

Trump's America: International Relations and the Construction of They-Images*

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Unequal power balances (or power ratios) between human beings, including unequal power ratios between nations, distort mutual perceptions in systematic, recognizable ways. And changes in power ratios over time are associated with shifts in perception. The power position of the USA in global affairs affects Americans' "we-images" of their own country and their (often inaccurate) "they-image" of the outside world. It also affects the outside world's they-images of the USA. Norbert Elias's theory of established-outsider relations is drawn upon to suggest how these may all be affected by the relative decline of American power.

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It is rarely granted to the strong, the powerful, and the ferocious to understand their own strength, power and ferocity.
(Bucholc, 2015, p. 13)

The sole advantage of the repulsive and uncouth lout who currently occupies the White House is that he may enable people to see the USA as it *really* is. And by "people" I mean both Americans themselves and non-Americans in the rest of the world.

After that provocative opening remark, I want to offer an academic hypothesis about how unequal power ratios between human beings, including unequal balances of power between nations, distort mutual perceptions and self-perceptions in systematic, recognizable ways.

I write as an academic, and moreover as a *European* academic. Let us start by mentioning one source of distorted perception on our own part. People like me tend to know hundreds of American people—but they are overwhelmingly fellow academics, publishers, and similar intellectuals like ourselves, well-educated and well-informed, and often over here in Europe. More generally, European people at large—perhaps especially the British¹—seem to be influenced in their perceptions of the USA mainly by images derived from New England, New York, and Pennsylvania with an historical component going back to upright Pilgrims and Quakers; in short, they still tend still to see the USA as an offshoot of Europe, one instance of what Louis Hartz (1964) called "fragment societies". Alternatively, or in addition, Europeans often appear to have adopted elements of Americans' own collective self-perception (or, to use Norbert Elias's term (2010, pp. 164-170),

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¹ Long ago, Allan Nevins (1948) pointed out that, as the balance of power between Britain and the USA gradually swung in the latter's favour over the period of two centuries, the British, who had started by rather looking down on Americans came very much to look up to them.

we-image). This may extend to unconsciously accepting what Robert Bellah (1967) famously called American “civil religion”, with its implicit biblical analogies: the city upon the hill, Washington as a Moses figure leading his people to freedom, the assassinated Lincoln as a re-crucified Christ, and so on. As we shall see in a moment, this “rubbing off” of Americans’ *we-image* on to outsiders is highly significant.

Yet when Europeans set foot outside the ivied towers and beyond the eastern and western seaboard and major university towns in between, they very often express shock at how badly informed too many Americans are about the world outside the USA, or even outside their own state. This has been documented in social scientific research over many years. For decades, it has been noted how little a part foreign affairs play in Presidential elections, even though it is arguable that the powers of a President in dealing with other countries are more extensive and less constrained than his domestic reach (see the study by Aldrich, Sullivan, & Borgida, 1989, and for the last two Presidential elections, Friedman, 2012 and Saunders, 2016). Perhaps most impressive is Arlie Russell Hochschild’s outstanding ethnography of Tea Party supporters in Louisiana (2016). Hochschild (2016) showed that, in spite of their far-right political beliefs, these ordinary working- and middle- class people are not monsters devoid of sympathy with their fellow human beings. In their relations within their local community, they are kind and well-meaning people, not conspicuously selfish. But their human sympathy or “circle of mutual identification” (Swaan, 1995) is of limited radius.² It calls to mind a remark by the historian David Potter:

In the twentieth century the United States developed what was perhaps the first mass society, but the American cult of equality and individualism prevented Americans from analysing their mass society in realistic terms. Often they treated it as if it were simply an infinite aggregation of Main Streets in Zenith, Ohio. (1968, p. 136)

But I think the problem extends to a much higher stratum, including those who have made American foreign policy since the Second World War. There is not space enough here to list all the catastrophes of American foreign policy, but perhaps it is enough to mention just Vietnam and the destabilization of the entire Middle East. Andrew Alexander (2012) had depicted in forensic detail how the construction of the post-war American Empire was guided by an “imperialism of ignorance”.

To return to the main point, concerning perception in international relations, yes, the USA did begin as a fragment of Europe that broke away politically a couple of centuries ago. But so did the countries that we now call “Latin America”, and we still tend to think of them as distinctly un-European in overall character (Huntington, 1999). The Hispanist and international relations scholar Charles Jones (2007) had drawn attention to this anomaly, arguing in effect that the USA is a lot more like Latin American and a lot less like Western Europe than we are accustomed to think. To simplify a complex argument, Jones suggested that the USA and its hemispheric neighbours to the south share a number of historical experiences that give their societies certain common features and set them to some extent apart from Western Europe. These include the legacy of conquest and of slavery (both of which have contributed to race and racism as salient traits), marked religiosity, and relatively high rates of violence. We may add a rapacious attitude to natural resources, born of the abundance that confronted settlers.

We are, however, concerned with a problem of *reciprocal* misperception, and I have suggested that unequal power ratios between human beings, including those between nations, distort mutual perceptions and

² Another, perhaps better, way to conceptualize this is to employ Norbert Elias’s idea of the “we-I balance” (Elias, 2010, pp. 137-208).

self-perceptions in systematic, recognizable ways. Let me explain the possibly unfamiliar concept of “power ratio”.

The term “power ratio” was introduced by Norbert Elias because of the risk of misunderstanding of its more familiar near-synonym “balance of power”. The word “balance” can conjure up the implication of *equal* power between parties: One thinks of the nations of late nineteenth-century Europe striving to maintain stability in the polygon of forces among the powers of the continent. But “balance” can also imply inequality as in “balance of probability”, and that meaning is more useful in understanding most social relations between individual and groups. Power ratios are found in all human relationships:

Today, built-in tensions and conflicts ... are characteristic of the interdependent functions of workers and entrepreneurs, as of those between groups of states. In previous periods, they were characteristic of the triangular relationship between kings, nobles and citizens, or between segments of a tribe. They are no less characteristic of the functional interdependences between husbands and wives or parents and children. At the root of these trials of strength are usually problems such as these: Whose potential for withholding what the other requires is greater? Who, accordingly, is more or less dependent on the other? Who, therefore, has to submit or adapt himself more to the other's demands? (Elias, 2012, pp. 73-74)

When some people have a large power advantage, the experience affects in quite specific ways how they perceive themselves and others. This can be seen at every level from the microcosm—the partners in a marriage, for instance—right up to the macrocosm of international relations. The principle can be derived from Hegel's (1977, p. 111) discussion of the master-slave relationship, but its relevance struck me through the findings of a study of a Dutch refuge for battered women and of their violent partners. These were marital relationships with a very unequal power balance, and the authors (Van Stolk & Wouters, 1987) found that the women took much more notice of their men than the men did of the women, and the women were much more attuned to their men's wishes and needs than the men were to theirs. When the women were asked to give a character sketch of their partner, they could do so with considerable precision, nuance, and insight, while the men could not describe their wife's except in terms of clichés applicable to women in general. It appears to be a general characteristic of the unequal power ratios that the weaker party “understands” the stronger better than the stronger do the weaker. As a naturalized Irish citizen of British origin, I am very much aware of Irish people at large knowing vastly more about their larger neighbour, the United Kingdom, than British people know about Ireland.

A more comprehensive insight into this principle is provided by the theory of established-outsider relations.

Established-Outsider Relations

Around 1959-1960, Norbert Elias and his MA student John Scotson conducted a study (2008) of a small industrial settlement on the periphery of Leicester. Briefly, it contained two working-class groups.³ The two groups worked in the same factories, and by ordinary sociological classifications based on their occupations, they were indistinguishable. The main difference, however, was that one group lived in the “Village”, an area of housing dating from the 1880s, where many of the families were old-established and had intermarried over the generations, weaving dense social networks. Being long established in the neighbourhood, they had also

³ *White* working-class, one should perhaps say now—it was before the advent in Leicester of large numbers of South Asian and other migrants.

come to occupy all the main centres of local power—in the churches, charities, clubs, pubs, political parties, and so on. The other group, living in the “Estate”, built on the eve of the Second World War, were relative newcomers, many of them relocated with their employers from London during the war. The essential point is that the “established” Villagers contrived to despise the extremely similar “outsiders” in the Estate. One of Elias’s most interesting insights was into the role played by gossip. The Villagers gossiped among each other about themselves, in terms of a “minority of the best”. That is, they constructed a we-image—a kind of group self-stereotype—based on the most upright and worthy members of their own group. That was “praise gossip”. It provided the basis for strong we-feelings and a collective sense of virtue. But there was “blame gossip” as well. They gossiped about the people of the Estate, in terms of a “minority of the worst”, constructing another stereotype, a “they-image” of the Estate based on the behaviour of just two or three families who were violent and drunk and promiscuous, and whose kids were in danger of becoming “juvenile delinquents”. Most people in the Estate were not like that. But they could not retaliate with a wave of counter-gossip, because their social networks and their positions of power were not as well developed as those exploited by the “Villagers”. Still more significantly, Elias and Scotson (2008) found that the people of the Estate had tended to absorb the Villagers’ adverse image of them into their own we-image—they had begun to think of themselves as to some extent “not as good as” the Villagers. But outsider groups—the less powerful parties to a power ratio—are generally marked by ambivalence, by a fluctuating balance between acceptance of and resentment at their position of inferiority. And, in general, when the power ratio between an established and an outsider group comes to be more evenly balanced, the resentment will come more to the fore. Elias later elaborated and extended this model to form an important component of his overall theory of power ratios.⁴

The USA as a Global Establishment

Now, how does this apply to the USA’s position in the world today? America has very obviously occupied the main loci of world power since 1945, and—at least at first impression—more emphatically since 1990. It is not just a matter of military power, although, as is well known, the USA’s expenditure on its military forces roughly equals that of all the other 195 or so countries of the world combined. This military apparatus, it should be noted, represents a decisive break with American history prior to the Second World War, when, in times of peace, its forces were modest in scale.⁵ It is also a matter of overwhelming economic power. The USA was already an enormous industrial power, but emerged from the war in an unprecedentedly dominant position, the economies of both its European allies and enemies and of Japan having been wrecked in course of the conflict. The entrenchment of the dollar as the principal world trading and reserve currency meant that the USA could in effect “print money” and borrow at favourable rates without limit. But it has also provided, as we have seen in recent years, the basis for a great measure of extra-territorial jurisdiction. By US law, all trades in dollars must pass through New York, and thus—for example—European banks have been fined massively under US law for breaking the economic sanctions imposed by the USA on states, such as Iran and

⁴ See Elias’s essays “Towards a Theory of Established-Outsiders Relations” (2008a [1976]) and “Further Aspects of Established-Outsiders Relations: The Maycomb Model” (2008b [1990]), in Elias and Scotson, 2008, pp. 1-36 and pp. 207-231 respectively.

⁵ For calculations of the “military participation ratio” (the ratio of military personnel to the whole population) in the USA since the late eighteenth century, see Mennell (2007, pp. 243-244).

Cuba.⁶ The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the credit ratings agencies also serve to impose the American economic regime and its model of capitalism on (most of) the rest of the world.

Then there is the more debatable question of cultural “soft power”. Certainly, the American mass media have extended their global reach beyond merely the distribution of Hollywood films, to the point where—for instance—the extreme right-wing Fox News television channel, as well as many American entertainment channels, are transmitted right round the world. Just how much this is convertible directly into political power and ideological domination is possibly exaggerated by American politicians, because the dissemination of American “culture” probably stokes the ambivalence typical of outsider groups, especially if the power ratio—although still unequal—is beginning to shift in their favour.

What is not very much in doubt is the capacity of the mass media *within the USA* to provide a functional alternative to “praise gossip” in the formation of a we-image of collective virtue prevalent among the American people. The “social media”, notably Facebook and Twitter, may now be coming to play some part in this, too. It was argued in the early stages of their development that such social media could become a democratizing influence, rectifying the power imbalance between the mass media controlled by big business and a hitherto mainly passive public. In principle, they make possible the dissemination of heterodox points of view as a counterbalance to the mainstream media. It is too early to be sure about this; the evidence is as yet inadequate. Since the 2016 Presidential election and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom among other dubious events, the concern has been more predominantly with their use as tools of demagogic manipulation with the potential to subvert the institutions of representative democracy (Mennell, 2017). For the moment, it seems safer to assume that the social media reinforce or subvert mainstream opinion in about the same ratio as the older mass media do. They certainly appear to do little to moderate the apparent insularity of American people at large. Among the striking symptoms of that insularity may be mentioned the 2014 American film *The Imitation Game*, about the cracking of the German military codes at Bletchley Park during the Second World War; the crucial episode of the capture of a naval Enigma machine was shown as being accomplished by *American* submariners, when the achievement was by the British and Poles, with no American involvement—a crass distortion of history. Equally symptomatic is that, whereas European audiences watched the hugely successful 2007 Danish crime series *The Killing* with subtitles, for an American audience the entire story had to be reshot in English and set in Seattle.

This trait of insularity has often been discussed (including by me—Mennell, 2010) in terms of American “individualism”. This is not an invalid idea: As the British writer Hari Kunzru, now resident in the USA, observed, “Americans are culturally averse to any explanation not based on the feelings and doings of the sovereign individual” (2015). This can often make it quite difficult to persuade individuals to restrain their own wishes in favour of a wider public good, at least beyond a fairly restricted local community in which most people know each other; “gun rights” are an obvious example, but perhaps an even better case of a public good is the insistence (and not just in America) on parental rights over whether or not their children be vaccinated against diseases ailments like measles, even though if a sizable minority remains unvaccinated the whole

⁶ Another example is the judgement of a federal court in favour of an American vulture fund (led by a right-wing Republican), ruling that Argentina must repay at full face to value the bonds that the fund had bought at junk prices after Argentina’s 2002 default. This ruling forced Argentina, which had been making a good recovery from its 2002 default, to default all over again on 31 July 2014. Joseph Stiglitz, winner of the Nobel Prize for economics, and formerly chief economist of the World Bank, said, “We’ve had a lot of bombs being thrown around the world, and this is America throwing a bomb into the global economic system. We don’t know how big the explosion will be—and it’s not just about Argentina” (Stiglitz, 2014).

community will be at much greater risk of an epidemic.

I think, however, that “individualism”, though real, is a side issue. More serious is that Americans in effect base their view of themselves on a “minority of the best”, and often perceive the rest of the world in terms of a “minority of the worst”. The USA is, and has long been, a great country. In its history and its institutions, there is an abundance of material on which to construct a we-image of virtuous superiority. They are so familiar that there is no need to list them here. A process of selection is involved in the incorporation of these virtues, but it is less rigorous than the selective exclusion of vices. There are many examples of what is *not* included in the American we-image, but which play a considerable part in the rest of the world’s *they-image* of America, and a brief listing of some of them may be useful here. They include:

In the world at large:

-the USA’s bloated military machine.

-the USA’s continuous record of military intervention in countries in many parts of the world; a depressing catalogue is provided by Alexander (2012, already cited), or more briefly Jansen (2017), while on the destabilizing effects of the decades-long war in Afghanistan, see Sopko (2018). These interventions have usually been justified as promoting “democracy”—always a dubious idea (Mennell, 2017); and often the flimsiest of veneers. As Alan Greenspan (2008) said of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, “I’m saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: The Iraq war is largely about oil”.

-its programme of kidnappings and targeted assassinations of people deemed to be its enemies; its routine use of torture;⁷ and its use of long-term imprisonment without trial at Guantanamo Bay.

-its interventions in countless elections in other countries (which make the furore about Russian intervention in the 2016 Presidential election especially piquant).

-its highly selective adherence to international law.

-its programme of spying, even on supposed allies, and indiscriminate surveillance throughout the world.

-its highly selective rhetoric of “human rights”, without any corresponding code of “human duties”.

-its support for corrupt authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Within the USA:

The rest of the world tends to know a lot more about the internal workings of America than Americans know about the rest of the world, so that many features of American society and politics also provide ingredients for their *they-image* of the USA:

-an electoral system corrupted notably by the manipulation of the franchise to disqualify millions of citizens (especially African-Americans and Hispanics), and gerrymandering of electoral boundaries—a State-level rather than federal responsibility so that election outcomes are increasingly distorted. There is a long tradition of corrupt elections in America (Gumbel, 2005), but the scandalous Presidential election of 2000 drew the world’s attention to the fact that the conduct of elections in the USA does not measure up to modern standards in the wider democratic world. It had world-historical consequences.

-a highly politicised judiciary.

-the power of the military-industrial complex, President Eisenhower’s warning (1961) against which has

⁷ To his credit, President Obama (2013) used the word “torture” instead of the usual euphemism “enhanced interrogation techniques”. In his speech at the National Defense University, Fort McNair, on 23 May 2013, he remarked that “in some cases, I believe we compromised our basic values—by using torture to interrogate our enemies, and detaining individuals in a way that ran counter to the rule of law”.

been studiously ignored—to the detriment of American democracy (though no doubt to the profit of its manufacturing economy).

-more generally, the extreme domination of government by big business and big finance. It has been estimated that one-thousandth of the population provides 25 percent of electoral campaign funding, and there is little doubt that public policy in the USA follows the sources of political donations rather than public opinion. The Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision in 2010 has effectively abolished all limits on electoral donations and expenditure short of specific quid pro quo bribery (Gilens & Page, 2014; Teachout, 2014). Teachout contends that corruption in the broad sense of the privileging of private interest over the public good was the major threat to democratic government anticipated by the framers of the Constitution, and that it is now pervasive. A stunning example was the USA's objection to a resolution at the World Health Organization promoting breast feeding, on the grounds that it could diminish the profits of American manufacturers of baby formula (Jacobs, 2018).

-the gross, and growing, social and economic inequality of American society, which (through America's global economic power) is increasingly being imposed in other countries too.

-the power of groups who deny large parts of modern scientific knowledge—on the basis of religious belief in the case of banning the teaching of evolution, but also from short-term economic self-interest in the case of obstructing measures to ameliorate the problem of climate change.

-America's high rates of violence; these have fallen somewhat in recent years (as they have in many countries), but are still very much higher than in other modern societies. This is linked to the gun culture, the obsession of a large proportion of Americans with the right to own guns, which is incomprehensible to most outsiders.⁸

-America's exceptionally high rates of incarceration, its vast prison population being very disproportionately composed of African-Americans, one symptom of the enduring legacy of racism in American society.

-the retention of the death penalty, now considered unacceptable in most Western countries.

Several items in this list would constitute a disqualification for any country wishing to be a member of the Council of Europe or the European Union.⁹

And of course, to this list can be added the election of Donald Trump in 2016. His advent offers fascinating case-study of old debates about how much the actions or character of particular individuals can produce historically lasting changes. He may prove to be an aberration, but the abrogation of international agreements, the denigration of old friends, and derogation of old alliances, may have lasting consequences. It is true that, as Elias remarked, that there is a duality of normative codes within the nation state:

most of the sovereign interdependent nation states which together form the balance-of-power figuration in the twentieth century produce a two-fold code of norms whose demands are inherently contradictory: a moral code descended from that of rising sections of the *tiers état*, egalitarian in character, and whose highest value is "man"—the human individual as such; and a nationalist code descended from the Machiavellian code of princes and ruling aristocracies, inegalitarian in character, and whose highest value is a collectivity—the state, the country, the nation to which an individual belongs. (Elias, 2013, p. 169)

⁸ For a persuasive explanation of the origins and persistence of the gun culture, see Spierenburg (2006).

⁹ The death penalty *has* been abolished in many states, and executions in the USA today are not very numerous outside states, such as Texas, but again African-Americans are very disproportionately represented among those who are executed; see Garland (2011).

Nevertheless, today's relatively "civilized" standards of diplomacy, negotiation and the conduct of meetings have taken centuries to take shape (Van Vree, 1999; Mastenbroek, 1999; Linklater, 2016), and those who breach them are despised.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of potential ingredients for the they-image of the USA that is being constructed by increasing numbers of people across the world. Different individuals will differ in the selection they make, although it is likely that this process of selection will be strongly influenced by their group membership. Of course, features of the USA that outsiders find admirable will also find their way into their they-images, but one suspects that negatively valued elements tend to carry the greater emotional charge.

Conclusion

I have argued (Mennell, 2007, p. 319) that the central experience shaping Americans' social habitus—what comes to them as "second nature"—is of becoming, over many generations, ever more powerful in relation to their neighbours. That process began almost immediately after the first European settlements in North America in the early 17th century. In accordance with the established-outsiders relations model, this tilting of power ratios in their favour assisted the formation of a certain blindness towards others. But this long-term process now appears to be changing direction: Power ratios between the USA and other major players in world politics would seem to be shifting *relatively* against America. It seems likely that Americans may already be starting to become more aware of this, and they may find the experience humiliating. As Elias, once again, comments, there are

analogous connections between a people's long-term fortunes and experiences and their social habitus at any subsequent time. At this layer of the personality structure—let us for the time being call it the "we-layer"—there are often complex symptoms of disturbance at work which are scarcely less in strength and in capacity to cause suffering than the neuroses of an individual character. (Elias, 2013, p. 24)

And, he says, "Britain in the recent past is a moving example of the difficulties a great power of the first rank has had in adjusting to its sinking to being a second- or third-class power" (2013, p. 3).

The USA is a long way from sinking to the status of a second-class power. Yet, it has suffered some reversals and humiliations since the years of hubris following the fall of the Soviet Union. A sense of national humiliation is dangerous. Scheff and Retzinger (1991) advanced a theory of "shame-rage spirals"—self-escalating processes they initially observed in interpersonal situations such as the breakdown of marriages. Scheff (1994) had extended the theory to war, nationalism, and international relations. At the beginning of the 21st century, the attacks on New York and Washington known as "9/11" were not only revolting acts of terrorism and mass murder, but also successful attempts to inflict humiliation, and America's subsequent wars have been disastrous. There are already—among some American citizens—signs of a sense of decline: witness the slogan "Make America Great Again". A sense of collective humiliation may make the USA an even more dangerous force in world affairs.

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