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The Social Cognition of Intelligence Analysis

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Members of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement take hostages within the Japanese Ambassador's residence in Lima, allegedly to force release of imprisoned compatriots and a change in Peruvian national economic policy. Daily, well-attended political demonstrations occur in Belgrade and other Serbian cities after the Serbian President ensures overturning opposition victories in recent elections. An explosion occurs near a government building in Lhasa that, according to authorities within the People's Republic of China, was set off by allies of the Dalai Llama and the so-called Tibetan government-in-exile. An Israeli soldier opens fire on Palestinians in a Hebron market place to prevent an Israeli-Palestinian agreement and, perhaps, to act out intrapsychic conflict. Why weren't these events anticipated and prevented? And now that they've occurred, how best to handle them and their actualized and potential consequences?

These questions and others like them are best answered through the satisfactory evaluation of relevant information--through intelligence analysis. However, psychologists have long-posed difficulties in evaluating any information--especially involving the intentions of other people.

In Book VII of *The Republic* Plato (c. 360 B.C.) describes men in a cave, legs and necks chained, a fire blazing above and behind them at a distance, a raised way between the fire and the prisoners, a low wall built along the way, other men passing along the wall carrying objects, some of these passersby talking, some silent. The men who are chained see only their shadows, or those of one another, or of the passersby, or of what the latter carry. The fire throws these shadows on the opposite wall of the cave. And when the passersby speak, the chained men assume the voices come from the shadows. The chained men mistake the shadows for realities. This is the human condition--one of mistaken perception--at least until philosopher-kings make possible the establishment of the ideal state. (A recipe for totalitarianism? Lenin, Kim Il-Sung, Mobutu Sese Seko as philosopher-kings? Plato was familiar with tyrants and tyrannies and failure in applied philosophy as well.)

In "On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense," Nietzsche (1873) describes intellectual knowledge and the human conception of it as intrinsically overinflated; as based on simulation, vanity, and deception; as developed just for human self-preservation--otherwise humans would "flee existence rapidly." Only out of a need to exist socially and through boredom, humans develop something called truth, arising in herd-fashion from a consensus, a lie being only a violation of this consensus. Language--which is characteristic of human knowledge--is no more than a metaphor based on a nerve stimulus. Language allows humans some approximate perception only of how something is in relation to them, not of how it is. The bottom line is that truth is the obligation to lie according to a fixed convention. (Any wonder that Nietzsche developed especially scathing words for people who seek careers in furthering the welfare of others through knowing the truth--the "improvers" of mankind making wrong right?)

More recently, Heuer (1982) has described research on the psychology of perception as it applies to intelligence analysis and the susceptibility to being strategically surprised and deceived. He focuses on well-known and basic perceptual characteristics: that people are not blank slates upon which reality impinges, but instead construct their reality; that the same person may derive different meaning from

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the same stimulus at different times-- contingent on experiences which may be irrelevant to the stimulus at hand; that different people can derive the same or different meaning from the same stimulus; and that expectations seem to singularly affect what people perceive. (Heuer's analysis is a useful sensitizer to psychological factors affecting political judgment but is ex post facto and is as useful, but may be--n.b., expectations affecting perception--less entertaining, than Plato and Nietzsche. As those who attempt to influence political decisionmakers know, entertainment value is often the sine qua non of success--necessary, even if not sufficient.)

That brings us to contemporary psychological research in the field of social cognition: the structure, process, function, and content of how people think about other people. This research describes very specific phenomena which may be both heuristic and biasing in evaluating social information--the kind that intelligence analysts and their consumers bemoan as the most important and the most difficult to analyze.

Here are some examples. People towards whom one already has highly accessible attitudes attract more attention when one views or imagines a situation. (These people are more likely to be factored into an intelligence analysis than they may warrant, e.g., Fidel Castro being behind all worldly evils.) Categories towards which one already has highly accessible attitudes are given preference in attempts to analyze people. (These categories are more likely to be factored into an intelligence analysis than they may warrant, e.g., Western-style liberal democracy and freedoms being behind all Asian evils--almost a direct quote attributed to Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong of Singapore in a recent press conference.) When one forms an impression, expectancy-incongruent information about a given target is better recalled than information expected about the target--the incongruity effect, e.g., remembering stories about the Coke-drinking, jazz-loving Yuri Andropov that circulated soon after he assumed power in the Soviet Union.) And there is a tendency to overestimate how often something has, is, or will occur, if it is congruent with a previously held expectancy--an expectancy-based illusory correlation that could lead to overestimating the number of foreign intelligence case officers and agents active in Istanbul, Berlin, or Hong Kong. These and other psychological phenomena are frequently operative when one analyzes intelligence and reaches important conclusions. In essence, these phenomena are part of our subjective approximation to objectivity.

To be maximally helpful concerning social cognition research, political psychologists need to do the following. First, sensitize intelligence analysts and political decisionmakers to its implications. (To some degree this has been ongoing (cf. Janis & Mann, 1977; Neustadt & May, 1986,) but efforts need to continue and be upgraded for each new generation of consumers and because the reliability and validity of psychological information also may change through time. Moreover, some of the most important analysts and decisionmakers seem to have arrived at their positions of power with a strong belief that the very phenomena which may mitigate against satisfactory evaluation of information are responsible for their success. Or as Plato describes "...will they not fancy that the shadows which (they) formerly saw are truer than the objects which are now shown to (them)?"

Second, political psychologists need to help identify the parameters wherein the same phenomena which negatively affect the evaluation of information may have no effect or even have a positive effect. (This endeavor has been done to a lesser degree (cf. Bless et al, 1996.) Third, help develop psychological techniques which minimize the impact of psychological phenomena when the effects may be negative, and maximize them when they may be positive. (This endeavor has been attempted least of all and may be epistemologically unrealizable (cf. Lefebvre, 1995).)

The most useful conclusion for political psychologists who wish to mine the extremely important research area of social cognition? Back to Plato. "...Anyone who has common sense will remember that the bewilderments of the eyes are of two kinds, and arise from two causes, either from coming out of the light or from going into the light...and he who remembers this when he sees anyone whose vision is perplexed and weak, will not be too ready to laugh..." (See Bless, H., Clore, G.L., Schwarz, N., Golisano, V., et al. (1996.) Mood and the use of scripts: Does a happy mood really lead to mindlessness? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (JPSP)*, 71, 665-679; Hamilton, D. L., & Rose, T. L. (1980.) Illusory correlation and the maintenance of stereotypic beliefs. *JPSP*, 39, 832-845; Hastie, R., & Kumar, A. P. (1979.) Person memory: Personality traits as organizing principles in memory for behaviors. *JPSP*, 37, 25-38; Heuer, R. J., Jr. (1982.) Cognitive factors in deception and counterdeception. In D. C. Daniel & K. L. Herbig (Eds.) *Strategic military deception*. NY: Pergamon Press; Janis, I., & Mann, L. (1977.) *Decision making*. NY: Free Press; Lefebvre, L. (1995.) Ecological correlates of social learning: Problems and solutions for the comparative method. *Behavioural Processes*, 35, 163-171; Neustadt, R. E., & May, E. R. (1986.) *Thinking in time*. NY: Free Press; Nietzsche, F. (1954/1873.) On truth an lie in an extra-moral sense. In W. Kaufmann (Ed.) *The portable Nietzsche*. NY: The Viking Press; Plato. (1976/c. 360 B.C.) In J.D. Kaplan (Ed.) *Dialogues of Plato*. NY: Washington Square Press; Singapore's governing party almost shuts out the opposition. (January 3, 1997.) *The New York Times*. p, A5. Smith, E.R., Fazio, R. H., & Cejka, M. A. (1996.) Accessible attitudes influence categorization of multiply categorizable objects. *JPSP*, 71, 888-898.) (Keywords: Social cognition, intelligence analysis.)