

ON THE GRAMMAR OF STEREOTYPES

by Johan Galtung

Department of Politics
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey 08540

December, 1985

I am going to argue in this short paper that prejudices we have about human beings, perhaps even including ourselves, essentially add up to two types, or stereotypes, to use the common expression. Of course, there are variations, but I am going to stand by this basic hypothesis because I think there are reasons for this particular dualism, and linked to the concept of stereotype itself.

But let me start with the beginning, some experiences I made almost thirty years ago on a vacation from the United States, in Mexico. Of course I was eager to find out something about how Mexicans perceived Americans, or gringos as they call them (us, but Mexicans are quick to point out that Europeans were not really gringos), and compare that with how Americans perceived Mexicans. Before that time my knowledge of patterns of prejudice and discrimination was mainly theoretical, having been shielded from such factors by growing up in an extremely homogeneous country, very very white, very very christian, with everybody speaking the same language and the sami being the only exception to the general rule of Norwegian-ness. Of course, exposure to Europe in general sensitized me to how northern Europeans perceived southern Europeans and vice versa, and considerable exposure to Italy in particular to how northern Italians perceived southern Italians in general, and Sicilians in particular, and vice versa. But the Mexican experience was more decisive.

Briefly told the U.S. view of the Mexican, as I was informed increasingly often approaching the Mexican border, not to mention

inside Mexico itself, ran something like this:

"Absolutely charming people. Emotional, volatile. Of course, they are lazy and dirty, and given to pick-pocketing and minor crimes like that. They easily laugh, they easily weep. They are like children, good story-tellers, their imagination runs away with them, I certainly would not trust neither what they do, nor what they say, nor what they might think. But they are warm and good at the bottom, many of them artistic, friendly; fall easily in love and are easily fallen in love with, no doubt good lovers and mistresses. But I am afraid that if you establish closer relations with them they will stick to you for life and you will never get rid of them."

And, in the same vein, I could summarize the Mexican image of the gringo in the following manner:

The gringo is like a machine, efficient, cold, without emotions. You can see him in his car as he comes into our country with tight lips and blue eyes, helpless the moment he leaves the car. The machine is a part of him, he is a part of the machine. He is trustworthy, does not steal, is not corrupt not because of any inner morality but because this would be beyond his imagination; he has not been drilled that way. His friendship is worth nothing as he is incapable of deeper emotions and attachment to anybody. As a lover he is miserable. He fears emotions in others since he has no emotions with which he can reciprocate himself. His woman, the gringa, has acquired many of the same characteristics but is deeper down more like human beings, like us. She may respond to a Mexican man, the gringo knows this, and is terribly frightened that something might happen that could release the human being in her when not sufficiently

supervised by him."

I have given slightly more extended descriptions, based on the general ideas obtained from these conversations, not implying that every particular person would have said exactly this or in exactly that order. But the general idea is clear: on the one hand the emotional, dirty, lazy and unpredictable; on the other hand the cold, clean and clean shaven, highly energetic and predictable. They have a high level of inherent consistency, they can be encountered in real life, and they constitute the kind of nucleus around which stereotypes crystallize.

And I could now walk around in geographical and social space, and even in time, and wherever I am I think I can see the stereotypes at work. Starting with my own country, with Norway, the country where south and north are inverted and the southerners see the ^{nor}therners according to image I (the U.S. stereotype of the Mexican), certainly reciprocated by the northerners seeing in the southerners image II. But Norwegians as a whole use to project image II on Swedes, reciprocated by Swedes projecting image I not only on Norwegians but, I think, essentially on the rest of their fellow Nordic peoples, Finns and Danes alike (certainly on the Finns). In general image I is what northern Europe sees in southern Europe and western Europe sees in Eastern Europe, bringing out the possibility of some synergism. Northwestern Europe according to this way of thinking should see in southeastern Europe an extreme version of image I, super-dirty, super-lazy and super-critical, far beyond pick-pocketing; into murder and assassina-

tion as well. In short, Balkan, and Southeastern Europe should see Northwestern Europe as rather extreme versions of image II: unemotional, cold and intensely boring, something like jellyfish, British, if it had not been for a certain efficiency usually not attributed to jellyfish. Northern Italy, Southern Italy. Cataluña and Andalucia in Spain. Europeans versus Africans, North Americans versus Latin Americans. Japanese see in the Chinese and the Koreans image I; the latter certainly see in Japanese image II.

But that is geographical space, what about social space? Much of image I applies to male construction of females; I am not so sure that they are so complimentary in general as Jung's idea of anima. And much of image II, by reciprocity, is what females attribute to males--again considerably less attractive than Jung's animus. In age terms image I certainly applies to adult images of children, but perhaps also to middle-aged images of very old people. And maybe children and old people have something in common if they project image II on middle-aged people?

However that may be, the class aspect of what has been said is obvious: image I is upper class images of lower classes, and dominant race images of dominated races with the same synergistic factor: the U.S. lower class black being seen very much like Balkan, as a geographical region is seen from Northwestern Europe. Dark, physically, murky, dangerous, unpredictable-emotional and artistic! Correspondingly, image II is what lower classes and dominated races would see when they look upwards in the social structure, and particularly so in societies when both dimensions operate: ice

cold, cost benefit oriented, machines and machine tools. No doubt efficient, to their own benefits, pushing the costs onto everybody else.

I think it also operates through time. The way we today conceive of people in the Middle Ages is to a large extent, I think, in terms of image I, and they probably perceived the leadership of the Roman Empire in terms of image II. They would probably also have conceived of us in the same way just as we might tend to feel that, after our period is over, people of image I variety will be ushered in, and what our civilization has created will be covered by a flood of dirt and lust and laziness; dissolved in alcohol, bacchanals and orgies. A little bit like when what is left of the classical German elite thinks of the present young generation, particularly greens: "make love, not war."

Let us now try to imitate Jung a little by putting names on these two stereotypes, even to the point of introducing similar sounding terms, dominus (for image II) and domina (for image I). The terms reflect the gender of the two images, and in addition the class connotation, except for the fact that "domina" opens for two interpretations: a dominating female, and a dominated person (with some linguistic flexibility). This ambiguity might, however, be acceptable given what we try to express.

And what we try to express can now be developed a little bit further along three lines.

First, I think the origin of the stereotypes are often found in the family, with the father having some of the characteristics

of the dominus and the mother some of the characteristics of the domina. I say "some": it is not clear how such adjectives as "lazy" and "dirty" could be used to fit the image of the mother in most cultures. But then obvious socio-psychological factors come to the attention: mother's work is not seen as real work, real work is what father does; moreover, mother's work certainly has to do with dirt and cleaning up dirt from the children via the dishes to the home in general. Mother is seen as emotional, takes easily to tears, laughing, smiling, caressing, but also shouting, even yelling whereas the father has a much more limited spectrum of expression, often keeping tight lips well pressed together, escaping from rather than joining the shouting match.

Second, another source of origin for the archetypal stereotypes posited here is, of course, to be found in class relations. When the relationship is one of class, meaning of domination one way or the other, then there are some obvious roles to play, of the dominant and the dominated, top-dog and under-dog. Those exercising authority must to some extent exhibit attitudes and behavior that are appropriate to authority. In other words, they have to be "authoritarian," at least in that relationship. At some point or another they have to issue commands, and this has to be done in a way which leaves no doubt: a man issues commands in order to be obeyed. And one way of doing this is to behave oneself as if one is always obeying commands, "being an example for the children/servants/workers/soldiers/staff." No non-sense, no jokes, nothing frivolous. Of course, the atmosphere may be relaxed even ninety percent of the time; but there will be those occasions that call

for a stern, sincere and severe countenance. Profile has to be shown. More likely than not those are the moments that will be remembered, not the ninety percent of relaxation.

But why should the dominated person engage in a different generalized role behavior? Why should they not prefer to do exactly the same, being the obedient recipient of the norms emitted by the dominant? The answer is that they often do--look at the list of under-dogs above and there is no difficulty envisioning situations where the under-dogs behave in a way typical for dominance. But, and that is the essential point, as soon as the top-dog disappears the under-dogs may resort to a totally different type of behavior, among themselves. The teacher leaves the classroom, and there is general pandemonium. The foreman walks away, and the workers start smoking and joking and idling. The mice are on the table, dancing. And even if this is not true, at least this is what the top-dog, the cat, will believe and probably for the same reason as the reason that generally makes it true: these are needed psychological reactions to work off the stress stemming from being at the tail end of a chain of command.

Third, given the essential duality of and dominance, There, after all, two genders, and dominance is a bilateral relation between top-dogs and under-dogs, however much such relations may be chained together in larger structures; chains, trees, cycles.

And this would be even more so if all women are in under-dog positions (obviously not all men are in top dog positions in any social order); in other words in very simple social orders like the ones we have had up till recently, where gender and class tend to reinforce each other. In such social orders there are essentially two role models to imitate for people growing up in the system. And, as a consequence: the stereotypes function, in the sense that they are very far from the worst guides a newcomer might like to have to the social order in question.

But, stereotypes nevertheless remain stereotypes; they curtail variety. Above we have already pointed to one reason why they are so false and misleading: however valid they may be in one context, and precisely that of a dominance relation, they may be totally invalid if the same two persons (or two groups) meet each other in a different context, a social setting where a dominance element for some reason or another is not present. And that is the setting where they both express astonishment:

domina to dominus: "I did not know that you could be that human,
I thought you were always thinking of work
and never knew how to enjoy yourself!"

dominus to domina: "How tidy and beautiful your home is! And
how well disciplined your children,...."

A theme with countless variations. But even in the dominance relation, stereotypes may be very much less than perfect as a

guide to social reality. What is most likely is that we are trained through the dominus/domina pair of opposites to see exactly that which fits the characteristics. Take the typical north-south relationship: the tourist, or the technical assistance expert or whatever, arrives, stops for a short while, comes to the conclusion that natives are lazy and dirty. In addition they are illiterate and do not know how to count. It never strikes him that this may be because they are short-shrifted all the time, and never really have a chance to make a good deal. Give them a good deal, whether it is a black market currency operation or a decently paid job, and at least the ability to count will change immediately, for the simple reason that there is something worth counting. Most people are mixes of dominos and dominas.

However, the key factor in generating these stereotypes is probably found in gender relations rather than in class relations. In systems that are more matriarchial than commonly found systems of patriarchy one would expect more complex stereotypes. The mother dominates the family setting even to the point where the father is deprived of domestic initiative, becomes "lazy," defending himself with jokes, all against the unsmiling woman at the top. On the other hand, these very same women may behave in a very different way outside the home, in settings where they are not top dogs, training both them and those who watch them in a broader repertory of generalized role behavior, thus making it more difficult for stereotypes to find the simple, but rich soil in which they blossom. And the same applies to the males; a male training himself in domina type behavior at home may become very much the

dominus the moment he is on the outside and has somebody to boss, with the same implications.

But all of this would only point to the possibility of some kind of diachronic complexity, with people playing domina-dominus-domina or dominus-domina-dominus chains throughout their lives, within the span of the hour, the day, the week and so on. Quite a different approach would be more synchronic, based on the possibility of mixing the two archetypal patterns at the same moment, in the same context. Social orders that are less sexist and less "class-ist" would stimulate that kind of behavior, and hence, probably, a breakdown of the stereotypes. Men and women would somehow meet in the middle, mixing dominus and domina types of behavior as is probably now happening in North American and Northern European families. There even may be a yearning for this kind of non-stereotyped behavior. And, people who find it difficult to act it out in a classical bi-sexual setting might be attracted to homosexuality; one possible explanation for the apparent increase in that pattern. In other words, what is postulated here is that it may be a longing to be relieved from the iron cage of stereotyped gender behavior that dictates sexual preferences just as much as, or even more than, the other way around.

Similarly, one might expect that in egalitarian countries strong dominus/domina divisions, both as reality and as image, will break down. Neither pattern is a pattern that will obtain easily among equals in the longer run, the dominus pattern having too low a

temperature, and the domina pattern too high. Oscillations through time and more tepid would correspond better to human and social reality, making society richer in behavioral variety and people more free to expand individual repertoires.

But in the meantime we shall have to live with the dominus and the domina, both as fact and as image. Young children will be treated to them as realities to which they grow accustomed. They will tend to think that these are the basic two kinds of people that are around, they will tend to project these images on reality and construct and reconstruct reality according to the image, starting with others, continuing with themselves, then with others, then with themselves again, and so on. Sometimes they might like to confuse people; and the more audacious of them might like themselves to be confused. But in most cases they will reject dissonant images as games people are playing, as a put-on even designed to fool people as when the director suddenly is ingratiating or the little girl becomes "bossy" in a manner not becoming to little girls.

In conclusion, let me just point out some ways in which this has a bearing on contemporary east-west relations. I have been rather struck, as have so many others, by the similarity in the ^{two} images. Both sides tend to see the leadership on the other side as dominus, and the people on the other side as domina. The people are basically nice, easy-going, and--this is particularly valid for U.S. images of the Russian people--neither excessively energetic, nor excessively clean. The Russians might point out that there are considerable pockets of such people also in the

United States, at least according to Soviet images--in the South, in the West, perhaps particularly in the Southwest. But both of them concur in the idea that the leadership is thin-lipped and unsmiling, and if they are smiling then it is because they are acting (like Reagan) or are upstarts from the people and have not (yet?) been broken in (like Khrushchov). Actually, the images of the two peoples meeting, as soldiers, at the Elbe in April 1945, embracing each other, drinking, saluting, celebrating--all of this in highly domina-oriented ways--epitomizes the two ideas the two peoples may hold of each other. But it is easily overshadowed by elitist, traditional dominus-type behavior, associated with disarmament negotiations and official stands taken when cold-war games have to be played, in general.

The fact is, of course, that in both countries the peoples are rather normal people most of the time, meaning some kind of mix of domina and dominus. When domina images are projected on the people in general on the other side, as opposed to the elites, it serves the function of making them less threatening, more promising for peace. However, the image also serves the important function of portraying them as possible under-dogs to dominus style behavior not emanating from their elites, but from their adversary. A domina type population is more pliable. When it is pointed out that some of them, actually quite a lot of them, are rather energetic, clean, hard working, determined and seem not too different from the dominus images attributed to their leaders the answer comes quickly: "they have been forced to become like that, this is not their natural way of being, I know the Russian

muzhik (peasant), none of this is natural to him." And the other side might say: "apart from some millions of fanatic yankees essentially in the northeastern part of the U.S. the rest are actually happy-go-lucky people who are egged on by the yankees, although they would prefer the good things in life...." In short, if we could only get rid of those elites on the other side all would be well.

The combination of the search for "human" and less threatening aspects of the other party, and the search for something that can be dominated by oneself rather than by the elites or the other side, is both a cause and a function of stereotyped images and realities. Country A is against country B because B points nuclear-tipped missiles at country A, fixes the attention on elite/people differences in B in dominus/domina terms, picks up domina hatred of dominus in B and interprets it as a basis, for an alliance because of the common enemy factor. Country B does just the same. Both of them over-estimate the strength of that "alliance" because they do not see that deeper down people may have some kind of knowledge that these are stereotypes, not really valid social descriptions, that elite and people are woven together with quite tight bonds--in most cases. But in reacting to the image produced by the stereotypes the elites may become even more dominus, and the people have to respond by being even more domina. There is an element of self-fulfilling prophecy at work here.

Conclusion: stereotypes are dangerous and on the whole war-productive rather than peace-productive. One reason is that they lead to serious misunderstandings. But more importantly: people enact the

stereotypes. Dominus, to the extent he (she) is real, is war-prone; and that does not make domina (to the extent she-he is real) peace-prone. Domina is more likely to submit to dominus strong profile, strong words, strong deeds, stance. What we need is neither dominus, nor domina but mature people, freed from the shackles of patriarchy and hierarchy, of sexism and classism.