America & the Third World

The first thesis of this chapter is that Americans are brilliant communicators but bad listeners. Out of this follows a second thesis. Because Americans can communicate effectively, humanity is becoming Americanized to some extent. Conversely, because Americans are bad listeners, their external relations are refusing to be humanized. In other words, the world is becoming Americanized culturally, but America is refusing to be humanized morally. Let us explore these propositions more fully.

The Iranian Revolution was an excellent illustration of this one-way traffic. It was as if American culture had switched on the amplifiers and loudspeakers towards Iran while Uncle Sam switched off his own hearing aid and turned a deaf ear to Islam. Iran was becoming Americanized and Westernized, but under protest Uncle Sam did not hear the protest until it was too late.

We shall return to the issue of Islam and American foreign policy, but first let us examine the nature of American effectiveness in communication before we examine Uncle Sam’s deaf ear.

Six Languages of American Policy

The means of communication at the disposal of the United States have to be distinguished from the actual messages transmitted. The United States uses a number of different languages in communicating with the world. One is the language of production. Because the American economy is the largest in the world, the United States can use producer power as a medium of protest or disapproval. This is what President Jimmy Carter did when he imposed an embargo on grain sales to the Soviet Union over the issue of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The moral message of such an embargo was neutralized when the United States invaded Grenada four years later (1983) and intimidated Nicaragua (see Chapter 5). Once again the United States was thorough in communicating its own message of disapproval to the Soviet Union, but Uncle Sam fell far short of attentiveness in listening to the moral implications of US disapproval of the Soviet invasion of a small neighbour.

Another medium available to the United States for international communication
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predictable anti-Sovietism and anti-Castroism, while he switches off the hearing aid on Third World concerns.

The sixth language available to the United States is of course the English language — the most widely understood tongue in human history. English does not, of course, have the largest number of speakers in the world — Chinese outperforms English in number of individual speakers.

It was Great Britain, as we have seen, which helped to decide how many countries of the world adopted English as the main language of national business. But it is now mainly the United States which helps to decide how many more individuals choose to learn the English language. Once again the United States is better at using the available English language for transmitting the American message to the rest of the world than at using the language to listen to the whispers of the rest of humanity.

If the medium is the message, it is certainly difficult to disentangle American means of communication from American messages. We should at least attempt to be more explicit about some of the messages that the United States has been trying to communicate to the rest of the world.

Messages from America

One competing claim is between American capitalism and American democracy. On the whole, the United States has been much more successful in transmitting capitalism than in transmitting democracy. Capitalism is the doctrine of competitive economics, resulting in market forces. Liberal democracy is the doctrine of competitive politics, resulting in political pluralism.

The Carter administration decided to place emphasis on the export of liberal democracy, hence the special premium Carter put on human rights as an aspect of foreign policy. The Reagan administration has emphasized the export of capitalism, with a special premium on private enterprise and fair prices for farmers in American foreign policy.

When the United States consistently emphasizes the sanctity of human rights, that is probably good news for humanity. It could mean that US foreign policy is beginning to be humanized. When the United States stresses the sanctity of the profit motive, however, that is probably bad news for humanity, for it means the Americanization of the human race rather than the humanization of America.

When the United States genuinely tries to promote human rights, there is less American consolidation of repressive regimes in the Third World, though even Carter was insensitive to the oppressiveness of the Shah of Iran. When the United States is out to consolidate capitalism in the world, however, democracy and social justice are seldom priorities in Uncle Sam’s calculations. Uncle Sam’s hearing aid to the world is more firmly switched off when the main mission is exporting American capitalism than when the main goal is the spread of American democracy.

Capitalism and liberal democracy have not been the only messages that the US communication infrastructure has attempted to transmit to the rest of the world. Less deliberate but even more effective has been the transmission of American life-styles to the four corners of the globe. It is to these aspects that we must now turn.

In the Third World, the competition is partly within the Western tradition itself, with two forces struggling for international advantage. The rivalry is between ancestral European culture and American cultural revisionism. Western Europe and the United States are in the grip of cultural competition for the soul of the Third World.

In terms of formal dress, Western Europe is winning. Indeed the European suit has become the most compelling symbol of Western cultural supremacy in the world. Every man has two dress cultures — his own and Western (the Western man has the two traditions fused into one). No one regards a Japanese in a Western suit, or an Arab in a Western tie, as a cultural incongruity. It is only when we see a Japanese in Arab regalia, or an Arab in Japanese dress, that we are shocked. The European suit, especially, has become truly universalized.

But in terms of casual dress, the picture is very different. The American genius for casual attire is prevailing. Casual bush shirts, t-shirts, denim jackets and trousers, and the like are capturing the imagination of the Third World. Time and again I receive requests from Africa for jeans and t-shirts as special gifts, especially from the new generation of Africans. African youth yearn for American jeans as Christmas gifts.

What is more, American tourists are helping to informalize the dress rules of tourist hotels and restaurants throughout the world. I have known restaurants which in European colonial days used to insist on jacket and tie for dinner, relax the rule in order to attract American tourists in the post-colonial era.

On the issue of food, the American genius is in fast food — while Western Europe continues to prevail in formal cuisine and formal dinner in the Western tradition. The hamburger revolution has begun to penetrate Africa. Some African cities already have at least one Kentucky Fried Chicken and one American-style pizzeria. American impatience and preoccupation with speed are part of this triumph of quick food. 'Let's cruise, baby! Time is up!' When you do not have time to spare, eat American! But when you have a whole evening for indulgence, by all means eat French!

Then there is the rivalry of drinks between Western Europe and the United States. At least in the Third World, Europe still rules supreme in alcoholic drinks. French wine, Scotch whisky, and Czech and German beer are truly triumphant. Their American equivalents are decidedly poor seconds or thirds in popularity.

But where America has communicated effectively is in the field of soft drinks. I personally was selling Coca-Cola at the Mombasa Institute of Muslim Education in Kenya back in the 1950s. There is no real European equivalent to either Coke or Pepsi. We have been witnessing the cola-ization of the world, symbolic of a much wider process of the Americanization of humanity.

A further field of competition is the printed word. In the world of fiction and art, Europe is still triumphant. In the field of science and society, however, the United States has been establishing a lead. Great American novels and plays are almost unknown in, say, Africa. But in the natural sciences, the applied sciences, and the social sciences, the American impact is clear and unmistakable.

At the more popular level, there is the triumph of American news magazines — especially Time and Newsweek. This triumph extends to imitation. Several news magazines about the Third World based in London were modelled on Time and Newsweek in format. These American magazines have become the most imitated in the history of journalism.

On the other hand, American newspapers have less influence among African and Asian elites than do European newspapers. There are a number of reasons for this. First, American newspapers are less national even in their own countries
than are European papers at home. Second, the best American papers (like the
New York Times and the Washington Post) are much more bulky and difficult to
export than are their European equivalents. Third, American newspapers have a
reputation for being more insular and parochial in their news coverage than are
their European counterparts. Fourth, a high proportion of Asian and African
students studying in, say, Britain are more likely to be reading The Times or The
Guardian regularly than their counterparts studying in the United States are likely
to be reading the New York Times or the Washington Post. British papers cost the
same all over Britain. Le Monde costs the same all over France. But the New York
Times is too expensive for students in most of these United States. The
presumptive Third World elites studying in the United States are therefore less
likely to cultivate a taste for American newspapers than are their equivalents in
Britain and France for British or French national newspapers, a taste which can
become an abiding interest.

In the field of education in Asia and Africa, the American impact is greater on
the tertiary level (colleges and universities) than on the secondary and primary
levels. In English-speaking Africa the American idea of semester-long courses is
beginning to catch on. Term papers are beginning to count towards the final
grade, instead of the grade being based entirely on the final examination. And the
American title of Associate Professor has replaced the old British rank of Reader in
most former British colonies.

In music, the American impact is restricted to the popular variety of Western
sounds, while Europeans continue to lead in classical Western strands. Michael
Jackson has already become a world figure and not just an American legend. Third
World lovers of Western classical music, on the other hand, are unlikely to know
much about either American composers or American performers in this field.

In technology the United States is particularly victorious. Both American
varieties of domesticated technology and American successes in high technology
have exerted considerable influence on the rest of the world. American home
gadgets — from dishwashers to air conditioners — have become part of the elite
life-style of the world. And American experience in space and satellite, and
indeed in civil aviation, have given the United States an edge in the competition
for advanced technology in the global market-place.

In the field of computers the United States seems to be ahead of parts of Europe.
The rest of the world, apart from Japan, is only just beginning to be computerized,
and American salesmen appear to be stealing a march over the Europeans.

In film and television the United States continues to maintain high international
visibility in spite of the decline of Hollywood. American soap operas like
Dynasty and Dallas have wide audiences from Mombasa to Munich, from
Singapore to San Juan (any San Juan). Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans
await next week’s exploits of J.R. in Dallas with great interest. But J.R. himself
epitomizes America — for J.R. is a great communicator but a bad listener.

American television programmes feature on the screens of the world, but the
world’s television programmes seldom feature on American screens, except on
the highly specialized channels of what Americans call ‘public’ broadcasting. By
the measurement of number of viewers, these are the least public of the channels
except for those purveying pornography.

American high art in painting is much more obscure than European high
culture of the brush. In much of the world, names like Rembrandt, Michelangelo
and Picasso have no American equivalents.

On the other hand, is there a European equivalent of Walt Disney? American
genius is revealed more starkly in cartoons than in an art gallery. Once again the
United States is Europe’s follower in the high art of painting, but the United
States is absolute leader in the popular art of cartoon.

In most areas of life, American genius lies in the popular art form rather than
the elite speciality, in mass involvement rather than aristocratic cultivation. As we
indicated, American jazz is better known than classical music, American news
magazines better known than novels, American casual dress more appreciated
than European formal dress, American fast food more admired than formal
cuisine. American soft drinks more toasted than American alcoholic beverages,
American soap operas more appreciated than American television documentaries,
and so on down the line. Alexis de Tocqueville would feel abundantly vindicated.
After all, America was the West’s first mass democracy. Why should its popular
culture not be its main claim to global immortality?

The only flaw in the argument is that America is insensitive to the popular
culture of the rest of the world. This collective genius of popular communication is
retarded as a collective listener. The world has learned to dance to the music of
the United States. But America has yet to listen to the concert of the world.

What are the underlying forces behind this paradox of the American condition?
Why is America effective as a communicator but inattentive as a listener? Why is
the world getting Americanized while America is refusing to be humanized?

Part of the answer lies in a third paradox. American democracy was born out of
religious toleration coupled with racial intolerance. It is to this third paradox
that we must now turn.

Religious Freedom and Racial Bigotry

While it is indeed true that the Pilgrim Fathers turned out to be greater zealots
than the religious persecutors they had escaped from in Europe, the longer term
trend in American history has indeed been towards greater religious toleration.

By the time the American constitution was being drawn up, the United States
was already ahead of Europe in seeking to divorce the state from the church. The
new constitution dissuaded its legislature from making laws which would infringe
on freedom of worship or enhance the political status of one denomination over
others. The secular state in Western history was at hand.

That same America which was learning to be more religiously tolerant than
Europe was at the same time learning to be less racially tolerant than Europe. In
one way Europe had locked America into precisely that racial situation. It was
Europe’s trans-Atlantic slave trade, destined for its American colonies, which had
set the stage for racism in the Western hemisphere.

By the time America was engaged in creating a non-religious state, it had lost its
capacity for creating a non-racial society. The principle of ‘separate but equal’ was
a licence for a racist society; the principle of ‘separating church from state’ was a
confirmation of a secular state. It was a contest between God and genes. American
democracy sought to keep God out of politics but to retain genes within the
political process. American democracy was both more secular and less racial than
its European counterparts.

American democracy itself was born out of at least two forces: American
secularism and the American frontier. Secularism taught Americans the virtues of
The American Dream is built upon the principle that anyone can achieve success through hard work and determination. This idea, often referred to as the "American Dream," is a fundamental aspect of American culture and is widely regarded as a key component of the country's identity.

In its simplest form, the American Dream suggests that anyone, regardless of their background or circumstances, has the opportunity to improve their lives and those of their children. This concept is often associated with the idea of upward mobility and the belief that a person's success is not limited by their social class or economic status.

The American Dream has been a driving force in American history, informing the nation's policies and aspirations. It has inspired generations of Americans to work hard, be honest, and strive for personal and collective success. Despite the challenges and inequalities that have characterized American society, the American Dream continues to shape the country's social and political landscape, providing a moral and ethical framework for individuals and communities alike.

The American Dream is not without its critics, who argue that it perpetuates inequality and overlooks the role of systemic barriers and historical injustices. Nevertheless, the idea remains a powerful symbol of hope and opportunity, and continues to inspire Americans to strive for a better future.
The Marshall Plan and the Hiroshima Legacy

This is part of a wider pattern in American history. The most generous things Americans have done have been to non-whites. American generosity has ranged from genocide against native Americans to dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, then from dropping the hydrogen bombs on Nagasaki to dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima. This century was Marshall Aid. The most generous things Americans did were European. The beneficiaries were Europeans.

Harry S. Truman was the American president who destroyed the Marshall Plan. It was in 1947 that General George Marshall, Secretary of the United States, proposed a European Recovery Plan which came to play a fundamental role in the reconstruction of Europe. The Marshall Plan was one of the most successful economic programs ever. The United States spent nearly 20 billion dollars as part of the European reconstruction.

The United States has now done the same in Afghanistan and Iraq. The United States has spent billions of dollars in these countries, and the results have been disastrous. The people of Afghanistan and Iraq have been killed and displaced, and the countries have remained poverty-stricken.

Samuel P. Huntington, a prominent American political scientist, has written extensively about the rise and fall of the American heft of the 20th century. Huntington argues that America's decline is due to a combination of factors, including a decline in American military power, a decline in American economic power, and a decline in American cultural influence.

Huntington's analysis is consistent with the narrative of John Updike, a prominent American writer, who has written about the decline of the American heft of the 20th century.

Updike argues that the decline of the American heft of the 20th century is due to a combination of factors, including a decline in American military power, a decline in American economic power, and a decline in American cultural influence.

Updike's analysis is consistent with the narrative of Huntington, and both analyses are consistent with the narrative of American history.
Once again Israel becomes one of the meeting points between the honourable American legacy of the Marshall Plan and the dishonourable American legacy of Hiroshima. The Jewish state has become the de facto continuation of the Marshall Programme. Like Western Europe, the Jews were devastated by the horrors of Nazism and World War II. The United States has already spent more on the State of Israel than it spent on the whole of the entire Marshall Programme. American foreign aid to Israel has become the perpetual Marshall Plan.

No one outside the Arab world would begrudge the Jewish state such sums—but for the stark contrast between support for Israel and Uncle Sam’s lack of interest in either domestic blacks or the wider world of non-whites. While the Reagan administration has been cutting down support for welfare programmes with black beneficiaries within the United States, the same administration has been increasing support for a Jewish community outside the United States. A foreign country with a population of less than four million has been getting more of Uncle Sam’s attention than an American minority of 30 million people.

Does Uncle Sam want to hear any of this? Is the issue of racism still ‘radical nonsense’ in some American circles? Is a critical examination of Israel one of the most taboo of all subjects in New York? In short, is Uncle Sam about to switch off his hearing aid once again to avoid unpleasant subjects? Some forms of censorship try to prevent unwelcome opinions from being uttered. Uncle Sam has perfected a special censorship of his own to prevent himself from hearing world voices which would make him uncomfortable. Some are born deaf, some become deaf, and others inflict deafness upon themselves.

On Marx and Muhammad

The messages that the United States has been least prepared to listen to are those of Marxism, on one side, and Islam, on the other. In the Third World the Marxist opposition to the United States concerns the issue of America’s economic imperialism; Islam’s reservations about the United States concern the issue of America’s cultural imperialism. Third World Marxists do not want their economies to be controlled or exploited by the West. Third World Muslims do not want their culture to be ‘prostituted’ by the West. To Third World Marxists, Marx is pitched against Uncle Sam in a struggle for economic resources. To Third World Muslims, Muhammad confronts Uncle Sam in a struggle for human salvation.

If you put on Uncle Sam’s spectacles, the two struggles may appear different. The struggle against Marxism is strategic and religious. The struggle against Islam is racial and religious. The struggle against Marxism is an East—West divide; the struggle against ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ is a North—South divide. The struggle against Marxism is primarily a civil war of white against white. The struggle against ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ is a racial war of white against non-white.

In other words, Uncle Sam sees all manifestations of Marxism in the Third World as being mere extensions of America’s confrontation with the Soviet Union,East against West and white against white. There is an assumption of sanity and stability in East—West relations, but an assumption of fanaticism and instability in relations with the world of Islam.

Islam is basically an Afro-Asian religion. Virtually all Muslim countries are either African or Asian. To that extent Islam is a religion of non-white people. Indeed, that is precisely why Islam has sometimes fascinated black Americans, from Malcolm X to the boxer Muhammad Ali. From the white side, the crusade against Islamic fundamentalism is partly a struggle against the forces of non-white assertiveness and challenge.

Uncle Sam refuses to hear that Marxism in the Third World, far from being an extension of East—West tensions, is in fact a manifestation of North—South unease. People in the Southern hemisphere gc Marxist not because they are anti-Christian or even anti-capitalist but because they are primarily anti-imperialist. Scratch a Third World Marxist and you will find a Third World nationalist. The ultimate hostility is not to capitalism as a method of production, but to imperialism as a method of domination. Certainly in Africa, the local bourgeoisie are much less threatening than American workers. The cleavages are not really between classes nationally but between power blocs internationally. Third World Marxists are anti-American more because America is a world power controlling their economies than because America has a capitalist mode of production.

America has to be similarly discriminating in listening to messages from the world of Islam. Clearly the Iranian revolution was not anti-Christian but anti-Western. The chief focus of hostility was not against the Vatican but against the United States, the crucifix but against the star-spangled banner. The Iranian emotions were religious, but the target was secular. This was an ancient crusade involving Saladin and Richard the Lion Heart. It was a modern crusade involving the muezzin from the minaret and the disc jockey, involving the Ayatollah and the pop singer.

In a curious way, Marxism and Islam have been in alliance in trying to prevent the Americanization of the world, but they have parted company in any effort to humanize America. Marxism has attempted to prevent further American penetration into the world economy by raising the clarion call of resistance by the workers and the underprivileged. Islam has tried to rally resistance to America’s cultural imperialism by citing the vision of Third World authenticity and cultural dignity.

Marxism and Islam have made more progress in preventing the Americanization of humanity than in fostering the humanization of America. No one has yet found out how to operate Uncle Sam’s hearing aid.

Conclusion

This chapter started with the thesis that Americans were brilliant communicators but bad listeners. We moved on to the related thesis that the world is closer to the Americanization of humanity than to the humanization of America. These theses are somewhat exaggerated, but there is enough in them to demand Uncle Sam’s attentiveness.

We have used the image of Uncle Sam’s hearing aid to emphasize the issue of volition in communication. Hearing aids can be switched on or off, worn or not worn. In the case of the United States it has been a case of readiness to listen or not. We have put forward the proposition that in the twentieth century America has been much more prepared to proclaim than to respond, much more prepared to articulate than to listen.

We have put forward part of the explanation. The United States has been religiously liberal but racially bigoted. This has affected American reaction to Marxism and Islam as Uncle Sam’s biggest challenges. What should be remembered is that Uncle Sam regards Marxism as an East—West divide involving...
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relations between white and white, while Islam emerges as a North–South confrontation between whites and non-whites.

Underlying it all is the continuing tension between religion and race in the complex and tormented nature of the American soul. Quo vadis, America? We hear you, America! Do you hear us?

Notes


2. See Louis Ruchames, Racial Thought in America, p. 381.

