

# **SOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF LEFEBVRE'S THEORY OF ETHICAL COGNITION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In a recent book Vladimir Lefebvre contends that the dominant ethical systems in the West and the Soviet Union are fundamentally different. However, people on each side tend to assume that there is only one type of ethical reasoning. The result is that each side takes actions that are misunderstood by the other side. With the guidance of Lefebvre's theory it may now be possible for the West to take actions which, although counterintuitive in Western thinking, might lead to more success in negotiations and/or a reduction in armaments.

## **ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS OF EAST-WEST TENSION**

The United States and the Soviet Union have been engaged in a "cold war" at least since the end of World War II. Although the cold war may not be either rational or stable, we can at least be thankful that the tension has not escalated to a nuclear war. Nevertheless, the danger inherent in the existence of nuclear weapons and the very large sums of money that are devoted to military activities suggest that a change in the current pattern of behavior could be to everyone's advantage. Efforts to control military spending and to reduce risk through arms control have not been notably successful. Arms control agreements have merely resulted in ceilings for the next stage of the arms race. It may be that the time has come to consider alternative strategies. That is, rather than trying to limit or manage the arms race, we might focus our attention on why there is such intense distrust between the United States and the Soviet Union. Several explanations for the current conflict have been proposed.

Cultural differences are one explanation. People in all countries tend to assume that people in other countries think and act very much like they do. People in general tend to believe that their behavior is reasonable, appropriate and good. Hence cultural differences often lead to conflict because behavior which is different frequently is interpreted as being bad. Yet cultural differences do not necessarily lead to arms races. If cultural differences explain the tension between the United States and the Soviet Union, they must be either unusually strong cultural differences, or cultural differences of a different kind.

A second explanation for the arms race is that it is the modern version of nations seeking to establish "spheres of influence." According to this view each large state attempts to surround itself with allies and to compete with other large powers for allies. Yet this kind of behavior is anachronistic in a world that since World War II has been moving from political and military competition to economic competition.

A third way of explaining East-West conflict is to assert that the military and industrial establishments in both countries have an interest in continued hostility and military preparations.

The ideologies of the two countries and the assumption that these are incompatible is a fourth explanation of the current conflict. The idea of an international class struggle is still appealing to many people, but it explains conflict within a country better than conflict between two superpowers.

These explanations of the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union are well known and yet the intensity of the rivalry between the two countries continues to be puzzling to many people.

## **A NEW EXPLANATION FOR EAST-WEST TENSION**

A new explanation of the conflict between the West and the Soviet Union has been offered by Vladimir Lefebvre (1982). He suggests that there are two fundamentally different systems of ethical cognition and that one is characteristic of the West while the other is characteristic of the Soviet Union. Lefebvre maintains that people in the West and in the Soviet Union not only value different things but also have different ways of valuing. Understanding his theory requires understanding how he uses the words "compromise" and "conflict". Compromise and conflict can occur both within an individual and between individuals. His concept of compromise and conflict between individuals corresponds to normal usage, but his concept of compromise and conflict within an individual is unusual.

To understand how Lefebvre thinks about compromise and conflict within an individual, think of a possible conflict between means and ends. If there is a conflict between means and ends, a person in the West is considered to be a good person if he thinks about that conflict and takes it seriously. In the Soviet Union a person is considered to be a good person if he minimizes or compromises on a difference

between means and ends. In the Soviet Union a good person is one who will pursue a good end even if the means is bad, whereas in the West a good person is one who will not use a bad means to achieve a good end. The constitutions of the United States and the Soviet Union reflect this way of thinking. The Constitution of the United States lists a series of "thou shalt nots." The government is not permitted to infringe freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to assemble, etc. The constitution of the Soviet Union says that the government will guarantee housing, education, and health care, presumably by any means necessary.

### **SOME CONSEQUENCES OF THE DIFFERENT ETHICAL SYSTEMS**

These different ways of thinking can lead to different ways of negotiating. When a Soviet person begins a negotiation, he often leads off with a confrontational statement in an effort to present himself as a person of high ethical status who will not compromise his principles. An American will often begin a negotiation with a conciliatory statement intending to present himself as a person of high ethical status who is willing to give a little in order to get a little. Unfortunately each opening statement establishes exactly the opposite impression as the one intended. Americans come away thinking that the Soviets are boorish, aggressive, and unwilling to negotiate seriously. The Soviets conclude that the Americans are weak, unprincipled, and unprepared to negotiate seriously.

Not only do Americans and Soviets have different ways of initiating a negotiation, different feelings are also involved. Americans approach a negotiation by indicating the area in which an agreement might be possible. They expect the other side to do the same. The region of overlap then becomes the focus of attention. The rest of the negotiation is envisioned as a process of clarification, wording, and working out of details. At the end of the process the negotiators are left with the satisfying feeling that they have jointly constructed a mutually acceptable agreement. This cooperatively produced success is interpreted as a sign that relations are improving and will continue to improve.

When Soviets negotiate, they envision a different process. One side's opening statement defines issues on which no compromise is possible. They expect the other side to make a similar statement. A Soviet negotiator will look closely at what has not been ruled out. He will then state another issue on which compromise is not possible. He expects his "opponent" to do likewise. This process continues until a situation has been defined that neither side has ruled out. This becomes the de facto agreement. The feelings at the end of a Soviet negotiation are completely unlike those at the end of an American negotiation. Each side can feel victorious since it never compromised. At the end of a Soviet negotiation there is a feeling of exhaustion mixed perhaps with exhilaration from a long and hard-fought struggle which had a satisfactory outcome. Rather than a feeling of friendliness among negotiators at the end of a negotiation, the most that can be achieved in a Soviet negotiation is grudging respect for a skilled and committed adversary.

Diplomats who have long experience in dealing with the Soviet Union are familiar with these differences in negotiating styles. But the majority of the American people are not. They assume that the Soviets are like us. They wonder why the United States does not have better relations with the Soviet Union. Meanwhile each new American administration presents the opportunity for a new group of leaders to experience the frustration of dealing with the Soviets and the anger that follows. The Soviets interpret this anger as hostility and feel justified in continuing their arms buildup.

Because the cultures of the United States and the Soviet Union are so different, people in each country often have difficulty imagining how the social and political system of the other country works at all. Americans believe that centralized planning, the lack of a market mechanism to set prices, and the suppression of the free flow of information would create a system so inefficient it would barely be able to produce anything. Russians believe that a system that permits as much freedom as occurs in the US would be chaotic, unmanageable and characterized by uncontrolled violence.

Because a willingness to compromise is associated with low ethical status in the Soviet Union, conflicts tend to escalate until they are resolved by a person in authority. Hence the Soviet

Union through the Communist Party is organized like one huge pyramid. Every agency of government, every manufacturing firm, and every club or association has two chains of command. At each level of organization there are two officials in charge. One is the normal administrator. The other is a party official. An administrator never makes a major decision without consulting with the party official. The fact that a party official is always nearby insures that a person in authority is close at hand to resolve disputes which would otherwise escalate without control as each side demonstrated its high ethical status by refusing to compromise.

In a society where high ethical status is associated with a willingness to compromise, there is little need for decisions to be imposed by a central government. However, in a society where high ethical status is associated with refusal to compromise and a willingness to be in conflict with an opponent, a central government with considerable authority may be necessary to maintain order. Understanding a system of government requires understanding the culture in which that government is rooted. Similarly, trying to understand how a government may change is not possible unless one has some idea of how cultures change.

Lefebvre's work on the ethical systems in the West and the Soviet Union explains how each system evaluates ethical status and leads to feelings of guilt and suffering, but it does not contain an explanation of how ethical systems change. Kohlberg's theory of moral development does contain an explanation of how people move from one level of moral development to another, namely by encountering problems that cannot be successfully solved at the current level of moral development but can be solved at the next higher level of moral development. Efforts to combine these two theories might be a fruitful line of inquiry for those attempting to understand change in Eastern or Western social systems, for example change from one style of management to another style of management.

## **THE NEED FOR KNOWLEDGE TO MANAGE CULTURAL INTERACTION**

Coexistence between the United States and the Soviet Union requires that joint decisions be made. The two political and economic systems are very different in both organizational structure and practices. The different institutions have their foundations in different value systems. There is ample evidence that, when people from the United States and the Soviet Union interact, puzzling and surprising problems arise due to the different value systems.

The result is that interactions which are on-going tend to be superficial. Efforts to understand the differences between the two systems often result in anger, hostility, and the conviction that further interaction would be fruitless. It is time that we attempt to understand why these feelings occur, despite sincere efforts on both sides, and begin to formulate strategies for moving beyond these feelings.

Peaceful coexistence in the long term will require some important changes in values and social practices. In order to achieve this change in a manner that is not disruptive it will be necessary to explicate the value differences. More successful management of the interaction between the two systems will require more thorough understanding. The fact of differences can hardly be questioned. Why do Americans behave as they do? And why do Soviets behave as they do? Though it may be unpleasant for both sides, an explication is indispensable. New forms of conduct need to be established based on new values.

There are indications that there is a willingness on both sides to engage in new conduct. The research described above can contribute to the "new global political thinking" which has been called for in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev has declared that there is a need to give up orthodox approaches of regionalism and narrow class interests. Currently experiments are underway to increase emigration from the Soviet Union, to permit joint ventures between East and West not administered by the government, and even to allow private ownership of some services such as restaurants with owners allowed to keep profits. If interaction between the two societies increases in the years ahead, success of joint projects will require deeper understanding among a larger number of people than currently exists.

My experience has been that there are major conceptual difficulties in understanding relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. My conclusion is that the focus of attention should be not on the arms race but rather on the cultural and ethical systems underlying the two societies and that at least a few theories already exist to help us formulate fruitful methods and lines of inquiry.

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## **EXAMPLES OF THE TWO ETHICAL SYSTEMS**

Compiled by Stuart A. Umpleby  
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"In a breathtaking act of loyalty, Molotov quietly abstained when the Politburo voted to arrest his Jewish wife in a postwar wave of purges. Molotov defended the betrayal simply: 'Because I am a member of the Politburo, I must obey party discipline.' Later rulers freed his wife but stripped Molotov of party membership. That dishonor was later rescinded, but the man who was once 'the voice of Stalin' lived in obscurity the rest of his life." Obituary of Vyacheslav M. Molotov, 96, *Newsweek*, November 24, 1986, p. 98.

Molotov believed the end justified the means. To aid the advance of socialism he was willing to sacrifice his wife. The story is similar to that of Abraham in The Bible. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son in order to prove his love for God. At the last moment God told him not to kill his son.

"FDR thought he could charm, outwit and patronize Joseph Stalin. In both Ike and Kennedy there was some hint of feeling that Khrushchev could be, if not charmed, at

least cajoled and favorably impressed into accepting our general outlook on the world... Khrushchev turned out to be and behave like a brute at his Vienna conference with Kennedy. He went home with a sense that the American president was a pushover. Kennedy went home knowing he had to take action to overcome that impression. Plenty of trouble followed." Meg Greenfield, "Close Encounters at the Summit," Newsweek, November 18, 1985, p. 114.

In his book, Manipulated Science, Mark Popovsky describes a fire in a classified scientific research lab in the Soviet Union. When the firemen arrived at the laboratory to put out the fire, the guards at the door would not admit them because they did not have security clearances. An intense argument ensued between the firemen and the guards. Finally the firemen went around to the side of the building and entered through a window. The guards did not stop them because their job was to guard the front door. A later board of inquiry ruled that both the guards and the firemen had acted appropriately. Both sides had been uncompromising in carrying out their duty.

Ligachev, at the time chief Soviet propagandist and a spokesman for the conservative faction within the Politburo which prefers a slower pace of change:

"Today we must also mention the need to improve the atheistic upbringing of young people, of university students. Occasionally, some people who come across violations of the standards of socialist morality begin to consider the expediency of being tolerant toward religious ideas, of returning to religious morality. They forget the elementary Marxist truth that religion is not in any way the source of morality in the individual. It is not religion which gave the people their moral standards, which have now become universal. These standards were developed and strengthened by the masses in the course of their centuries-long struggle against the oppression and domination of the wealthy and against the immorality and cruelty of an exploitative society. Communist morality has significantly enriched these common human norms. For this reason we have no reason to narrow our moral conceptions, to move them backwards into the past. Yet, this precisely is what some of today's supporters of religious mysticism and contemporary God-search are demanding.

"A scientific-materialistic and scientific-atheistic outlook has long become established in the minds of the majority of the Soviet people, under the conditions of the freedom of conscience which prevails in our society. This does not suit our ideological opponents in the West. They are hurling heaps of slanders at the Soviet system, claiming that the USSR is suppressing the freedom of religion and is persecuting believers. Some state leaders in the capitalist countries have allowed themselves to be dragged into such unseemly petty intrigues. All of these are lies, however. In our country both believers and nonbelievers enjoy equal and extensive constitutional rights."

Ye. K. Ligachev in a speech to a group of educators, Kommunist 15 (1986): 17.

"In Tashkent, Gorbachev criticized communists and high officials 'who say they defend our morality and ideals but in fact help promote backward views and themselves take part in religious ceremonies.'" Newsweek, June 22, 1987, p. 39.

Below are quotes used in a class on Soviet Civilization taught by Uri Olkhovsky -- a faculty member at GWU, a Soviet émigré and a strong opponent of the USSR.

Lenin, "Promises are like pie crusts -- made to be broken."

Stalin, "Words must have no relations to actions -- otherwise what kind of diplomacy is it? Words are one thing, actions another. Good words are a mask for concealment of bad deeds. Sincere diplomacy is no more possible than dry water or iron wood."

"A treaty is a means to gather strength." The source here might be Lenin. He might be speaking about the treaty of Best-Litovsk, which he alone advocated within the Politburo. The treaty took the USSR out of World War I, though at the cost of a great deal of lost territory. Lenin won the argument because the USSR was not able to continue the war. He wanted to turn the attention of the Communist Party to consolidating power at home. The USSR took back the lost territory and more at the end of World War II.

Lenin in 1920: "We repudiate all morality that proceeds from supernatural ideas or ideas that are outside class conceptions. Morality is entirely subordinate to the interests of class war. Everything is moral that is necessary for the annihilation of the old exploiting social order and for uniting the proletariat."

"When are you going to stop killing people?" Lady Astor bluntly asked Joseph Stalin in 1931, when he was liquidating the kulaks (wealthy farmers) in his drive to collectivize the land. His reply: "When it is no longer necessary."

Khrushchev in 1955: "We wish to live in peace, tranquility. But if anyone believes that our smiles involve abandonment of the teaching of Marx, Engels, and Lenin, he deceives himself poorly. Those who wait for that must wait until a shrimp learns to whistle."

Brezhnev in 1968: "Our party has always warned that in the ideological field, there can be no peaceful coexistence, just as there can be no class peace between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie." Source of quotes (according to Olkhovsky): Primer on Communism, by Overstreet and Overstreet.

See also Stefan T. Possony for more quotes.

"I once heard someone say morality was method. Do you hold with that? I suppose you wouldn't. You would say that morality was vested in the aim, I expect. Difficult to know what one's aims are, that's the trouble, specially if you're British." John LeCarre, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*. p. 70.

In the movie *Platoon* Sergeant Elias represented the first ethical system, while Sergeant Barnes represented the second ethical system. The main character in the movie was torn between the two and felt that the two were battling for his soul. This idea is expressed most clearly in a voice-over in the final scene when the central character is in a helicopter composing a letter.

*"Apocalypse Now* is Coppola's long Conradian voyage into the dark heart of war, and what he finds at the end of his journey is Kurtz bunkered away in his temple headquarters. Kurtz is Coppola's symbol for the American experience in Vietnam. During one of Willard's meetings with him, Kurtz tells him a story about an incident some years back in which all the children in a village were given vaccination shots by the Americans. All had gone smoothly, the Americans assumed, until they returned to the scene and in the center of the village was a pile of tiny, severed arms. 'I then realized,' Kurtz says, 'like I was shot, like I was shot with a diamond, a diamond bullet right through the forehead. And I thought, my god, the genius of that, the genius...the will to do that. Perfect, genuine, complete, crystalline, pure. And then I realized that they were stronger than we. Because they could stand it.'

"What makes Brando's Kurtz such a great, tragic character -- the single most compelling figure in the Vietnam war movies -- is that he is a man, a model soldier, broken in two by the awareness that he cannot commit the sins that the war requires him to commit; that for a moral man to embrace murder and genocide, to have the strength to win against his enemies, is to embrace immorality and, therefore, to lose himself.

"Kurtz longs for a life without moral distinctions, without judgment, 'because it's judgment that defeats us,' and the impossibility of attaining what he desires leaves him fractured, deranged.

"...The Robert De Niro character in *The Deer Hunter* is an attempt to forge a hero -- a modern-day Natty Bumppo -- along these conventional lines, but part of Cimino's point is that, in this context, a hero is an anachronism, a noble freak. Even his friends think he's weird." Hal Hinson, "Vietnam: The Movies' Coming of Age," *The Washington Post*, July 5, 1987, F1.

This movie review is superb. In terms of Lefebvre's theory the American soldiers in Viet Nam, who were raised with the first ethical system, felt compelled to adopt the second ethical system in an effort to win the war. Some soldiers were psychologically destroyed by the conflict between the two

systems. One could also say that the U.S. lost the war in Viet Nam because the U.S. government was unable to impose the second ethical system on the American people. If the Soviets are forced to pull out of Afghanistan, will it be because the war is too costly economically and in terms of international prestige or because the Soviet people refuse to accept the morality of the war?

"An important aspect of the cultural liberalization currently underway in the Soviet Union is a quest for values and religious moralities,' said Josephine Woll, an Associate Professor of Russian at Howard University. Dr. Woll, speaking at the Kennan Institute on February 4, 1987, after returning from a recent trip to Moscow, said that this new attention to values is being discussed in cultural circles in Moscow and among university students." Meeting Report, Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.