

“I am Not a Gobi Girl!”

## **Observations on Cultural Similarities and Differences Based on Four Years of Fulbright Fellowships in Poland, Latvia, and Outer Mongolia**

David Pichaske (Southwest Minnesota State University)

All living organisms share some traits, needs, and abilities, but mammals have things in common that are not found in worms or fleas. All human beings share traits and abilities not found in cows and dogs, and apparently the same hierarchy of needs. Men tend to think and act differently from women. (Both my wife and my strong daughter have told me that they turn to female friends for sympathy, to male friends for solutions.) Caucasians exhibit commonalities not prominent in other races, and vice versa; most Americans share commonalities not common to all other Caucasians; most Minnesotans exhibit shared traits not found in people from New York or Los Angeles (those cities where American change planes when traveling to Europe or Asia); Protestant Christians think differently from Catholics and Muslims. Older folk of both genders, of most religions and from most ethnicities think differently from teenagers. Most rural Minnesotans share commonalities not shared with urban Minnesotans . . . and so it goes. And while we can generalize at almost every level, at almost every level we will find differences as well as commonalities. And one commonality may override one differentiating factor to produce similarities among differences.

What makes us what we are? For one thing, our DNA. My genes determine my biological equipment and hormonal mix—and thus my character. As Camille Paglia, a lapsed lesbian, has pointed out, “even a woman of abnormal will cannot escape her hormonal identity” (107). Geneticist friends tell me that just about everything I do, right down to decisions on what I eat for dinner, comes from my DNA, but sociologists say no, no, no, you’ve got it all wrong, it’s social environment and education; given time and resources, we can turn any sow’s ear into a silk purse. I have always believed that we lock mentally into the world of teens and early twenties, that I will always be “a sixties kid.” My son, however, says that research for his Ph. D. shows that kids “fix” in the world of their early teens. An old saying says that you can take the boy out of the country, but you can’t take the country out of the boy. Bill Holm talks about growing up in southwestern Minnesota with a “prairie Eye” for “horizontal grandeur,” different in all respects from the woods

eye or the urban eye. He tracks his eye to Icelandic ancestors, suggesting that place imprints itself on our DNA, so that place and genetics merge in shaping us. I don't know. I do know that visiting Gobi girls just love the southwestern Minnesota prairie, whereas Ewa Bednarowicz, visiting from urban Lodz, was positively annihilated.

But talking genes or talking environment, just how legitimate are generalizations based on age, religion, gender, ethnicity? All of us we generalize easily about Brits, Poles, Italians, Germans, Chinese, Russians, WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). When polled about what ethnicity they would like to be if they were not Mongolian, Mongolian girls mostly answered "Swedish" and the boys mostly answered "Italian." "Swedish" and "Italian" must mean something to Mongolian teenagers.

But what exactly are Italians? My dad's German-Wendish father refused to attend his marriage because he was marrying "a Wop." Dad did marry the Italian, and I remember my Italian aunts and uncles all wiggled out because one of the young ones was going to marry . . . "a Wop." My sister was puzzled. "Isn't that what we are?" she asked my Aunt Bertha. "Aren't we all Wops?" My aunt looked at her disdainfully. "We are not Wops," she told my sister; "we are Tuscans."

And exactly what is a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant? There are different types of Protestants: Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Lutherans. And there are several different Lutheran denominations, whose ministers in the old days warned parishioners to stay the heck away from those other (bad) Lutherans (as well as from those Catholics). What exactly is German? My Prussian grandfather would rail against "Saxon swine." A Bavarian farmer once told me, "Bavaria *is* Germany; the rest are just colonies." There are Warsaw Poles and Gdansk Poles and Łódź businessmen Poles. There are Buryad Mongols and Khalka Mongols, UB girls and Gobi girls. "I am not a Gobi girl," Aniuka once told me, but Enkhee is proud to be a Gobi girl. So there must be some legitimate differences among the differences.

Still we draw national stereotypes which may come from DNA, the natural environment, the social environment, perhaps the economic or political environment. We can deny the stereotypes, but often they erupt. I would like to think I am not a stereotypic American—or that I am a rural Minnesotan American and thus different—but I recall a moment in Riga, walking the evening streets, when I heard footsteps behind and saw a dark shadow approaching me from the rear. I spun around with my arm cocked, jaw set, eyes flashing. It was a policeman! He said something in Latvian, which I told him I did not understand. He tried Russian. "I don't understand you," I told him again. "I am American; I speak English." "American," he stammered, backing hastily away from me. "American. American. Okay. American." He was confronting a stereotypical

American, one of those guys who in Phil Ochs's words "shoots first and shoots later." Maybe I am a typical American. Or German-American. Or Italian-American. Of my age and sex and religion, of course.

My own experience living and studying and teaching in the States, visiting England and Germany and Norway and Italy and South Africa, teaching American Studies on Fulbright fellowships to Poland (1989-91), Latvia (1997-98) and Outer Mongolia (2003) has led me to accept conclusions based on nationality and form some of my own—identifying not absolutes but tendencies. I have also come to believe that while stereotypes are not 100%, stereotypes (you will not like this) cease to be stereotypes once they are no longer true. (I can remember when Toyota and Honda meant "cheap Jap car." This is certainly no longer true, and we don't think "cheap Jap stuff.") I have learned also to suspect much of what I read, trust only what I see with my own eyes and experience in person (although who knows what to believe in this on-line age, and back in the Sixties "Benny the Red" turned out to be a CIA operative, and in the wonderful film *80 Millions*, Poles "see" Milicja disguised as members of Solidarność pulling pranks that would, when publicized, make the union look bad.)

Still, in this talk I want to offer some generalizations from my days in Poland, Latvia, and Mongolia—using my own experiences and those of some of my students. Not linguistic things like the tendency to pluralize English collective nouns which are plurals in the native tongue (as in the expression "a lot of bullshits"), but broad patterns of thought and behavior. My sources are my own journals from those years, and letters, and photos, and in one case a book written by my Latvian student.

I came to each of these countries as it was breaking away from a Soviet government which had told Poles, Latvians, and Mongols that they were all just proletarian "Workers of the World," united and thus alike (although some members of the proletariat were more equal than others). That system of belief had failed spectacularly, and one tendency in each country was to reassert the Polishness of Poles, the Latvian-ness of Latvians, the Mongol-ness of Mongols. These are prominent themes in Iveta Melnika's memoir *Tale of the White Crow: Coming of Age in Post-Soviet Latvia*, a book on the one hand just an archetypal coming-of-age story and on the other hand uniquely Latvian. The notion of recovering a national self from a Soviet grey expressed itself in everything from Orange Alternative/Polish graffiti like "Sowieci Go Home" to promotion of local soccer clubs to "Polish peasant cuisine" restaurants. (The young were trying to be Western, listening to rock-n-roll and eating bananas and Big Macs when they could.) Vestiges of the Soviet/Russian colonization certainly contributed to the atmosphere of indeterminacy which I

felt in all three countries. In my book *Poland in Transition* I call it “The Fog Machine.” In Latvia, the fog of indeterminacy manifested itself in extreme privacy: where Poles and Mongols are social and generous to the extreme, Latvians are extremely self-contained. In Mongolia, it was things happening “on Mongolian time,” something I attributed at the time to their closeness to a very unpredictable nature, an echo of “Indian time” in America. Or are those pre-Soviet national traits, borne of history and carried in the DNA? In Poland and Mongolia especially the environment—human and natural—spoke to something archetypal buried inside of me personally, part of Pichaske the American WASP, the rural Minnesotan, the child of the Sixties, the whatever it is that makes me (to take a Polish example) collect wooden farm implements and baskets of potatoes; that makes me (to take a Latvian example) sing folk songs, that has me (to take a Mongolian example) ignore the curving paved sidewalks and cut a direct track across the grass. Let me tell you about Poles, Latvians, and Mongols, show you the photos, and tell you the stories, and you decide if these are culture-encoded national traits dating to God knows when, culture-encoded national traits tied to place and time, manifestations of an archetypal humanity we all share at one moment or another . . . or just figments of Pichaske’s imagination.