

# Friends are Individuals, Enemies are Collective

I had the misfortune of sitting in a hotel lobby that had TV news playing today. At some point, the anchor said something about, “The Russians”. It struck me how odd, and subtly dangerous this language is.

Foreigners, far-away peoples, threats, enemies, or those we fear get labelled as a giant unified collective. In reality, only individual humans act. “The Russians” cannot do or say anything, only individuals can. But it’s too complicated and nuanced when you’re telling yourself a simple us/them, good/evil story.

Think of the groupings that get labelled in this way. “The Chinese” is another big, monolithic bogeyman. But if the Prime Minister of Britain says something, headlines don’t talk about “The British”. If a Canadian politician speaks, no one says, “The Canadians want NAFTA”. And, of course, no one who lives here would dream of giving every individual human in the United States a single identity. Can you imagine trying to answer, “What do the Americans want?” about any topic?

I get it. It’s a shortcut to prevent mental overload. Far-away stuff we know little about is much easier to lump together as “the chaos/threat out there”, like the old maps with, “There be dragons” on the unknown places. Still, it’s wise to catch yourself when using sweeping collectivist labels for diverse groups of individuals and ideas.