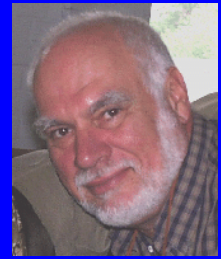


Bellicose Veins—the roots of violence in US culture

STEREOTYPES—OUR BEST FRIENDS, OUR WORST ENEMIES

September 2004



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In the panic for security now gripping the USA, typing and profiling others has become as commonplace as it is noxious.

Stereotypes are both our best friends and our worst enemies. Imagine your mind as the stereo playback of your computer. Stereotypes are the tracks that are running on the vast iPod of life. This goes for everything in life, though we tend to think of stereotypes about people when we use the word. For example, I see heavy black clouds and my stereotype says “rain” and I go for my umbrella or raincoat before leaving the house.

Generalizations (statistically probable data) about a culture (a group of people who develop ideas and approaches to life or a part of life in common) can give us a high probability that many people in that group will act, think, speak or behave in a certain way—but there is no certainty that the person before me who belongs to this group will do so.

“Stereotypes” is the common word for these functional generalizations. They are anchors for our thinking, one of our necessary mental processes. We have an immediate interpretive reaction for everything we see, hear or experience (at least those things for which biology and culture have trained our senses to register rather than ignore). New data is interpreted by what we have learned or previously experienced individually or collectively.

What we do next, however, is critical. **WE CHECK THE REALITY AGAINST THE STEREOTYPE** (this by the way refines the stereotype for its next use). We explore alternative interpretations, possibilities; use other stereotypes to question the ones that have arisen. We say of the dark clouds, “Maybe it will pass over.” But we have our rain gear ready in case it pours down cats and dogs, needles, or sheets or whatever cultural equivalent of abundant wet.

Stereotypes are the necessary mental/emotional chatter that we constantly are engaged in during our waking hours at least. If you don’t believe me, just pause for a moment to be aware of the **THINGS YOU HAVE SAID TO YOURSELF OR INTERNALLY PRESENTED TO YOUR SELF** (images, sounds, memories, judgments ----have you heard yourself say “yesssssssss!” or “BS!”, etc., etc.?) about the couple of paragraphs you have just read, and, perhaps about their author (I don’t wanna’ know).

Whether you choose to share it or not, you have an opinion about everything; it’s always there if you care to listen in. Cognitive scientists, those people who study how the mind works, tell us that in listening to someone else, we are talking to ourselves about eight times as fast to figure out what is being said.

This, by the way, is how listening works. Good listening is selecting the right chatter track to run, not not reacting at all. The faster and more accurately we can unconsciously talk to

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ourselves about what is going on around us, its possibilities, its consequences, possible options, before we invest in one interpretation or another, the better we listen.

Stereotypes are unitary elements in our listening, parts the running internal (cultural) interpretative dialogue that keeps us from having to figure life out at every second, which we are ever trying to do at the unconscious (thank God!) level. Well functioning mental wetware is forever challenging each bit of information it receives for:

--is it true or false, right or wrong?

--is it good or bad (safe or dangerous)?

--is it ugly or beautiful (how the stereotypes on this one change from culture to culture and fashion season to fashion season.

--is it one or many? (Is this strange arrangement of sticks a "chair"?)

We are talking this out internally all the time, before, during, and after taking decisions and acting.

Stereotypes are our friends. As long as we treat them like good friends, sit with them, ask them questions and try to find out what they mean when they say something, and hold their hands when it is pretty clear that we haven't sorted something out yet.

That being said, this process is also an enemy, because we sometimes need to be alone, give it a rest, veg out, change the mental track that is playing by doing something different, singing, meditating, seeing a movie, making love. Playing the same track over and over and over and over leads to deadly certainty, inflexible fundamentalism. It is a march that promises and sometimes goose-steps its way power and glory and ultimately leads to cultural implosion and oblivion. Gross stereotypes about others (ethnic, racial, gender, age, etc.) can become self reinforcing systems, usually maintained in society for someone's benefit and to someone's loss. If we cannot change people's minds we change the laws when these become too ominous.

This dynamic is why diversity is not just a fact, but a necessity for survival, and why making a monoculture out of our internal or external ecosystem, making a one-party system or a dictatorship of a government leads to great fortunes, empires and death, the death of a culture and usually the deaths of many of its people and of those around them. Eliminate diversity and you win big...for a while. Cultivate diversity, expand inclusion and we can all win bigger... if only it were not for the diversity of those who want to eliminate diversity... In dealing with life and especially in dealing with culture, we need to continually cultivate what Zen calls "beginners mind" and management consultants call "thinking out of the box." We need a constant process of questioning the presumptions/stereotypes by which we necessarily operate on a day to day basis to discover and benefit from more possibilities.

Why, because some tracks like to take over. We empower them because we feel they will serve or save us. Sometimes people want their track to dominate in our selection of mental tracks that we play on our mental iPod (dogma). Some people are professionals at this (or use professionals) to ensure this, e.g., advertisers, politicians, anybody with a stake in something. They repeat things over and over until they are embedded in our operating systems.

This is never more true than when we are stressed, fearful or panicked. Old generalizations become certainties in our minds and get acted out in our behavior toward each other. They get more and more deeply rooted and harder to resist. They turn into thousand year old hatreds. Animosity we found inexplicable in the Balkans a decade ago as USians—why can't these

people get along?!—we are now acting out with much of the Islamic world. We are making the world into a very large Balkans.

If anyone thinks the next election will be decided by the issues... Not a chance! There is a great struggle going on at the moment to embed the "right" stereotypes in voters' minds, by making appeals to stereotypes they always have running. What Goebbels and Leni Reischthal knew intuitively when they built Hitler's propaganda machine, research offers today to all who will learn, and advertisers and political parties have learned. They know where the money and the power are at.

Yup, forget the issues. We don't have time for them. Go for sound bites, memes, those contagious ideas, all competing for a share of our mind in a kind of Darwinian selection. If we can successfully stereotype the opposition, we can win. Seen in this light, it is not surprising that a month should have gone by when the military records of three decades ago are the main electoral preoccupation.

We are told that most of the undecided voters are not trying to resolve their indecision by studying the candidates and the issues, but that they will make up their mind on "how they feel about the candidates" on election day. They are taking their cues from entertainment media that appeal to them. If this is so, it is the end of democracy when those who don't know and don't want to know will decide for us which way things go.