

Jutta Weldes, "The Cultural Productions of Crises: US Identity and Missiles in Cuba", 35-62.

Main idea: Objective crises do not exist; crises are cultural artifacts. When particular events threaten the identity of a state, they come to be constituted as a crisis. Crises in turn help solidify state identity or lead to a new identity (identity A -- crisis -- stronger identity A or a new identity B). Contrary to popular delusion, state identity is not fixed but fluid and malleable.

Brief summary: The events leading to the Cuban Missile Crisis threatened US state identity along several axes. First, they threatened the US role as the guarantor of freedom in the Western Hemisphere and the leader of the world. They also tested US courage and resolve, and the credibility of its commitment to uphold the ideals it stands for. Given its masculinist identity, the US was unwilling to appear weak and feminine by not showing strength and courage. Since state identity is always defined by reference to some other, the events constituted as a crisis provided a legitimate other, that initially challenged but eventually reinforced US state identity by highlighting the *us* versus *them* divide and strengthening the collective feeling of belonging to the American nation. US actions in the 1962 were purely altruistic and cannot be explained by a realist calculus. (A suspect claim at best.)

Problems: Weldes' work is plagued by the usual problems that diminish the value of much constructivist scholarship: lack of analytical rigor, sloppy definition of the independent and the dependent variables, and unwillingness to present falsifiable hypotheses. She tells an interesting story, but there is no way for us to know whether it is a true story. She seems to be arguing that the macho identity of the US was one of the main reasons for the production of the Cuban Missile Crisis. One possible test would be to specify clearly criteria for masculinist and feminine state identity and to test whether feminine states are more reluctant to constitute events as crises. A crucial point that is not elucidated well is how state identity comes to be constituted. Who has the power to determine state identity? If we accept the Foucauldian dictum that language is power, then whoever has a monopoly over language will get to have monopoly over the definition of state identity. Yet, given that the US leadership changes quite often, no one individual will be able to define what US state identity is. Given the imprecise definition of identity and its ever changing nature, there is no way for us to arrive at testable hypothesis about events that would always threaten national identity and would thus be conceived as crises.

Fundamentally, Weldes' piece contains three valuable insights. First, state identity is defined by reference to some "other" who is usually vilified. Thus, to define itself as the champion of freedom, the US needed the Soviet Union and often exaggerated its authoritarian tendencies ("red fascism") in order to solidify its collective democratic identity. Second, the same action can be perceived differently by different countries. Thus, all actions of the US leadership came to be seen as undertaken to defend freedom, while Soviet actions were seen as threatening democracy. The deployment of US missiles in Turkey was undertaken to save freedom and thus the US viewed it as defensive, Soviet deployment in Cuba was seen as offensive. Third, the power to marginalize competing discourses is crucial in constituting events as crises and using crises to reinforce state identity. Recent examples of US aggression in Iraq and Kosovo show that the suppression of alternative discourses went a long way in securing the support of the US public for these actions, which were presented not as violation of sovereignty but as a holy war for democracy and national self-determination.