

CHAPTER 14

Conclusion

The sociologist Erving Goffman, to whom this book owes a debt, looked at everyday social interactions from a strategic viewpoint. While he did not use mathematics, he had a game-theoretic attitude and talked in terms of goals, strategies, and cooperative endeavors. Some commentators have viewed his explanations as disconnected, noting that he would switch from a strategic viewpoint to a metaphor of theater in which people play out a script, or, having discussed the “strategies” of facework, he would change to the language of ritual, where every person is “a sacred object that must be honored” (Manning 1993). He gave no strategic account of why people followed the ritual. This book analyzes symbolism in a way that unites these modes of thinking by showing how culturally expected scripts, rituals, and symbols can be treated within the strategic approach. This chapter summarizes its conclusions on each of the topics.

Symbols

Symbolic messages are more dramatic than verbal ones, but they are not always clearer. The goal of communication is coordinated thinking, so the receiver must decipher the sender’s meaning and the sender must choose a symbol that promotes a correct understanding. For reliability the message should be delivered in an established and expected way. Chapter 2 described some past techniques of generating symbolic messages, summarizing about 680 instances from recent international interactions. The data cannot tell whether individual signals were understood correctly, but they show some patterns that symbolic communicators have taken.

Message symbols are based on metaphors, prototypical scenarios, and metonymies. A metaphor, as the word is used here, is a pattern of thought and speech that maps the domain of interest into a more comprehensible one; a

metonymy is the selection of a part to represent the whole; and a prototypical scenario is a generally expected script for a certain kind of event. Most of the international symbolism can be accounted for by a fairly short list of metaphors, metonymies, and prototypes. One common metaphor depicts a country as a particular citizen. This often involves a leader who visits another country to show friendship or acknowledge the other's status or who does a specific task to show that some national policy is important. A related metaphor treats a nation's territory as a house, and accordingly, many symbolic events are conducted at national borders. A common prototypical scenario involved preparing for war and it generated some hostile message symbols in the database, like troop deployments or token acts of violence.

A recurrent problem for national leaders is to get one's action noticed as a symbolic message. National leaders often choose an action that is ineffective for any other function but communication, as when Belize offers military support for U.S. operations in Haiti. The common usage is that something is "purely" or "merely" symbolic, but symbols are not ineffective by nature. Ineffectiveness is a cue that alerts the audience to look for a message.

In chapter 3 a message symbol is defined by two requirements. First, it is a communicative act, meaning that the sender intends the receiver to believe or do something by virtue of recognizing that intention. This kind of "reflexive" intention is an element of all communications, in language or not, symbolic or not, so a second condition is added that qualifies certain messages as symbolic: the act is connected to its meaning by being a part selected either from a prototype alone or from a prototype transformed by a metaphor. Nelson Mandela invited his white jailer to his presidential inauguration as a symbolic call for racial reconciliation. Inviting another to a significant personal event—a marriage or a party—is part of the prototypical scenario for reconciliation. Mandela's action was transformed by the metaphor that regards the group as its leader, so its meaning changed from reconciliation between individuals to reconciliation between races.

No sharp line separates symbolic and nonsymbolic messages. When it is used for the first time, a symbol must be decoded through the steps of metaphors, metonymies, and prototypes, but with repetition it can come to be understood more directly by precedent. It then has changed from a symbolic communication to a conventional one. The history of the Gulf War yellow ribbons shows how the practice of wearing colored ribbons moved back and forth along the symbol/convention continuum over the centuries. With repeated use, the symbolic element weakened but it was reinvigorated when the motif was embedded again in some popular song or story. Using it in a plot, especially in

a dramatic and commonly known one, associated the symbol with prototypical actions and emotions and allowed the techniques of prototype and metonymy to be used again. The ribbons moved back toward functioning as symbols but with a slightly different meaning than before. Their history shows some advantages of using message symbols instead of conventional communications: they have greater imprecision of meaning, which can be desirable; they can take a more dramatic form; and most important, they acquire associations and values from the prototypical emotions and scenarios to which they have been linked.

A focal symbol is communication without the requirement of a sender—it needs only receivers. Each one knows what the others are concluding from the symbolic event, knows that the others know that, and so on. The focal symbol establishes a focal point, a common expectation of the outcome of a coming game. It does this symbolically by calling a larger class of events to the observers' minds, typically through the mechanism of analogy. The outcome of the game is one member of this class; what makes the outcome focal is the common belief (in a technical sense of beliefs about others' beliefs) that everyone is thinking along the lines of the analogy.

Often focal symbols spring up around collective action problems—an event occurs that gives watchers confidence to act because others will support them. Another type of focal symbolism is symbolic leadership, exemplified by President Reagan's unfortunate visit to the Bitburg cemetery containing graves of some SS officers. In the world's eyes, the focal symbolism prevailed over his insistence that he was only memorializing the tragedy of war. The event shows that message and focal meanings can be in conflict. Other instances of focal symbolism are the struggles over small points preceding negotiations, which are expected to generate self-fulfilling expectations of who will dominate in the real negotiation. Further instances involve symbolic contests leading to expectations of who will back down in a real confrontation.

Another kind of focal symbol involves crisis tension, a shared worry about an imminent war, which itself contributes to the danger. Tension has been absent as an explicit variable in the recent theorizing about crises, but it has been included by implication, since much theory about nuclear strategy and arms control involves reducing crisis instability. This is interpreted here as the manipulation of focal symbolism. An example of a symbolic event generating tension was the inadvertent U-2 flight over the Soviet Union at the height of the Cuban missile crisis. It was a focal symbol, structurally similar to what would happen in a real war, and so increased the mutual expectation of a war and the temptation to strike. A game model shows how this could work.

The model is compared with the everyday metaphor of tension that treats

it as physical stress on a string, where the snapping point corresponds to the outbreak of war. The metaphor is mostly valid within the model, but it misses one feature of tension—a string responds to present forces, but leaders look ahead to likely future stress in deciding whether to preempt now. The analysis gives a possible rationale for symbolic arms control and confidence-building measures meant to mitigate future crises, and it suggests the importance of “public” events, defined as those whose occurrence renders them not only known by both sides but known to be known, and so on.

Symbolism of all types—message, value, and focal—proliferates at international ceremonies. Like religious rituals, international ceremonies often reaffirm the social order, and this fact has generated controversy around the symbolism of who should attend a ceremony and in what status. The symbolism sometimes functions to add credibility to promises made at ceremonies, by connecting the current commitment with past and future ones made in like circumstances.

Honor, Commitments, and Challenges

Honor, face, prestige, and moral authority determine whose interests are respected or who prevails in a confrontation. They are substitutes for violent conflict, but they often become the causes of conflict when they are fought over for the benefits they yield. They differ according to their bases: honor refers to a quality within the individual as perceived by the group; face is the group's expectation of how everyone else will treat the individual; prestige is the group's perception of its own attitude toward the individual, based on something the person is or did; and moral authority is the group's self-fulfilling expectation that someone who has abided by the group's norms up to now can set future norms.

Chapter 6 works out a theory of honor that fits the patterns found in societies. The purpose is to allow a judgment of whether honor is reproduced among nations. Possessing personal honor means having a certain bundle of traits whose ingredients vary by culture and by gender. For male honor, which is the relevant kind for international relations, the concept usually includes truthfulness to one's word when given in a certain context and willingness to defend one's group and avenge wrongs against it.

One trait in honor's bundle is especially interesting theoretically and distinguishes honor from simple virtue. Honor obliges its possessor to show others that he possesses honor. A man who claims to be honorable but to be unconcerned who knows it is uttering a contradiction. Honor is thus self-

referential, and this fact means that the payoffs in games that involve it take an unusual form—they depend on others' beliefs about the person's degree of honor. Honor-conscious societies act as if one trait of honor were an indication that the individual possessed all the rest, so being concerned about being seen as honorable is taken as an indication of really being so. The way to show concern for others' perceptions is to make a sacrifice. When someone's honor is challenged, the individual responds with a costly proof of it, for example, by engaging in a duel or a fight.

A basic game was described in chapter 6 that reproduces most of the features of honor found in societies. It has two equilibria, corresponding to the fact that a certain mode of challenging will work in some cultures but not in others. The game is developed here in several ways to clarify promises, threats, and more general deterrent commitments to defend one's interests. One makes a commitment more credible by putting one's honor at stake. This leads to a different approach to modeling deterrence: by looking at how deterrence is set up before a crisis, rather than during one.

This book argues that states still fight over honor. Further research is planned to investigate this statistically, but here the evidence is qualitative and diverse, involving the parallels between honor-related talk within societies and at the international level. "Honor" is seldom mentioned by name, but leaders talk about "will," "resolve," and "credibility," and these show the same pattern. The speakers typically leave a blank space after them—"will" or "resolve" to do what? The terms are self-referential just as honor is: leaders show resolve to show resolve in the same way that honor means wanting to be seen as possessing honor. Honor's importance is also substantiated by its indirect consequences: related concepts like insults, challenges, commitments, and apologies continue to be central in international matters.

Threats are one kind of international commitment, but promises are also controlled by honor, and an honor-based analysis suggests why certain of them have been treated as binding and others not. Some promises are given on traditional points of honor, such as defense, and are made to members of the group. Promises made to those who are not in the honor group, such as the United Nations or native peoples, are breakable.

The problem with an international system of honor is that it has no single tradition behind it. It is somewhat like a pidgin language, the common denominator of the various forms in the interacting societies. Some components of challenging that are common across cultures are absent or distorted in the international context. Challenges tend to cause fights, and the missing elements at the international level are especially the ones that within a culture dampen

the tendency to violence. Unlike most societal challenges, international challenges can come from nonmembers of the group; they can be challenges to blatantly unfair contests; they can arise from clearly self-serving motives; and they do not require a prior affront. Also unlike societal honor codes, national honor does not involve a duty to follow higher authority—on the international scene there is none. This difference is all the worse for peace.

One aspect of international challenges makes them less powerful in provoking violence: with no common culture it can be unclear that a challenge has even occurred. A model suggests that a small amount of doubt about this goes very far in relieving the obligation to respond with a fight. If the challenged party wants peace, it should avoid affirming on the record that a challenge has occurred.

One widespread viewpoint in the social sciences stresses that much of the world that we take as objectively given is socially constructed, in the sense that it is based on common expectations set by culture. Gender or ethnicity or what it means to be sick or drunk or literate are largely socially determined. Searle's example (1995) of a social fact is money, in that something counts as money only because everyone expects everyone to take it as that. Challenges are the example analyzed here. If the audience believes that the challenged individual sees the event as such, and the individual believes the same of the audience, and so on up the ladder of metabeliefs, then it is a challenge. The objective slap on the face may be a trigger to this set of beliefs, but it is no more than that and not an essential part of the challenge. The model of chapter 7 shows what a social construction is without the metaphor of construction. The metaphor suggests that there is an external entity there, perceptible to all, but an analysis using interactive belief systems shows how different individuals may see the social situation in different ways.

Face, Insults, and Apologies

Many writers would dismiss insults as side effects of international conflict. If an insult is followed by a war, the argument goes, the system was already fated for war through objective factors. Historians examining particular cases have disagreed, and the present book cites examples of insults that they saw as leading to wars. Contemporaneous documents show leaders stressing the insult aspect in private and suggest that their complaints about being offended were not just rhetoric to motivate the populace. If the balance of resources and system structure was such that Iraq had to leave Kuwait, one cannot predict from those variables whether this had to happen by diplomatic coercion or by war. Certainly,

insults are not long term and abiding as the reasons for wars, but they often seem to have made the difference between peace and war.

Many of the insults that historians have seen as provoking wars fit the pattern of challenges to honor but others do not. Honor challenges can come only from equals, but some of the insults went up or down the hierarchy. In fact, they seemed to be ways to proclaim the target's relative place in the hierarchy. These insults are assaults on face.

In a model of face, a hierarchy of deference emerges as an equilibrium in a repeated game. The game differs from some past approaches, like Shubik's games of status (1971) or Kaneko and Kimura's development of social classes (1992), in that the hierarchy is not based on any objective feature differentiating the players. It emerges from their behavior in the game. The hierarchy is maintained endogenously, based on the history of deference so far. At some equilibria, players rise and fall in their degree of face. An interesting consequence is that representing degree of face as an interval on a line works as well as representing it as an exact point. Someone defers to someone else if the former's interval lies entirely below the latter's. The game shows how insults and symbols can be used to manipulate face.

Like honor, face can be used to establish commitments. If the world sees one put one's own face at stake, it will trust that the commitment will be kept. Delivering a strong insult is a way to do this, and after Bush labeled Saddam a neo-Hitler, it was widely recognized that he would not want to back down in the Gulf. This idea is formalized by a "war of face," a contest used to show one's resolve short of a real war. It is like an auction except that only the loser pays the amount bid. This kind of contest can generate very large bids, like the extravagant insults the world witnessed before the 1991 Gulf War. It is one way to settle a conflict by proving who has the higher motivation to win, and it can be compared with other methods, like wars of attrition or arms races. The comparison is at an abstract level, asking for the perceived cost of each way of settling the same problem without a view to the commodity in which the cost is paid, lives, money, or face. In theory, the war of face seems to be no better or worse than other ways of settling those conflicts, but in practice insulting is inadvisable. It is a relatively dangerous way to engage in facework.

Apologizing is a peacemaking institution, a countervailing force against insulting and challenging. A full apology implies a constellation of statements and requests, and often international apologies worsen the situation when they leave out elements that the recipient is looking for. Simply expressing regrets, for instance, falls short of apologizing and can end up causing more resentment. International apologies are systematically different from interpersonal ones judg-

ing by a database of 121 international ones. They are often blatantly insincere; they are often made to and for third parties who did not commit the offense or did not suffer from it; and they do not seem to induce expressions of forgiveness. The explanation offered here is that, compared to interpersonal apologies, their purpose is not to tell the offended party of one's change of heart. They involve more the granting of honor and face in front of the world audience.

Prestige and Moral Authority

Prestige is the degree of belief within the group that the individual is admired by the group for some specific reason. It carries the suggestion that this admiration will lead to influence or power. It sometimes involves symbolism when countries seek prestige by acquiring the kind of weapons that the prototypical powerful state would have. Chapter 12 focuses on normative behavior as a way to achieve prestige and on the consequence of this prestige, moral authority. This lets the prestigious person specify what the norms are in other situations. The dynamic of moral authority is one way that norms emerge and change.

The chapter states a definition of norms, a major element of which is that a norm is supported by other norms that tell people what to do when someone keeps or violates the former. This might suggest an unbounded hierarchy of norms supporting norms, but a game analysis shows how this can be avoided, how norms can be arranged in mutually supporting loops. Susan Strange's comment (1983) that "'Regime' is yet one more woolly concept that is a fertile source of discussion simply because people mean different things when they use it" need not be true. The construction here is one way that the concept can be made more precise. The key is that others grant rewards or inflict punishments *in response to* one's observance or violation of norms, and do this following a further norm, and they do *this* pursuant to a further norm.

Symbolism, Honor, and Arms Building

The final chapter examines symbolism in the nuclear arms race, in particular in one of its subplots, the 1980s deployment of intermediate-range weapons in European NATO nations. It gives a fairly thorough listing of the possible motives for deploying these weapons. The arguments based on military strategy are usually regarded as the hard-nosed ones, but here the symbolic reasons carried more weight in determining the actual decision. The deployment was mainly a symbolic response to the challenge of Soviet missiles. It sprang from the typical

motives around honor: willingness to pay costs as a proof that one will be ready to defend the group in the future. The form of the response was also symbolic; it was matching the other's weapons in type and number and placing the missiles on the soil to be defended. Other symbolic motives were using the weapons as moves in a symbolic contest and as influences on crisis tension.

A good account of the INF event has to include nuclear reality as it was defined by those groups making the decision through what are termed nuclear thought-styles. Those in official roles tend to develop special ways of thinking about nuclear weapons, based less on objective considerations, more on what others in the group are thinking. As in any group, members worry about what positions and ideas will be accepted, whatever they may believe in private. Nuclear organizations tend to treat nuclear weapons as if they were conventional weapons; they simplify goals and objectives and stay vague about plans; and they cultivate "rational irrationality" in nuclear thinking. In the INF case, the thought-styles promoted the symbolism, which in turn bolstered the thought-styles.

The U.S./Soviet arms race is over but it is important to determine the causes of overbuilding to know if there is anything about nuclear weapons that prompts arms competitions. The conclusion here is that the nuclear buildup was caused directly by the lack of a practical use for the weapons. It is just because they would do no military good, that governments used them in symbolic modes.

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