

Identification, Violence, and Attribution Biases

By Luke Roelofs

Here are two fairly well-supported findings from experimental social psychology: Firstly, 'the self-serving bias' tells us that people's explanation of events tend to be biased so that any success they achieve is a result of something about them – their effort, their skill, etc. – while any failure is a result of something about their situation – the weather, what had happened recently, etc. People tend to explain away bad things, while accepting credit for good things.

'The actor/observer bias' is less obvious: it's that people tend to appeal to external, situational factors more often in explaining their own actions, while their explanations of other people's actions will tend to emphasise stable, internal personality traits and dispositions. There are ongoing disputes about what explains these discrepancies, but whatever their origin, they seem to be widespread, at least within North American society. This gives us an interesting way to analyse both the way we do think about politics, and the way that we are encouraged to, because it tells us that if we identify with some agency or person, we may apply to their actions the same biases we apply to our own.

A good example is question of violence at, and against, protests. At different times, both police and protests perform actions that could be accurately called 'violence' or 'force', but there's a stark difference in the framing of public debates about this: for the police, the question asked is generally whether their use of force is appropriate, proportionate, well-timed, well-executed, etc. This sort of question sets us up to consider things from their point of view, in terms of their aims – given what they wanted to do, were their means the bests ones to use?

Conversely, the question of force used by protesters is usually whether it occurred at all – was there violence? If so, who was responsible, and who can avoid responsibility? This sets us up to see things in dispositional terms: are the protesters themselves violent, are they violent people?

Of course, who you're talking to will have a big effect on how the debate is framed. But to the extent that this sort of discrepancy appears, we might worry that it both reflects and perpetuates an attitude of pre-reflective identification with one side. This might worry us because if there is such an identification, it may activate the self-serving bias: we may, even without thinking about it, be more disposed to excuse, explain away, or not take seriously bad actions by one group.