviving and in part a form of social protest, usually the only effective way for people who lack money and status to express their anger at a social and political system that keeps them poor and dependent (Piven

and Cloward 1977). It becomes a way of life if the absence of other options continues long enough.

Here again, a widely disseminated classification not only helps create emotional support for blaming the victims, but becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as well. The labeling of large numbers of people as innate criminals and convicts ensures that for them and their families breaking the law will remain the main and often only option for survival and political expression—reinforcing the controversial categorization and constructing an ever more vicious circle of cause and effect.

Welfare benefits, to consider another example, are classified as relief and reform; but they are chiefly effective as a means of regulating the poor so as to maintain a large supply of cheap and docile labor (Piven and Cloward 1971). Again, both the inadequate welfare label and the material benefit to employers buttress established inequalities.

The armaments budget, categorized as "defense," may well be the main influence on economic booms and recessions in the industrialized countries with large military establishments. It influences regional prosperity or recession as well, and it attracts funds, scientists, and engineers available for research and development to military rather than peaceful uses. In serving these functions it reinforces the inequalities already noted. The potent defense symbol is in part descriptive and in much larger part a rationalization for actions and nonactions that a more adequate classification would place under such rubrics as "economic," "scientific," and "social."

Many of the phenomena we label as "social problems" (poverty, unemployment, discrimination against minorities and women) are not recognized as advantages for elites, though they are major benefits for them. For employers, widespread poverty and high unemployment mean lower labor costs and a docile work force. For white males, discrimination against minorities and women mean better jobs and reduced competition. Liberal legislation classified as efforts to solve these problems is chiefly responsive to the interests of those who benefit from the problems and so is rarely effective in changing the discriminatory conditions, though there are often gestures sufficient to minimize social disorder and disruption. Both the minimal protections and the failure to solve the underlying problems maintain the established system.

Though most conventional classifications related to public policy are doubtless the result of long-standing confusions and socialization practices that reflect dominant ideology, some are deliberate efforts to secure economic advantage for a particular group. Construction workers, for example, are increasingly classified as independent contractors rather than as employees to avoid paying them unemployment compensation, workmen's compensation, and social security benefits.

Because classifications of problems, issues, and policies are major influences on political support and opposition, those that carry a strong emotional appeal are favored. Unfortunately, the categories that focus attention on long-term consequences and on the implications of policies for the widest range of people typically carry less emotional appeal than those that concentrate attention on the immediate consequences of an action for a concerned group or individual. As a familiar line puts it, an opportunity to win riches for oneself at the risk of death for an unknown, randomly selected Chinese is very tempting. In a more realistic and common example business people often yield to the temptation to present goods as quality merchandise and good buys even though they will predictably harm unknown customers.

Voters often oppose tax increases for themselves at the risk that schools will become

ineffective in educating children. Is the measure in question best classified as a tax bill or as an education measure? The Willie Horton ad in the 1988 election was presented as a dramatization of the danger of crime in the streets, not as a commentary on the long-term effects of prison overcrowding, denial of furloughs, or the ineffectiveness of imprisonment in reducing crime rates. The latter focus involves dry scholarship and statistics; the former hits close to home for many urban residents even if its message is misleading.

A general label for a political ideology can create very different beliefs and emotions than names for the specific policies the category implies. To refer to enriching the wealthy, depriving the poor of the means to feed, clothe, and house themselves adequately, or executing a disproportionate number of poor and black people for crimes is to provoke reactions that are chiefly disapproving because those actions look unfair and shameful; but to refer to "conservative" policies is, for many, to garb the same policies in a perfectly respectable and even admirable aura.

The category "conservative" evokes a picture in the mind of a place in a pattern of ideologies, all of which are respectable; but the specific labels for many actions conservatives favor evoke a picture of mean and unfair treatment of victims. The same gap between the connotations of a general category and the implications of specific ones it embraces appears in denunciations or exaltations of "liberal" policies that do not name the specific actions in question. In these instances a name drastically alters meanings and public reactions.

Sometimes the names of categories imply radical differences from other categories when the differences are in fact minor or nonexistent. A recent study (Linebaugh 1992) calls attention to the impressive similarities among the experiences of African-American slaves, Irish farm laborers, domestic workers and wives, and skilled artisans, journeymen, and other workers in London in the eighteenth century. None of these workers ordinarily received money regularly in payment for their labor; they all survived by helping themselves to some of the wealth around them in ways that were often illegitimate or illegal; and they all were vital to the work process. As one historian has put it, "In such circumstances distinctions between 'free' and 'unfree' labor, and between household and factory, which are so important to the history of the nineteenth century working class, did not cut nearly as deep" (Merrill 1992).

Categories as an Integrated Network

The list of favored and conventional categories and their associated confusions regarding causes and effects, benefits and sacrifices, and vicious circles could easily be expanded. Indeed, the set of contestable classifications regarding a wide range of public policies comprises an interconnected structure: a self-perpetuating system whose various parts buttress one another and so continuously buttress long-established inequalities. The most common ones exalt the actions and motives of elites and justify sacrifices for many others by defining them as less deserving, dangerous, unproductive, or parasitic.

The media, regimes, and academic studies all typically focus on particular public issues, ignoring their close connections to other issues and policies. The treatment of closely connected issues as though they were autonomous is itself a major category mistake.

The fabricated separation of an integrated set of policies into autonomous parts has two consequences that are vital for the survival and the legitimacy of regimes: unpopular actions can be portrayed as deviations rather than the inevitable outcome of the regime's ideology and value system; and effective analysis and alleviation of problems are hindered

and become unlikely. Those results would never appear if news reports and official statements made it clear that seemingly piecemeal governmental actions comprise an indissoluble whole: an integrated system in which the unpopular policies are typically the inevitable outcome.

Consider some of the most common news reported as separate stories in the media, studied as discrete subjects in universities, analyzed by specialists with diverse academic training, and addressed by governments as requiring remedies or solutions that are independent of each other: fiscal policy, monetary policy, crime, military budgets, unemployment, elections, mental illness, racism, sexism, local and national police operations, health policy, educational policy. The close ties among these public issues are apparent to anyone with even a modest understanding of public affairs and social science; but neither the media, the government, nor the universities typically present them in a context in which the focus is on the analysis of their connections. Reports and studies concentrate instead on the diverse problems they present.

But it is precisely the links among them that explain their dynamics and provide a basis for dealing with them effectively. Almost always some public policies cause problems in other areas; and a political emphasis on some issues that generate strong emotions frequently induces officials and the public to ignore other issues that have a greater effect on well-being and that may give rise to the emotionally charged issues in the first place.

Consider a common and important example. The least seductive concerns for most of the public, and therefore for the media and for public officials as well, are technical economic policies and problems. They are typically hard to understand, and they seem to deal with abstractions instead of helping or hurting specific groups of people. Their direct and potent ties to a whole host of social problems that do get a great deal of public attention, including poverty, crime, unemployment, inflation, educational resources, prosperity, and recession, are therefore easy to miss or ignore. To try to solve or ameliorate any of these prominent concerns without paying close attention to their sources in fiscal and monetary policy is to assure that remedies will be superficial or entirely beside the mark. An action of the Federal Reserve Board that raises or lowers interest rates or bank discount rates draws yawns from most of the public, but it is likely to affect their well-being in a substantial way. It may induce or aggravate a recession, contributing to poverty, homelessness, the inability of state and local governments to deal with social problems, and all sorts of social tensions, including racism, sexism, and the inclination of people afraid of sinking into poverty to blame those who are even worse off than they are themselves. Sensitivity training, job training and counseling, welfare for the poor, shelters for the homeless and similar policies become necessary; but they only deal with symptoms that are likely to remain serious or grow worse as long as their causes are not addressed.

Other tempting political responses make the problems worse and generate actions that are even more counterproductive. Public chagrin and embarrassment with welfare recipients, the homeless, and those who commit the crimes of the poor are likely to yield cuts in welfare eligibility and benefits and larger prison populations respectively, all of which make it harder to support families and more likely that crime will increase. Poverty, homelessness, and crime are nonetheless reported, studied, and treated as autonomous social problems or as the fault of their victims. They are rarely linked to their economic or social origins or to the misconceived public policies that perpetuate and aggravate them.

Why are they not usually the fault of their victims, as a great deal of popular opinion and right-wing rhetoric maintain? It is true enough that not every victim of poverty resorts

to crime or becomes homeless or fails to obtain a good education; but it is also certain that a large number of poor people will succumb to these problems as they cope with poor schools, housing shortages, serious levels of unemployment, and inability to provide food and clothing for their families. The conservative argument that the poor have themselves to blame for their problems obviously confuses an explanation of why some people manage to avoid those problems with the fact that most cannot possibly do so because the problems are not rooted in individual inadequacies, but rather in social inequalities and social institutions that make life too difficult to cope with.

Another striking outcome of the practice of treating an integrated set of issues as though they were autonomous is justification of governmental failure to solve or ameliorate them: partly because blame is assigned to their victims, partly because they appear to be unsolvable by any measures that are feasible for governments to undertake.

Categorization and Ideology

The terms used most frequently in political discourse are potent ideological weapons because they are accepted and categorized as factual or descriptive. "Leader," "government," "official," "regulation," "welfare," "defense," "election," and so on reassure the public that its interests are being protected: that public officials who understand difficult issues will handle them competently and with integrity and will reflect the wishes and needs of the population as a whole. These terms accordingly help induce support for the public policies regimes pursue and acceptance of the sacrifices they entail, even while media accounts and political science textbooks and lectures deploy them as objective descriptive tools.

Each of them is a contestable metaphor, not a factual description. Incumbents of high public office are seldom "leaders" and are unlikely to achieve or keep their positions if they do not conform to established policies and ideology more often than they innovate (Edelman 1988). "Defense" always involves substantial preparations for offensive military actions, often fails to protect home populations, and even more often imposes severe economic burdens on those populations. "Regulation" has served the interests of the economically powerful groups ostensibly being regulated more than the interests of the general public or politically weak groups. This pattern of reassuring tropes that are belied by the actual functioning of the institution in question applies to every such term that regimes socialize people to accept as simply descriptive. These terms serve as key bulwarks of the dominant ideology by depicting threatening actions as reassuring, not by describing an objective reality.

Misleading beliefs about what causes what are all the more powerful in politics because we typically see our opinions and those of other people as consistent, firmly based in moral commitments and an unchanging ego. We do not easily recognize how volatile, easy, and deceptive the process of constructing opinion typically is.

The assumption that opinions are stable is itself a category mistake, of course, displacing the site of opinions regarding political issues from the social to the individual. If opinions were indeed rooted in each individual person's "character" or reason, they would consistently reflect that person's moral qualities and capacity for logic. But opinions always involve social role taking, social influences, and social pressures, making them both volatile and readily rationalized as they change. Categorization is fundamental to their creation and re-creation and to their rationalization as well.

The dubious empirical and moral neatness and stability that dominant categories evoke mean that most of the population of the world underestimates its capacity to

change social and political institutions. Those institutions seem to be natural and justified regardless of what outcomes they produce, even if those outcomes are failures or disasters.

The Reagan administration can be admired as an instructive lesson in the remarkable possibilities for rationalizing failures, though that is not how it is usually categorized. These were the years of a deliberately created severe recession in 1981 and 1982, growing poverty and homelessness, a declining standard of living for the middle class, continuing rebuffs to women and minorities, the Iran-Contra scandal, and the savings and loan scandal, and of the placing of financial burdens on the cities and states with which these units of government cannot cope. Yet Reagan and his administration remained extremely popular, his designated heir was elected to succeed him by a landslide, and there is continuing esteem for Reagan and his advisers. Clearly, political success and failure depend on constructed categories, not on the benefits and costs that political actions generate.

Expression, Images, and Compartmentalization

The connections among misleading language, public opinion, and public policy are powerful, though subtle. Language itself does not create errors in belief and in governmental action. But it can play powerfully on established prejudices, spread biases to a wider population, and make them compelling elements in formulating public policy. It does so all the more effectively because the role of language as itself a form of political action is not readily recognized.

It is the expression of ideas that makes it possible to hold them, think about them, react to them, and spread them to others. There must be an image, as articulated in art, in words, or in other symbols. The notion that an idea can somehow exist without objectification in an expression of any kind is an illusion, though the expression may take the form of a term or image in one's own mind: that is, as a contemplated exchange with others (Mead 1934; Vygotsky 1962).

That ideas exert their influence only when they are objectified in an image or a linguistic term explains a disturbing phenomenon that repeatedly appears in individual thought and in public opinion. People readily express different, even contradictory, beliefs when focusing on different images or linguistic cues because they then compartmentalize their thinking and their opinions. The person who believes nations should not "interfere in other nations' internal affairs" may support a military invasion of Panama or of Iraq when the leaders of those countries are depicted as "aggressive," "corrupt," "a madman," or "a Hitler." Images objectify hopes, fears, moral stances, enthusiasms, and revulsions and so become the focus of attention and the generators of opinions.

For many whites and males, the depiction of the poor, minorities, women, and other disadvantaged groups as responsible for their own problems, as embodying evil or criminal tendencies, or as inherently less competent than the affluent, whites, or males is an effective way of justifying their own successes as deserved or excusing their failures as the product of misguided policies that unfairly benefit inferior groups. For much of the middle class, and even for many liberals, a term like "workfare" or "affirmative action" calls up these emotionally charged ideas and channels them into political action, just as more blatant and crude expressions of racism or sexism do for people whose biases are more overt and self-conscious. The prejudices and the language evoke and reinvigorate each other.

But alternative images and the categories they imply can evoke alternative sentiments and actions in the same person, regardless of their logical incompatibility. The advocate of "freedom of expression" may also support the censorship of works of art and literature when they are classified as "obscene" or "subversive." The person who blames the poor for their own plight can also be responsive to an evocation of the unequal chances for success faced by those born in poverty and those born into affluence.

That kind of compartmentalization and contradiction is most likely to occur with regard to issues that are reported in the media but are remote from a person's daily life. In that situation terms and images encourage the projection into an issue of the fears, hopes, frustrations, and ambitions associated with the image in question; but such ready compartmentalization and inconsistency is less likely over problems and challenges encountered in everyday life because immediate experience then helps correct delusions and misconceptions. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's job is likely to hinge more on everyday experiences than on the words and images in brochures published by the National Association of Manufacturers or in Marxist writings.

Still, most opinions about public affairs do stem from reports about matters remote from everyday experience: wars in distant places, a civil rights bill that chiefly affects minorities of which one is not a member, actions of a Federal Reserve Board whose functions one understands only dimly, and so on. In these common situations interpretations are easily influenced, for there is little available evidence to counter whatever claim is advanced.

Those who do make claims, moreover, are likely to win a wide hearing by linking them to a relatively small set of widely taught and deeply held assumptions that also draw on neat categories: for example, the need to support a leader in time of crisis, the need to resist or attack a threatening villain, a promise that a feared or hated current condition (crime, poverty, immorality) will be eliminated if a particular policy is pursued.

Works of Art as Shapers of Political Beliefs

The construction of imaginary worlds with invented categories and invented cause-effect relationships is strongly influenced by images, scenes, actions, and characters from widely known or frequently imitated works of art. Good and bad art provide the images and stereotypes into which we translate the news. News reporters, editors, interest groups, and supporters of political causes help induce the public to fit current situations into these models, while rival political groups propose conflicting models.

Works of art similarly provide plot patterns into which we translate news reports. Among the more common are the triumph of virtue, the threats posed by unreason, and the act of God.

The news becomes a stylized narrative, most of its pertinent details, history, consequences, and links to other current developments left out or supplied with a meaning that fits the prevailing ideology. Reporters, editors, and interest groups help induce the public to fit current situations into these models, in which each category or image implies or presupposes a story that bolsters its political impact. The image of the tough general, for example, evokes a narrative about dangerous enemies who will be overcome if military means are made available, but who will triumph if there is reliance on irresolute leaders. The category "regulation" suggests that formal enactment of a law will bring protection of consumers or some other politically weak group from that time onward.

When they are effective as propaganda, the stock situations, characters, and scenarios

are vivid and morally explicit. There is no question about who are heroes and who are villains, which actions are ethical and which are sinister. The reduction of multiple, competing claims to moral justification and rational action to neat contrasts between evil and virtue, competence and error, evokes a herd spirit. The focus is strongly on subjects who make good or bad, successful or incompetent, choices. Clear cues generate widely supported admiration, anger, or the impulse to attack people who are depicted as alien or suspect.

These invented political worlds have no space for people whose choices are dictated, encouraged, or limited by the situations in which they find themselves; such worlds are therefore not morally ambiguous, as the world of our everyday lives typically is. In the world of stock categories neither poverty nor cutthroat business rivalry provides an inducement or a need to break laws; bureaucratic settings and pressures do not tempt or coerce staff members to grow insensitive to clients or induce clients to evade rules; and leaders innovate rather than follow constructed opinion.

In everyday life there are constant responses to morally unclear situations, but they are not the stuff from which political appeals and, successes grow because they blur both moralistic claims and rational strategies. Social solidarity and pressures to conform to the dominant view cannot be the key influences. In place of enthusiasm and a sense of solidarity with the herd there is likely to be ambivalence.

Although the imaginary worlds we create do not describe the complicated, often confusing and murky world in which we live, they do powerfully rationalize policy outcomes in that world, helping people to adjust to their social situations and accept them, whether they are affluent, poor, powerful, or powerless.

As already noted, the most common classification mistakes make life worse for the disadvantaged and benefit those who already enjoy the most of what there is to get. It is not hard to understand why political language reflects and reinforces that inherent bias. We are socialized into the dominant ideology from infancy on: trained in subtle and explicit ways to admire the successful and become suspicious of the abilities and integrity of the disadvantaged, even if we are disadvantaged ourselves. More important, the classifications we learn use political issues to express a compelling, though usually subliminal, narrative about who are meritorious and who undeserving. What seems to be an objective term for describing people or actions is an ideological weapon.

Such dubious categories also construct and maintain animosities because they depict good and evil, threat and alliance as clear cut. A full picture of the reasons for developments in the light of their historical backgrounds, the influence of settings and social structures in constructing people, and the recognition of hostile acts as byproducts of a world we never made would, of course, help us see them as far from clear cut. In this sense news reports can be understood as a never-ending fuel for often misleading narratives, prejudices, loyalties, beliefs, and animosities, which, In their turn, generate still more news that exacerbates established biases and conflicts. The result is a vicious circle of news, actions, and beliefs that often escalates and makes escape into a more hopeful pattern unlikely.

Some Other Influences of Works of Art

Art can also emancipate the mind from stereotypes, prejudices, and narrow horizons. It repeatedly generates new and useful ways of seeing the world around us. As Arnheim (1974, p. 144) put it, "on occasion an artist comes upon an image that embodies some basic subject with a spellbinding validity. The same story, the same composition, or the same posture lives on for centuries as an indelible contribution to the way man visualizes his world."

Nelson Goodman (1968, p. 33) makes a similar point: "The marking off of new elements or classes, or of familiar ones by labels of new kinds or by new combinations of old labels, may provide new insight . . . if it (a picture) calls for and yet resists assignment to a usual kind of picture, it may bring out neglected likenesses and differences . . . and in some measure remake our world."

When Pablo Picasso was told that his portrait of Gertrude Stein did not look like her, he is said to have responded, "No matter; it will." The implication, of course, is that Stein would come to be seen in the light of his portrait. To quote Goodman again, "Nature is a product of art and discourse."

Kaethe Kollwitz's portraits of working women undermine the common political depiction of workers as an abstraction that is less than human: manual workers as lazy or stupid; workers as a threat to the respectable classes. In her drawings and paintings we see workers as fellow human beings, and we see the pain of poverty and of lives lived under miserable circumstances.

Categorization is fundamental to expression, meaning, and ideology and therefore to political success and failure, which depend on constructed categories rather than on the benefits and costs that political actions generate. The categories shape our definitions of benefits and costs and they are always contestable.

That depressing conclusion has not been evident throughout American history or world history. It is valid at the end of the twentieth century for the paradoxical reason that the mass media can now reach virtually the entire population for the first time in human history; and while in theory the media can inform and educate, regimes and interest groups have learned that in practice they can use the media to place mass audiences in invented worlds that justify the outcomes of any policies at all.

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