

Cliches— Stereotypes— Generalities

Basis of Anglo-American Misunderstanding

by

EDWARD L. BERNAYS

President, Edward L. Bernays Foundation, Inc.

My subject is

Cliches — Stereotypes — Generalities, Basis of Anglo-American Misunderstanding. It might be a good idea beforehand to discuss the attitudes of the British people towards their place in the broad political, economic power structure; attitudes bound up with their feelings about Britain's destiny. For their attitudes towards the United States are to some extent influenced by the international complex. Neither Britishers nor Americans function in a self-contained vacuum.

Recent British polls show indecision on what the future relationship between our two peoples should be. About half the British prefer to join Europe to hold their country's place in the world, a quarter prefer the United States, a quarter say they don't know. They don't agree about a choice of entering the Common Market or closer association with the United States. Over half prefer the Common Market, less than a quarter the United States and less than a quarter don't know. As to a special close relationship with the United States, only slightly over a half say Britain has such a relationship. A third think the relationship is the same as with other countries. The remainder don't know.

The future of our relationship will depend to a degree on the decisions the people of Britain make as to their economic and political future. But regardless of the nature of this decision, a close relationship between our two countries must be maintained to strengthen, in the world, those human values for which they stand.

Five months' recent study in London of British attitudes towards Americans revealed a great communications gap between the fifty-three million Britons and the one hundred ninety-eight million Americans. This is comparable to the misunderstanding of the British by Americans. In my estimation, this lack of understanding is dangerous to future relations between our two countries.

Thoughtful men on both sides of the Atlantic agree with this view. But this communications gap is not generally

recognized. It is rarely discussed. Our two governments, to be sure, clearly see our areas of agreement and disagreement and recognize our common interests are of great importance. However, the people must also understand one another, if we are to maintain good relations. They too must recognize their samenesses and their differences, and that common goals transcend both.

Actually negative stereotypes, cliches, myths and half truths distorted by ignorance are substituted by our two peoples for educated over-all understanding.

Here are some adjectives from British mass media used to describe the Americans: brash, vulgar, aggressive, crude, war-like, non-intellectual, money mad, sex crazy, rat racing and ulcerous. Adjectives used by us about the British are no more friendly: snobbish, degenerate, casteridden, undemocratic, tradition bound and homosexual.

Obviously, there are people in both countries to whom such adjectives apply. But you cannot truthfully generalize about several hundred millions of people.

Minister Philip Kaiser of our London Embassy recently asked "whether political cooperation, technical . . . and important trade, cultural and education channels can remain open between us, unless we take steps to further understanding between British and Americans on the most basic level. That is, in the minds of the whole broad mass of our populations."

Public diplomacy today has to a great extent taken the place of high level diplomacy. The people influence foreign as well as domestic policy. The president of the United States and the premier of Great Britain listen to the voice of the people and foreign policy seeks their consent.

In the certainty of the coming electronic communications revolution, negative stereotypes present grave dangers.

The combination of the Vietnam war and racial disturbances in the United States have helped change stereotypes of the United States in Britain for the worse. The stereotypes of Britain in the United States have also undergone change. Attitudes were more favorable in 1948 and 1949 after World War II. Unesco at that time took a scientific sampling of what British and Americans thought of each other. Six adjectives most frequently used by the British to describe Americans

were: progressive, conceited, generous, peace loving, intelligent and practical. And Americans used comparable adjectives to describe the British: intelligent, hardworking, brave, peace loving, conceited and self-controlled. Stereotypes were friendlier after a war in which we were allies, than they are today.

The danger of negative stereotyping has been pointed out by authorities. In his book, *Human Nature in a Changing World*, Alexander H. Leighton, the great social scientist, writes: "A central matter in national attitude and belief is the way the members of any . . . nation perceive the members of another. Generally the people of one nation . . . harbor stereotyped images of other nations starkly simple and exceedingly inaccurate. . . ."

"The nature of the various types of images, their comparison with reality and the identification of causal factors are attackable problems. Until some headway is made, international relations must always be in danger of decisions based on fantasy."

Stereotypes are of such grave importance, he wrote, because they represent reality to individuals, when they are actually illusions.

But before we attack the problem, let us explore how these British and American stereotypes are formed and perpetuated. We are of course aware that Britons and Americans react to individual friends and acquaintances on a personal basis. But their attitude towards whole populations is cast usually in stereotypes.

The extensive information and misinformation that pass between our two countries have a complicated structure, haphazard and planned, organized and unorganized. News and entertainment are the main elements received through newspapers, TV, radio, movies. General publications, advertising, trade, arts, tourism, Fulbright and other educational exchange play a part. Government channels function through diplomats, the British Information Services and the United States Information Agency, the two latter regrettably limited in funds and personnel. Our respective governments have not yet recognized the importance of adequate information and have provided only niggardly amounts to substitute truth for false stereotypes. The United States Information Agency has a

Voice of America, radio, TV, motion pictures and books. The U.S. also has international exhibits which promote trade and we promote travel. The British carry on similar activities. But misunderstanding continues.

A study was made of American and British school children who had not yet been taught the history of the overseas country. They were asked to write their impressions of that country. A little girl in Birmingham (England) wrote, "There is one of the worst places in the USA that is in Harlem. That is where the thugs hold out and pedal drugs between them." Another young philosopher wrote, "The people in the USA seem to have lots of money to throw away on silly things which they did not want in the first place." Another child wrote, "The USA is governed by a senate who is now Lyndon B. Johnson."

American children showed equal insight. According to a survey in Toledo, Ohio, youngsters viewed Great Britain as "a wet soggy environment for people with strange accents." The Beatles and Liverpool were mentioned by most. "They have kings, queens and chimney sweeps and a heavy English brawl," said one. "It must be pretty queer to still have a Queen and a Prince," wrote one Toledo boy. Another wrote, "From what I hear they treat their people like dirt." His playmate thought Queen Elizabeth Taylor ruled England.

The years through high school do not have objective teaching about the other country. A dual study by British and American historians, in its published findings, "The Historian's Contribution to Anglo-American Misunderstanding" reveals serious nationalistic biases in history text books, used by millions of pupils on both sides of the Atlantic. Five categories of biases are listed. The bias of inertia perpetuates outworn nationalistic legends. In the bias of unconscious falsification, the historian degrades the other nation and glorifies his own. In the bias of omission, American text books, for instance, describe only American victories and English text books do the same for their country. As for bias of language, each country's text books use derogatory language about the other. The American texts say "Hessian mercenaries," while English books write of "hired soldiers." We are "rebels" in the English books, and "patriots" in our own. Our "uprisings"

are "riots" to the British. "Executions" in one country's histories are "murders" in the other's. The bias of cumulative implication praises your own country to the disadvantage of the other.

Conditioning of millions of impressionable children builds up to intensified biases later on, when as adults they are subjected to other media. The media in turn tend to accept these biases and to reenforce them.

Adults are exposed to many media that affect their thought and action. A Britisher wrote me that there is an "abysmal ignorance between the United States and England, with many areas of misunderstanding and friction." A British social psychologist explained to me that only a tiny percentage of Britons is interested in learning anything in depth about the United States, but that the overriding majority thinks it learns the truth about the United States by way of our TV programs, our movies, comic books and superficial news and human interest stories. Americans equally accept superficial, sensational and unusual distortions about Britain.

Even quality newspapers in both countries print only a little material about the overseas country, compared with the remainder of the news. The autumn 1966 issue of the *Journalism Quarterly* reports a study of four quality newspapers British and American, read for a thirty-day period. In the *Minneapolis Tribune*, the *New York Times*, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Washington Post*, English news took up less than two percent of the space devoted to news. In four British newspapers, the *London Daily Express*, *London Daily Telegraph*, *Manchester Guardian* and *London Times* the American news averaged more than four and a half percent, of which ten percent was pictorial. Almost a fifth of American news in British papers was sports, recreation and human interest. In our papers it was one tenth.

One Britisher wrote me he gets his American information from columns in London national dailies, called *The Week in America* or *New York News* or similar titles, giving snippets of information about a seven victims murderer or an expectation of 9,000 suicides in U.S. colleges this year. I doubt whether we get much more about Britain from the average daily, unless we read a quality newspaper. Even then the less

than two percent devoted to the U.K. fails to give us a comprehensive picture.

Advertising also throws reality out of balance. A much used British advertisement published in the U.S. shows an aristocrat with a well-trimmed beard whose uniformed chauffeur delivers Schweppes from a Rolls Royce. This hardly squares with a realistic view of Britain today. And the thatched cottages and changing of the guards at Buckingham Palace in the British tourism advertisements in the U.S. present an equally distorted view.

British advertisers are not always kind to the United States. One ad has a photo of sherry on the rocks, with a slice of lemon, advertising Harvey's Bristol Cream. The caption reads, "How can we punish the Americans for doing this to the world's most civilized drink?"

American films come in for a shellacking in Britain. One man wrote, they "give an impression that all America is a world of penthouses, mink coats, motor yachts, and everyone has a swimming pool in his backyard." Or that the U.S. is a "world of dope addicts, gangsters, rackets and corruption." I heard often about the "highly improbable way of life as depicted by Hollywood." Some are wisely skeptical, but the vast public, without a frame of reference, believes what it sees and hears.

"My family thought America was a rat race, full of millionaires, gangsters, hillbillies and brash boasters," is the usual opinion. Gangsters as a main factor in American life are cited again and again. One letter I received said, "Many people in this country think that Americans are either gangsters or a slick lot of Get Rich Quicks." This theme has been boosted by press, TV and radio.

American tourists to Britain don't necessarily increase mutual understanding, quite the contrary. "Americans stay in cities and don't see enough in farming, ranching and back country sections, — too much night life and not enough educational lectures," said one Briton. Another said, "tourism is fed on differences. Travelers look for a change and the host country does its best to oblige."

Another Englishman complained that "American tourists spend only a brief time in each of several countries, getting

superficial impressions and intensifying their preconceived impression."

British tourists, like our own, bring along their own preconceptions. A professional man said to me on his return to London after four weeks in America, "I was so surprised. I met some intellectuals in St. Louis and San Francisco."

Nor do the British understand us politically. "We are a pawn of America" is a typical reaction. Or "we strongly suspect our leaders are taking orders from you." "Do not patronize us," said another. "All Yanks try to show themselves as superior beings. They seek to impose this will upon us and against us." Vietnam has intensified these attitudes.

All British reaction is of course not negative. The British admire our technology and skills, our automobiles, home appliances and some even envy our central heating. Many try to emulate American activities. "We used to be known as a nation of shopkeepers. Today it is the American super market that counts." Or "you never miss a trick."

Over one thousand international stereotype slurs are recorded in the English language. The U.S. has been spared such slurs because of its physical separation from other countries and its unhomogeneous population. But two world wars and speeded up communication and transportation have destroyed its immunity. We now are also victims of invective stereotypes.

England has suffered from them a long time. The French say "mechant comme un Anglais," meaning ill natured as an Englishman; "marriage Anglais" means that soon after wedding, husband and wife live in separate domiciles. The Poles have a proverb which says, "Nothing excites him, he's an Englishman."

The French slur the Italians, the Italians the French, the Germans, both, and so on.

These stereotypes do not validate truth. They started when there was little communication between peoples. They acted as a catharsis for aggressive impulses. Society encouraged them; an easy way to encourage national ambition at the expense of rival aggressors. Individual libel was a legal offense, national libel was patriotic.

Some students believe that national slurs and negative

stereotypes are caused by envy and political and economic rivalries. But this is not always true.

Negroes are victims of stereotyping, victims of innumerable slurs and damaging cliches, although their political and economic achievements are not envied.

Today students of human nature recognize that the attitudes on which negative stereotyping are based can be changed by education, by effectively using modern media of communication. There is no logic or reason in permitting the relations between our two people to rest on false stereotypes.

The electronic revolution in communications makes it immediate and essential to close the communications gap between the British and American people. The new electronic technology has expanded and will continue to expand methods of communication. But little attention has thus far been devoted to purpose or content. The new communications must be used constructively to create mutual understanding. The possibility always exists that communications systems may be usurped by anti-social elements to use for destructive purposes, as Goebbels did with Germany's machinery or McCarthy with ours. Demagogues are always with us. An informed public is our greatest safeguard against them.

Satellites and other electronic devices will soon make it possible to transmit facsimile reproduction, to do photographic phoning. Holography that uses laser light will produce realistic three-dimensional images. All this will enormously magnify the effect on a viewer.

Worldwide color TV and radio and facsimile newspapers may soon be aimed everywhere. Visual recorded and printed information can be transmitted by one unified system, for good or bad.

We had better decide to use these new tools constructively. The great communications media and the other great forces that shape our society can now start giving this problem the attention it deserves. The Edward L. Bernays Foundation recognizes that the area of British American understanding is a crucial one. To stimulate public discussion of the problem of improving this understanding and to encourage increased activity by government, business, voluntary groups and individuals to communicate and increase the

knowledge of Americans and Britons of each other, it has set up an award of five thousand dollars for a comprehensive and practical program of ideas and suggestions to accomplish this purpose. A jury of eminent American and British experts will select the winner. They include Sir Denis Brogan, Professor of Political Science, Cambridge University; Sir Ifor Evans, Formerly Provost, University College, London; Joseph C. Harsch, Foreign Correspondent; Seymour M. Lipset, Professor of Government and Social Relations, Harvard University; Donald Tyerman, formerly editor *The Economist*; and Gerhard B. Wiebe, Dean of School of Public Communication, Boston University. Manuscripts are limited to five thousand words. They must be postmarked not later than midnight, June 30, 1967, and should be sent to 7 Lowell Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138. The competition is open to anyone, anywhere.

About the Author

Dr. Edward L. Bernays, the author of this talk, has been intimately associated with international communications since World War I, when he served with the United States Committee on Public Information here and at the Peace Conference in Paris. He has since then advised governments, newspapers, magazines, broadcasting systems, business and financial organizations, professional and trade associations, unions and Presidents of the United States.

Dr. Bernays is a graduate of Cornell University, with a B.S. degree. He holds the honorary degree of Doctor of Humanities from Boston University. He has been awarded the Medallion of Honor of the City of New York, The French Officer of Public Instruction and the Danish King Christian the Tenth Medal. He is the author of numerous books on public opinion, and his memoir *Biography of an Idea* has recently been published.

He is president of the Edward L. Bernays Foundation.