

On The Trail of American Script Patterns

Fanita English

Abstract

The author briefly discusses her theory on scripts, refers to various National Rackets and moves on to an analysis of American Script Patterns as exemplified by the Mythical Hero of the Cowboy, contrasting it with the Myth represented by the Statue of Liberty. She proceeds with a description of U.S. presidents since FDR in relation to those concepts.

As a U.S. citizen, born in Rumania, who works frequently in various foreign countries, I might be expected to write about one of those countries. But as a result of experiencing myself abroad as an American I have become interested in thinking about the "American Script."

Definition of "script patterns"

My definition of "script" does not correspond to the "classical" TA definition (English, 1977). Clinical experience has convinced me that we each carry many script patterns; each one is based on a variety of "survival conclusions" that may be contradictory with one another. "Survival conclusions" are forms of behavior or attitudes that seemingly helped us survive in the past. The patterns of scripts contain past experiences and beliefs woven into the fabric of a personal mythological story — and these patterns lead both to negative and positive outcomes according to the manner in which these patterns intermesh and evolve. Some patterns correspond to specific universal myths or fairy tales; others represent combinations. We develop scripts with unspecified endings in order to find direction for the future. Scripts offer guidelines and become support systems which help us operate while experimenting with a variety of different options.

Myths have been defined as symbolic expressions of collective unconscious needs or wishes — and as such they often correspond to what I call "script patterns," except that script patterns usually also include beliefs based on past experience and certain "taboos" that are also related to the past. Taboos contain prescriptions for substitute behavior and/or feelings (i.e., rackets) that are frequently indulged in, or even proudly proclaimed.

National Rackets in Western Culture

In the case of nations, "authorized attitudes" or rackets are often put forth in the name of "tradition," particularly at times of stress.

For instance, the French are proud of their "sense of the ridiculous," as they call it, which alternates with their chauvinism to replace feelings of anxiety or inadequacy. This was evident during World War II, when, after using the slogan, "We'll get them!" about fighting the Germans, they then wryly said, on being occupied by the German army: "We said we'd get them, and we sure got them!"

Germans operate with order, duty, respect for authority, organization, punctuality. These are attitudes I appreciate as a frequent workshop leader and traveler in Germany; but these attitudes became their rackets (substitutions for initiative and human sympathy) when they had to function under the dominance of the Nazis and effectively execute monstrous orders that "came from above" during the thirties and forties.

Americans are proud to be practical, pragmatic, success-oriented, and endowed with the "know-how" that keeps us ever finding a "better mousetrap." Fine — except when our emphasis on "progress" as a "technological imperative" becomes a national racket that leads to the additional "imperative" of conspicuous consumption. This then substitutes for

feelings that are forbidden, or, at the very least, discouraged in America, namely regret, nostalgia, or genuine appreciation of the past.

We are immigrants or descendants of immigrants who had to look *forward*, not backwards. It may have been too distressing to look back or "brood," so dwelling on the past is discouraged even now — and recognition of pain or danger tends to be denied. Sure, there's some romanticizing about "going to see the old country," or some guilty references to what happened to native Americans when the white man came. "Roots" and equivalent shows on TV were very popular for a short time, perhaps precisely because they did temporarily permit some "looking back" in fictionalized form. But essentially our attitude remains: — let's "get on with it" and "the devil take the hindmost." "Go West, young man" continues to have a symbolic meaning, and "old stuff" gets rejected. This is in contrast to many other countries which continuously invoke their past and emphasize conservation of resources and of history.

Contrasts and Common Denominators in USA

Now let's look at USA national "script patterns." Is it possible to generalize about all of the USA? Are there common denominators between the "script patterns" of, say, an urban New Yorker, a Nebraska farmer, a Southerner, a Californian? And what of ethnic differences?

I remember being addressed by a German lady who was planning a trip to the United States. She was puzzled. "A friend told me that the US is very, very dangerous," she said. "People get mugged even in broad daylight, apartments are broken into all the time, old people get tied up, beaten and robbed; neighbors ignore cries for help; yet an American friend told me she's perfectly safe; she doesn't even bother to lock her front door when she goes out! Whom shall I believe?" It was not easy to explain how reality in Philadelphia is not the same as in Nebraska! And the difference is not simply that between an urban and a farm environment. Such extreme differences exist also in comparable communities, as was experienced by a German film crew which was in the US to do a series on humanistic psychology. In the charming small town of Palo Alto they parked their van with their equipment in a parking

garage towards which they were signaled by a amiable attendant who promised to take good care of their car. Indeed he did, but they were "conned" (a particular American talent); he was not an attendant at the garage and when they returned all their equipment had disappeared from their van which he had carefully parked under a sign that said "not responsible ... etc." Yet in Carmel, when their rented equipment broke down, this same film crew had the contrasting experience of being allowed to "take over," for a whole half day, the living and dining rooms of an elderly couple so they could fix their cameras. That couple was trusting enough to allow six rather rough-looking strange young men to come in and make themselves at home in their house.

These two anecdotes carry a common denominator about the United States: — more than any country I know of we represent paradox and extremes. There is more "conning" in the United States than elsewhere, with more necessity of a "buyer beware" attitude (dating back to snake oil charm sales!), and there is also more openness and trusting friendliness (perhaps due to pioneer experiences) than elsewhere. Big contrasts!

Big is itself our reality as a country. It's also our particular attitude (and/or racket) which we proclaim with national pride. Americans like to *think* big. We refer to ourselves as "Americans," even when what is meant is "citizens of the United States." We are so "big" that we blithely forget that Canada and Latin America are *also* America. Even our Foreign Service offices used to identify themselves (on the door and on their stationery) as the *American* Consulate, Embassy, Mission, etc., cheerfully implying that there was no other America but ours. This has been changed relatively recently. The other "Americas" have been impinging on our consciousness through daily news stories, but in one of our underlying "script patterns" they *still* do not exist. *We* and only we are the New World (in contrast to Europe, the Old World). We do acknowledge that the Old World (and other continents) exist, but they are seen primarily as contrasts to us, quaintly historical, sometimes irrationally troublesome and needing to be helped or rescued the way a grown child would be willing to help a needy or confused parent or unemancipated sibling. We concern

ourselves with these when they bother us too much, but we certainly wish they'd let us go our own way and recognize that *we* are the enlightened ones who know more about "what's to be done" (action, practical matters) than the old fogeys or the underdeveloped simpletons (see our behavior about Grenada). Yet *other* nations are often horrified by many of the naive assumptions on which we operate.

Europeans often refer to Americans (oops! I mean U.S. citizens) as "childish." This is sometimes said derogatorily and sometimes with envy and admiration. Well, let's use our TA word, Child, instead. Our national patterns do indeed embody more of the characteristics of the Free Child than those of Parent (and even Adult!). This Child is creative, unregimented by convention, humorous, energetic, endowed with curiosity, boastful, naive, spontaneously generous, but also greedy and grabby, unconcerned with consequences, cheerfully ruthless and inconsiderate. It's also kind and capable of "instant intimacy," but then ready to move on ("West") away from obligations and relationships. At times it's too gullible or unreliable — then at other times it's suddenly unconditionally helpful and sympathetic to the underdog (when there is time away from other pursuits). When faced with expectations from others it feels "pushed around" and fast becomes Rebellious, seeking to shake off these demanding Others by fair means or foul. (Get the Marines in and get them out!)

National Belief Patterns

Whatever else it may have stood for historically, the Bill of Rights defines important National Belief Patterns. It holds that there are certain "self-evident truths" and tells us that we have the "unalienable right" to "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

At the time this was written and fought for, "we" did not include slaves and American Indians. (Ah, the paradox!) Blacks are now included in "we" since the Civil War. Yet I believe that one of our most central script patterns, even now, resides in our conflictual approach to "Liberty" and the "Pursuit of Happiness." The question recurs as to whether the "pursuit of happiness" with "liberty" for some does not impinge on the "liberty" or the "pursuit of happiness" of others.

Our "truths" correspond to wishes of the

Free Child. They are not necessarily "self-evident" in other cultures which might emphasize the Parent (tradition) or the Adapted Child (obedience, acceptance of one's fate, discipline, "fair losing," etc.). For instance, "following tradition" or "doing the right thing" according to pre-established rules is important in England and in India. But just as "doing the right thing" may lead to very different behaviors according to whether you are a British Lord or an Indian villager, liberty and the pursuit of happiness also have many different interpretations in the U.S.

Justice Holmes is reputed to have said: "Liberty does not include the right to yell 'Fire' in a crowded theater." In TA terms he was suggesting that the Free Child must be governed by the Adult, particularly where others are concerned. But neither our Free Child nor our Rebellious Child likes the idea. For many, Liberty (or, to use the more modern word, Freedom) includes at the very least the right to litter when we're enjoying ourselves and feeling good (witness the disgraceful messes to be cleaned up at huge public expense following every Fourth of July celebration in this country). Going further, there is "freedom" to smear graffiti wherever possible and to vandalize if one belongs to the "underclass," or, for rich corporations, to exploit and damage our natural resources and our more defenseless citizens or those of other nations in the name of "free enterprise." In good old "Robber Baron" fashion almost anything goes in the "pursuit of materialistic happiness" for those busily climbing the ladder of "success."

When something as elusive as "happiness" must be *pursued* (rather than "found" or experienced") you can't always watch whom or what you're stepping on in the process, can you?

National Parents

So far I've emphasized National Belief Patterns related to Child. However, there *are* corresponding Parent patterns which maintain our National Conscience. Thus Liberty has her Patron Saint and Mother-figure in the form of the Statue of Liberty, who holds high her torch and invites "the poor, the wretched, the tired, those yearning to be free" to come to the welcoming shores of America.

Again, Freedom has many meanings. It's no coincidence that many a Utopian movement has

flourished in this country, although some ended with disappointments and heartaches. Modern-day equivalents of such Utopian movements are represented by the many followers of popular TV preachers, or cults, which continue to arise and grow all over the United States with promises of salvation or grandiose solutions for this world or next. Of course, such movements or cults often do precisely the opposite in the name of Freedom (from Hunger, Despair, Oppression, etc.), in that they rigidly structure the lives of their adherents. But they fit our Myth and represent the paradoxical aspects of our script-patterns. We can seek the freedom to escape from the responsibilities of Freedom by becoming the devotees of a particular movement!

Well, dear Statue of Liberty. Like many a well-meaning mother, perhaps she does hold forth more of a promise than she can deliver. She becomes the repository of all our projections; after all, she does *not* say that the "poor, etc." will not be exploited by the craftier siblings, and she seems incapable nowadays to prevent many from being locked out. (Good parents have less power than we believe!)

For myself, I cannot complain — I am now a part of "we" even though I was not born here. As a refugee, first of all I did receive the gift of *Life* — no minor gift, for it would have been denied me in Europe. Never mind that my first glimpse of the Statue of Liberty was through the bars of Ellis Island where I was locked up on arrival because my papers were not in order. I enjoyed the view, even at the time, and I now remember it as a fitting symbol of the paradox of America — the land where Pilgrims landed for *their* freedom but where they eventually got to burn "witches" (mostly helpless women) at Salem.

If the Statue of Liberty is our Mother figure (loved, but misunderstood, misinterpreted and often disregarded), who is our symbolic Father Figure? I suppose it's the figure of Uncle Sam, even though he is somewhat ludicrous. Perhaps that says something about us, too. Our male Parent is the one about whom we cry "uncle!" He wears the American flag all right, and he also looks a little like Santa Claus (wishful thinking?). He does not really set standards; he does make demands: sign up for Savings Bonds (or, worse, sign up for the draft!), and he is also the guy who takes our taxes. When things

go badly he loses prestige, and it's not coincidence that since the Vietnam War many more Americans have been cheating on their taxes than before. It's hard to go along with a Father figure whose Adult was so contaminated.

Of course, George Washington is said to be the Father of this country, but as mentioned earlier our national pattern discourages us from focusing on the past. So, in effect, each President becomes the "new" Father figure — or, perhaps the representative of whatever heroic figure we may require at a given time. He must correspond to requirements of at least *one* of our mythological script patterns and give us the opportunity to identify with him, or, if necessary, to reject him in the name of an alternate script pattern. Our Presidents are elected. This means that the national Child chooses the Parent every four years and that here "The Child is father to the man" (the Nation).

The Cowboy Hero

The Mythical Hero of one of our basic national scripts is the Cowboy. The reasons for this particular image are obvious — they tie into our pioneer history. But somehow the image of the Cowboy as hero seems to be a common denominator for most of us, whether born in this country or naturalized. For instance, even Berne, a naturalized Canadian Jew, liked to invoke this image as something of an ideal in TA — though he himself certainly did not resemble it.

Here are some of the characteristics of the mythical Cowboy: he is uncomplicated, non-urban, not bound to proceed like any predecessors. That makes him seem "free," although actually he carries with him a rather rigid, simplistic value system whereby Good and Bad are neatly distinguished. He is intolerant of ambiguity. He, of course, is the Good Guy, clean-cut (whatever that means), with virtues of courage, stamina, humor and charm, but he is imbued with stubborn determination and comes out "on top" under all circumstances. He claims not to be belligerent, but will kill in the name of goodness. He is the horseman defending the farmstead, bringing "law" by means of dominance — in other words, he is entitled to be lawless in the name of law and goodness, violent in the name of stopping violence because his ends justify the means; — he fights the bad guys, doesn't he?

When there's a shoot-out, even if a few of those around get shot and there's a big mess in the bar after he's gone, his cause has triumphed and the "good guys" are left in control — whatever the consequences.

President Reagan's Image

President Reagan corresponds perfectly to this image of the Cowboy. That he was a movie actor in Grade B films is an asset rather than a liability, for our Westerns have represented the beautiful Cowboy image over and over again in pictorial form. As a former Hollywood actor, he can be visualized all the better in the role of National Cowboy. (Doesn't he look wonderful on horseback at his ranch in California, or chopping wood even at his age, emphasizing the fact that cowboys stay forever young?)

Reagan also embodies another version of the mythical National Hero — that of Horatio Alger, who "made it" to the "top" though starting at the bottom, thus "proving" that "good," clean-cut guys, such as sportscasters, "make it" in this country. And by a typical Child reversal of logic, this implies that those who "make it" to become rich and successful must be the "good guys." Thereby the Cowboy and Horatio Alger are united under the banner of the Protestant Ethic which makes it possible to cast the poor and underprivileged as the "bad guys" and the rich as the "good guys."

Previous Presidents and National Script Patterns

Having embarked on presenting President Reagan in relation to a National Script Pattern, what of other Presidents: how do they relate to various other National Script Patterns?

Franklin D. Roosevelt came from a family which had "made it" for a few generations and could represent Rich America, the land of Plenty. He was needed to get us out of Depression by representing the pattern of Generosity which ties in to the Mother figure of the Statue of Liberty. He took on the "wretched, poor and tired" ones and dispensed largesse (WPA, Social Security, etc.) in accordance with that aspect of the American script pattern. Similarly he had us dispense to the World (Lend-Lease and, later, participation in liberating people in Europe at the time of World War II.) The gum-

chewing American GI who was handing out candy and cigarettes in occupied territories became the filial representation of this pattern. By the time of his second election, Roosevelt additionally represented the concept of "making it" in spite of adverse circumstances (in that he had polio) and nevertheless having courage and an expansive personality (think of the Fireside Chats). Significantly, Roosevelt aroused extremes of feelings — admiration and hatred — because the war had brought on different versions in the land as to whether the Russians were "good guys" (as fighting allies) or "bad guys" (as devilish foes of free enterprise). (Our issue of extremes and contrasts.)

As the "little guy" who "made good," Truman, the small haberdasher, seemed a welcome contrast to Roosevelt, who had turned out to be more complex than had been bargained for. Truman seemed appropriately simple, both honest and suspicious ("I'm from Missouri"). In good American Cowboy fashion he had no qualms about using the Atom bomb twice on the "bad guys," and to hell with the consequences.

Thereupon Eisenhower helped us forget the issue. He was the successful general from the European theater of war and was not implicated with the Atom Bomb. We could thus remain the "good guys" who had fought a just war without taking on any guilt about unpleasant methods. (A parallel to feeling good about having conquered the West without having to face what we did to the Indians. I believe it's noteworthy that Eisenhower won over Adlai Stevenson, who was too high-falutingly preoccupied with thinking things out.)

After relaxing with Eisenhower we were ready to take on again the mantle of generosity and open-handedness. So there was John Kennedy. Papa Joseph Kennedy had been something of a Robber Baron in his time, but John Kennedy was clean. Once again here was proof that old (historical) dirty business can be forgotten or discarded in the name of success. John Kennedy was not sullied by his money any more than we were by our richness and success — we were once again ready to be open-handed with the rest of the world. (In Germany Kennedy could say, "I am a Berliner" to great acclaim.) We were proving that the myth of successful Pursuit of Happiness works — for Irish immigrants were no longer being

exploited; their representative had made it to the top. Just as it says in the myth, everybody — even a Catholic — can become the President. So John Kennedy was finally the Hero we could identify with as representing all of our aspirations. And he, also, had overcome physical incapacitation (his spinal problems); he was courageous, youthful, vibrant, enthusiastic, expansive, and, best of all, thinking Big. But, unbelievably, he was killed — whereas he should have been our Invincible Hero, as he himself had also seemed to believe.

In the aftermath we needed to restore the Cowboy myth in its more primitive form. Lyndon Johnson of Texas, with his big Western ranch, was It. He was going to operate really Big — the Great Society. But the “little war” in Vietnam also got BIG under his auspices. Of course, we had started out being the good guys, rescuing the Vietnamese from the bad guys — China and communism — which were out to get us through the Domino theory, and we couldn’t let that happen, could we? Yet here was our beautiful clean-cut National Myth getting sullied. We were still Big, but we could no longer impose our definition of freedom and reality on the world. Our young people were dropping out and opposing this version of our heroic myth. Could it be that we could no longer deny that we were Dirty?

So we expressed the underside — the alternate image of our “good guy” pattern. If we were making mistakes, they were to be Big ones. We elected Richard Nixon, the Hero of Dirty Tricks. We found the perfect “con” man, corresponding to the snake-oil salesmen of pioneer times, to represent our alternate script pattern, to convince us, regardless of evidence. “I am not a crook,” said he (and, therefore, neither were we). Let it be said, though, to our credit, that at a certain point we got tired of wallowing in evil and sought to become simple good guys again.

There was Gerald Ford. He wasn’t elected, but he fit the bill of the simple Nice Guy who couldn’t walk and chew gum simultaneously. He stumbled on the ski slopes. See, we couldn’t be accused of being mean old warmongers or evil connivers, could we, with Gerry at our helm? What if we had embarked on an international venture and made a mess of it, it had been with the best of intentions, and no one should reproach us for it. But there were still

uncomfortable reminders — such as Haig and Kissinger working with Gerry.

How, finally, were we to forget our delinquency? Aha, by being Born Again, of course, with new pristine innocence. So here was Carter, a Born Again Christian. A perfect fit. A mother and sister involved in missionary work, yet Carter himself a self-made millionaire. Yes, friends, with American know-how you can make it big even from peanuts — and you can be honest and generous to boot. So, on to a new start with Carter. (Of course, thereby we were going for the Horatio Alger script pattern, but never mind.) Finally Carter might implement the promise of the Bill of Rights and the Statue of Liberty. And he tried. He worked for better human welfare, let in more refugees, struggled about human rights, and sought conciliation with Begin and Sadat. But he also aroused our latent awareness that to fulfill the rhetoric of human rights here in the world might cost more than we were ready to pay. Carter turned out to be more perfectionistic than we wanted him to be — and on the other hand he failed to meet our magic expectations. We had to stand in line to get the oil we wanted for our big cars (what, were we going to have to limit our joy riding?). Worse, he allowed us to be humiliated in Iran. We might have preferred a glorious shoot-out to his gloomy protracted efforts to free our hostages. Frustration and disappointment turned to rage. We punished Carter by shooting *him* out of office, symbolically, in favor of a good old Western Cowboy who fit our more basic pattern. Carter and the issues he had struggled for, human rights and all, were to sink into oblivion. We have come full circle in this discussion, again to Reagan.

Script-Patterns for the Future?

Now that there are no more open spaces in the West, Star Wars and such are becoming the modern version of our old Westerns. Are we going to elect John Glenn next, the Hero of Outer Space? Personally, I hope we’ll do better.

Oh, Mother Liberty, standing there with your offer and your torch, thank you for having let me join you in these United States. Now I, also, must take responsibility for whatever outcomes our script patterns lead us to, even though I feel so despairing about how we are doing in the other America, Latin America, and in this

country also.

Do you suppose we will start heeding again the "yearnings" of the poor and the wretched (and of our own hearts) by going, once again, with the script patterns of generosity and goodwill, or are we going to choose the script patterns that will justify a "glorious" nuclear shoot-out with which we'll blast our Planet out to the Wild Blue Yonder?

Fanita English, MSW, CTM is the winner of the 1978 Eric Berne Memorial Scientific Award. She lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and travels widely to do training and workshops.

REFERENCES

English, F. "What shall I do tomorrow?" (Chapter in Barnes, Graham (ed.), *Transactional analysis after Eric Berne*, 1977, pp. 228-297 and 338-342.

Nuclear Disarmament

The Editorial Board is inviting papers exploring various aspects of the nuclear disarmament debate — a debate which has been at the forefront of national and international awareness in this past year especially. We believe that we have a philosophy, a theory, and an understanding of communication and change which is relevant to this debate and that now is the time to apply our collective wisdom to this subject. Send us your papers on your understanding of the issues involved, your understanding of this issue as it relates to game theory and script theory, your attempts at dealing with the psychological impact of the responsibility we face — the fears, apathy, aggressiveness, futility, psychic numbing, greediness, involvement, etc. Send articles on how you deal with this issue on an individual basis, with groups, in your field of practice, in your community and beyond.

Please send your articles to the ITAA office by June 1, 1984.