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Introduction: "For Six Strange Weeks They Had Acted As If They Were Friends"

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Religion can heal but it can certainly hurt as well. Hence, this collection of essays addresses some aspects of the issues of religious stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, and considers a range of important topics that haunt our societies today. When stereotyping becomes the oxygen we inhale, when it is so important to us that we cannot see how we can survive without it, what can and should we do? This book is not only critical, but also constructive; it not only explores, it also opposes stereotyping.

In *Independent Diplomat: Dispatches from an Unaccountable Elite*, the former British diplomat Carne Ross critically discusses the way diplomatic telegrams are usually formulated. He provides an example from his early career as a diplomat:

> On my first ever overseas posting, to Norway, I wrote a letter—at the encouragement of my boss—to the Western European Department in London analysing the "Norwegian national character." This letter was superficial in the extreme, mainly because its observations had been gathered from watching the behaviour of Norwegians at the luggage carousel at Oslo airport when I first arrived. I spoke no Norwegian (and never did). This did not however prevent me from sending the letter.[1]

It is important to emphasize that this way of essentializing of entire nations and peoples that he criticizes is not an exception, but belongs to the very foundation of our way of thinking: "…the habit of referring to whole countries in the singular and to their government as the embodiment of that state is one as deep-rooted as the state-based international system itself."[2] Furthermore, he argues that there is an agenda at work here. The motives of *other* countries are not described in the same way as those of *one's own* nation:

> It is always easy to attribute to one's opponents the base and selfish motives of economic interest. […] Meanwhile, to ourselves, we routinely attribute "higher" motives of security, democracy, freedom, when of course the material motives are, with only a few exceptions, also at play. But I have often felt, looking from inside the box of policy-making, that it is too simplistic to assign motives in this way.[3]

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SHORTCUTS AND GENERALIZATIONS

Needless to say, it is not quite correct to think that we can establish and define a national character by watching people at the luggage carousel (albeit at the largest airport in the country), but, nevertheless, we all realize that it is necessary to make generalizations. This is something we do all the time; we simply have to do it, since, in the words of Perry R. Hinton in his book *Stereotypes, Cognition and Culture*, "…human cognition is not able to apprehend the full complexity of the world."[4] In this sense, a stereotype is a simplified picture of the world, and we all need this kind of simplification. For example, when a man suffering from acute abdominal pain comes to the emergency department of a hospital, the doctor does not consider, even for a moment, the possibility that this male patient might be pregnant, and that the cause of his pain is that he is about to give birth. In short, it is a justifiable cognitive shortcut for hospital staff simply to take for granted that men can never get pregnant.[5]

In other words, we need generalizations; we have to categorize in order to live our lives. For this reason, some scholars have chosen to use exceptionally wide definitions when discussing stereotyping and prejudice. Robin Fox, for example, states, "[w]e have to come to terms with the idea that prejudice is not a form of thinking but that thinking is a form of prejudice."[6] Whereas it is intriguing and fascinating to reflect on human thinking in this way, it could be argued that this approach is less than helpful in an anthology that consistently seeks to address the *negative* consequences of our stereotyping.

Hence, in this context we will differentiate between (beneficial and therefore not problematic) cognitive shortcuts and (harmful and therefore problematic) negative stereotyping. We should ask ourselves whether a heuristic categorization of other people helps us, or, to much higher a degree, hurts them. Are we entitled, for example, to identify, label, and categorize a person as "introvert" (and perhaps even nothing but "introvert")?[7]

Another example, which may prove to be helpful in this line of thought, is our behavior when we enter a clothes shop and need assistance. We probably look at those present in the room, at what they are wearing and what they are doing, how they are handling the clothes, whether they are scrutinizing the items, looking at the price tags, or whether they are slowly and meticulously folding the clothes and putting them into piles, at the same time as greeting those entering the shop with a word of welcome. We do this in order to distinguish between other customers and the shop assistants. Presumably, we all agree that this is acceptable behavior; it is neither problematic nor prejudicial. In the words of Hinton, "…we need to categorize the social world in order to understand and interact with it."[8] Sometimes we make mistakes. If we ask, "Do you work here?" and the other person shakes his or her head, we feel embarrassed, but it is not the end of the world (although it might be somewhat more problematic for the other person). Hence, we have to return to the pertinent and underlying question: *Why is it wrong to seek to establish the "Norwegian national character" by watching the behavior of Norwegians at the luggage carousel at Oslo airport, but not wrong to assume that men cannot become pregnant?*

When is our everyday understanding of people stereotyping, and when is it not? We have reason to believe that two aspects are of importance here. First, is part of