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Homo Narrans

*Toward a New Political Narrative*

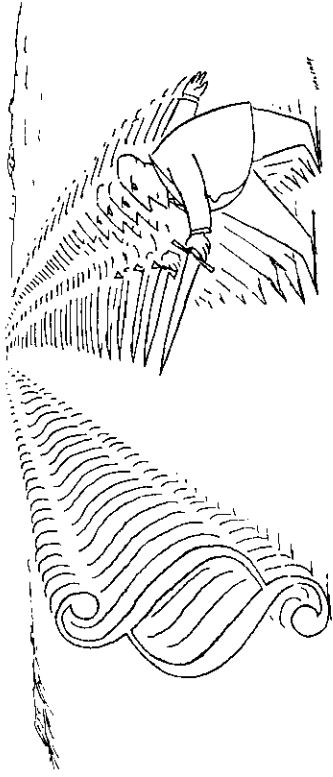
by W. Lance Bennett and Murray Edelman

*Recurring and stereotyped news stories portray a dynamic world of change while disguising old ideological understandings and solutions as social truth.*

Stories are among the most universal means of representing human events. In addition to suggesting an interpretation for a social happening, a well-crafted narrative can motivate the belief and action of outsiders toward the actors and events caught up in its plot. A key question about stories, as with other situation-defining symbolic forms like metaphors, theories, and ideologies, is whether they introduce new and constructive insights into social life. Recurring and stereotypical narrative accounts in the mass media can elicit powerful responses of belief or disbelief in distant audiences without bringing those audiences any closer to practical solutions for the problems that occasioned the stories in the first place.

Among the most common narrative plots in U.S. mass media is the saga of the government and its agents confronting formidable "facts of life," such as the deceitfulness of Communists, the immorality of criminals, or the aversion to honest work that swells the ranks of welfare recipients and the hard-core unemployed. Such obstacles are seen to routinely frustrate the best efforts of governments to solve chronic problems of international belligerence, crime, and poverty. Although measurable progress is scant against the entrenched enemies of society, most chapters in the ongoing saga of "embattled society" conclude with hopeful proposals for defending the good life against yet another onslaught by its implacable foes. Some of these positive moments appeal to the Left, as in the legislative victories of the "great society" of the

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1960s over poverty and inequality, while other chapters address the concerns of the Right, as in the daring example of the United States "standing tall" when the marines rescued the tiny island republic of Grenada from the clutches of communism.

The psychological importance of triumphal episodes cannot be overestimated for renewing the interest of the citizen-spectator audience in the long-running political dramas that lurch from one crisis to another. Behind the momentary victories, however, stands the ultimately self-defeating logic of stereotypical political plots that bring old and simplistic formulas to bear on new and complex problems. The day-to-day picture may be reassuringly familiar, but the long view reveals a society burdened with nuclear nightmare, growing inequality, and chronic conditions of psychological and physical illness.

There are at least two possible explanations for narrative cycles that breed short-run optimism in the face of long-term policy failures. One possibility is that there is merit to the popular belief that human nature and the course of history have conspired to imprison human creativity within rigid structures of political power and economic production. In this view, the frustrations of human political struggles reflect the "objective" limitations of real-world conditions, and the best we can hope for is the proliferating rhetoric of positive thinking that helps to brace us against the material evils we are doomed to suffer. Aside from being circular, nonstable, and paralyzing, this vision of the world is insensitive to its own self-fulfilling imperative.

There is another, more fruitful explanation for the standard versions of history that warrant the self-perpetuating, conservative bias of domestic and international power systems: perhaps they are just stories, and, like other popular narratives, appealing because they embody the fears,

hopes, and prejudices of the cultures in which their audiences live. The popular appeal of such stories is less an empirical than a dramaturgical and cultural matter. It is possible for cultures to cling firmly to understandings of their environments even when those understandings are poorly suited to critical inquiry, learning, and change. Rather than inviting us to seek empirical evidence for popular claims about society, nature, and history, this explanation of the disjuncture between social vision and political action directs our attention to hegemonic systems of culture, mass communication, and socialization. The social truths that rationalize and distort the contradictions of our time can be understood in this second view as highly selective impressions of reality that seem objective when applied uncritically to ongoing events. The daily life stories that embody the truths of social elites and their publics seem objective because they are confirmed time and again by self-fulfilling selection of documentary detail. Information that doesn't fit the symbolic mold can be ignored, denied, or rationalized out of serious consideration. When a ruling group promotes its cherished ideals at the expense of critical evaluations of the actions taken in the name of those ideals, the telling of familiar tales becomes a comforting fantasy-escape from the otherwise unpleasant contradictions of life experience.

The above sketch of the communication bonds between the powerful and their publics does not mean that policy failures and contradictions are lost on everyone, or that opposition efforts to reformulate political means and ends have been driven out of most political systems. However, the key question is not whether opposition exists (many hegemonic orders contain loyal oppositions) but whether political opponents are able to frame their analyses in ways that yield new insights, identify new points of struggle and consensus, and lead to new actions. In order to motivate new departures, political accounts must be sensitive to the novelties of situations and to the ambiguities in political positions that hold out hope for softening traditional lines of conflict. Yet it is novelty, uncertainty, and ambiguity that seem least tolerable in mass political discourse. In place of presenting open and flexible analyses of situations, leaders tend to offer formulaic stories that dissolve ambiguity and resolve possible points of new understanding into black and white replays of the political dramas of the past.

*In political discourse the narrative form is particularly vital because stock political plots (later to be distinguished from other, more useful narrative possibilities) construct meanings to counter the ambiguity and to reinforce the ideological disagreements that pervade political communication.*

Although fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty, the contested issues in politics are quickly simplified and cast in mutually exclusive ideological terms. People become so accustomed to ideological formula-

tions disguised and embedded in standard narratives that the "either-or" poles of political debate seem natural and adequate characterizations of reality. Is the president restoring national dignity and pride, or serving the interest of the wealthy at the expense of the poor and the working class? Does capital punishment diminish crime, or contribute to a climate of violence? The crucial political issues turn on complex or initial causes, motives, and future consequences of alternative courses of action, none of which can be known for certain. All of them are formulated, accepted, and rejected in line with ideologies, an outcome that is the more likely because of the impossibility of certain knowledge about them. Whether the unemployed are lazy or victims of unfair economic institutions, whether nuclear power plants will generate cheap electricity or catastrophic accidents, and every other political question entails assumptions about the unclear or the unknowable that directly reflect ideological differences.

The intimate tie between accounts of events whose meanings are ambiguous and the reinforcement of ideology gives narrative its psychological appeal and its central place in political communication. A story about an event's origin, its setting in space and in time, its consequences for actors and spectators, and the future effects of dealing with it in particular ways makes it meaningful. In supplying these often unverifiable and unfalsifiable features of events, narratives create a particular kind of social world, with specified heroes and villains, deserving and undeserving people, and a set of public policies that are rationalized by the construction of social problems for which they become solutions. In other words, stock political narratives disguise and digest ideology for people who prefer to represent themselves as passive or objective reporters of the world around them.

The intriguing characteristic of a social world created by a narrative is the integral link among its components: the who, what, where, why, how, and when that give acts and events a narrative frame. A choice among alternative settings or among origins of a political development also determines who are virtuous, who are threats to the good life, and which courses of action are effective solutions. If the war in El Salvador has its origin in the machinations of Communists in Moscow and Havana (note the wide setting), definitions of virtue and evil, of what the problem is, and of an effective military solution follow inevitably, just as different definitions of all these elements follow from the depiction of the war's origin in social oppression in Salvadoran villages. The narrative shapes people's views of rationality, of objectivity, of morality, and of their conceptions of themselves and others.

As part of our upbringing we learn of a wide range of origins to which we can attribute political developments, and we choose among them, usually unselfconsciously, as a way of defining ourselves, other people, the polity, and the road to the good life. We can attribute any social problem to official policies, the machinations of those who benefit from it, or the pathology of those who suffer from it. We can trace it back to

class or racial inequalities, to ideologies such as nationalism or patriotism, or to resistance to the regime. We can root the problem in God, in its historical genesis, in the accidental or systematic conjuncture of events, in rationality, in irrationality, or in a combination of these or other origins. In choosing any such ultimate cause we are also depicting a setting, an appropriate course of action, and sets of virtuous and evil characters, and doing so in a way that will appeal to some part of the public that sees its own sentiments or interests reflected in that choice of a social scene.

The creation of a social world through narrative is all the more compelling because there are always conflicting stories—sometimes two, sometimes more—competing for acceptance in politics. The awareness that every acceptance of a narrative involves a rejection of others makes the issue politically and personally vital. In a critical sense the differences among competing narratives give all of them their meanings.

*Every day's news calls attention to many narratives, largely unrelated to each other in their content.*

The world these narratives create is dynamic, filled with hopes and fears on many different fronts. Wars are threatened or fought, elections lost or won, economic conditions changing for better or worse, public officials protecting or assaulting people's interests, pressure groups trying to change policy, health and educational practices being reassessed, the social condition and welfare of particular groups evoking pity or envy, and so on. While the audiences for news choose which stories to notice and which to ignore, everyone pays attention to those that concern them, and there are concerns for everyone.

It is no accident that there are always narratives to attract the attention of most of the population, for news is generated and written in story form to shock, titillate, arouse, amuse, or reassure audiences. But people's material and psychological condition, not the story, determines a narrative's reception. The story that shocks some may amuse or gratify others. Each narrative creates its own social world while it holds a group's attention: a world, to cite some examples, that is defined by crime in the streets, by growing prosperity, by the security threat from a hostile foreign power, or by pervasive poverty and unemployment. It can be a Hobbesian world in which one either kills enemies or is destroyed by them, or a Marxist world in which unfair institutions corrupt the privileged and exploit the disadvantaged; a world of individual choice and individual responsibility, or one in which the individual is a reflection of the material conditions, constraints, and opportunities into which she or he is thrust. In focusing attention on one of these worlds (and so rejecting the ideology which denies that world is important), the news wins support for particular government policies. Fears or hopes are constantly being created, allayed, or reinforced. News

stories appear and vanish too fast for anyone to keep them in perspective, and so they mean different things to different people and to the same person at different times. Public officials and interest groups work constantly to shape the news that is reported, since support for themselves and their causes rises and falls with the narratives people notice.

As noted earlier, the changing and contradictory worlds created by narratives in the news and elsewhere are dramatic; but in a longer historical perspective the conditions of most people's lives are largely static. Inequalities in opportunity, wealth, status, and deprivation persist over long periods of time in spite of the dynamic pictures of the world experienced by newspaper readers and television news watchers. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the rapid succession of threat, hope, fear, triumph, and defeat that daily news stories depict blurs awareness of inequalities in well-being that persist over long periods of time. Regardless of the specifics of the individual narratives, the story presented is one of constant change and therefore of constant hope. Differences in quality of life by class, race, gender, and nationality remain in place over decades, usually over centuries, in spite of elections, official promises, wars, legislation, or the other accounts that convey a sense of triumph or defeat as they are reported each day. Social and economic history lies in a different universe of discourse from journalistic reporting. The two forms of narrative coexist but are typically experienced as separate phenomena.

To a striking degree stories are insulated from one another. Models of a rational world rest on the premise that human beings take all pertinent information into account in choosing the means to achieve their goals; but in everyday life people notice or ignore news stories according to whether they fit their current concerns and aspirations, typically focusing upon those that have meaning for them regardless of their compatibility with other narratives. The same account may construct contradictory meanings, reinforcing conflicting ideologies rather than reconciling inconsistent information or beliefs. Because narratives evoke social realities, anyone may experience contradictory worlds as they accept contradictory stories. The proponent of more generous welfare eligibility may see welfare recipients as undeserving after reading a story about blatant welfare fraud. In this critical sense, narratives help construct the subjectivity of those who accept them, contrary to the commonsensical view that people construct the language they use.

The point of this analysis is not to include in the same resignation to fate that we criticized at the outset. Rather, we seek to establish certain patterns in the use of narrative that are unproductive means of political communication. Our concern is not with all narratives, but with formula stories that disguise ideological rigidity and introduce unproductive opposition into political dialogue. Our goal is not to eliminate narrative from public discourse but to learn to use the narrative form more critically and more creatively. If stories can be constructed to wall off the

senses to the dilemmas and contradictions of social life, perhaps they also can be presented in ways that open up the mind to creative possibilities developed in ways that provoke intellectual struggle, the resolution of contradiction, and the creation of a more workable human order.

*Narrative is among the most creative intellectual forms because it can achieve sudden breaks with expectation while introducing new sensory experience.*

The great literature of every age has dared to suggest new ideas about the human condition. Yet it is difficult for public narrative to achieve literary creativity because of the erroneous sense that there are fundamental social truths that cannot be denied. The truths of various social groups become premises for competing accounts of daily life. When an account fashions the "facts" of a situation around *a priori* assumptions, history seems clear and undeniable because the analytical perspective has made it so. And so the vicious cycle continues: stereotypical narratives selectively exclude inconsistent or contradictory information, leaving the psychological impression that one is experiencing reality-driven objectivity. The irony of this sort of "narrative objectivity" is that, while an individual or a group may feel ever more convinced of the truth of a vision, the collectivity of individuals or groups may generate any number of opposing objective visions. When confronted with each other, these opposing objective visions have little basis for reconciliation, with the result that power, domination, or varieties of dehumanizing "tolerance" become the human relations strategies of last resort.

Since multiple accounts can provide equally objective appeals to their respective audiences, we must go beyond the question of mere psychological appeal in evaluating political accounts. Too much research has been concerned with the impact of messages on individual belief and attitude structures. As a result, we know a good deal about how to target and manipulate isolated individuals in a mass audience. However, we know relatively little about how to live with the ecology of competing realities that results from successful strategies of mass communication. The analytical focus on individual realities neglects the ecological problem of how people in collectivities can best present and reconcile competing truths. Tolerating virtually any form of communication that creates individual belief leaves us with the paradox that truth is multiple and that everyone is entitled to his or her own version. It may make more sense to work toward standards for evaluating narrative accounts along lines of descriptive adequacy, testability, and openness to change based on challenge and feedback.

The first step in the direction of narrative evaluation is to discover how standard narratives establish their credibility and at what price that

credibility is purchased. To begin with, we notice three features. First, many narratives accomplish a sense of realism by introducing selective documentation that supports a particular plot and that discourages the recognition of other plot possibilities in a situation. Second, in conjunction with selective documentation, the storyteller often introduces only fragmentary plot outlines. When audiences know the standard plots well enough, they gain satisfaction and belief from the process of projecting the completion of a story on to the fragmentary plot structure provided by the narrator. The third step in the process is completed when people draw familiar beliefs and morals (i.e., ideologies and social norms) from the emerging docudrama. Following an explanation of these three features through which the process of narrative authentication and closure occurs, we will suggest criteria for constructing and evaluating the adequacy of narratives.

*Although the genres of fact and fiction are blurred in storytelling practice, there remains a popular belief that agreeable political stories are rooted in fact.*

This impression is sustained by the selection of situational details that bring life and immediacy to stock dramatic material. The introduction of new detail lends the impression that "the same old story" is, despite its repetitive nature, the most adequate account of the situation. This sort of narrative adequacy seems to be rooted in documentary fact, when it is more the result of incorporating prior belief or prejudice into the developing narrative line. It is possible, of course, to imagine another sort of narrative adequacy in which documentary detail would be selected to challenge prior belief and promote new insight. However, the most familiar political communication formula is the circular development of plots that appeal to prejudices, leaving multiple and often unresolvable conflicting realities standing side by side in the same political situation.

When deep-seated prejudice drives political accounts, the supporting detail may be sparse and crudely extracted from context. For example, if one believes that the United States is the pre-ordained defender of world democracy against communism, then it is possible to conclude that a nation that rejects U.S. intervention in its affairs must be a Communist nation. From this premise, it is possible to infer that since Nicaragua, for example, overthrew a U.S.-backed leader and rejected subsequent U.S. demands upon its political reorganization, Nicaragua must be communist. If Nicaragua is communist, another core belief suggests, it cannot possibly have free elections. This prior belief chain, or one similar to it, set the stage for the news story about electoral sham and loss of liberty in the 1984 elections held in Nicaragua. The shred of evidence supporting the story was the refusal of one candidate to run on grounds

that it would not be a fair election. There were, of course, other ways of documenting the election story in Nicaragua. For example, one might have noted that there were seven other parties that ran in the race and that all of them received seats in the National Assembly under a generous formula for apportioning seats and votes. One might also suspect that the candidate who refused to run (Arturo Cruz) might have done so as a political maneuver designed to provide the shred of evidence necessary to convince those who shared a prior belief that the election story was an adequate account. It may be impossible to create an algorithm for selecting "correct" documentation, but common sense leads us to ask why so many available details were excluded from so fateful an account of another nation's affairs. Perhaps the inclusion of other details would have made it difficult to tell a story that drew so heavily from prior prejudice and warranted such a stereotypical course of U.S. policy.

The choice of situational documentation may be the result of active public relations, as in the annual U.S. Defense Department stories about the strength of Soviet arms at budget hearing time; or the choice of supporting detail may be more the result of habit and routine, as when reporters filter news events through a repertoire of implicit story formulas of the sort described by Darnton (1), Tuchman (5), Gans (4), and Fishman (3). The idea here is not just that stories are selective representations of reality; there would be no point to any symbolic form if it were not selective in its representation. The issue with selectivity is whether a representation funnels emerging reality back into stereotypical terms, or whether it introduces new information in terms of unfamiliar dilemmas, puzzles, and contradictions of the sort that promote critical thought and a self-consciousness of problem-solving behavior. Most stock political formulas drive out the stuff of critical thought and action and replace it with self-fulfilling ideas and habituated action imperatives.

*The selection of documentary detail becomes all the more convincing (i.e., the selected details become "facts") when the audience can fill in a time-honored favorite narrative plot that makes sense of the emerging facts.*

Most political narratives provide only the sketchiest details of the who, what, where, when, why, and how that establish a narrative model for an action. The richness of the dramatic experience is often left to the imagination of the audience, whose members can complete the outline based on their own fantasies, emotional circumstances, and ideologies as expressed through well-known narrative themes.

Just as any narrative is likely to imply a wider set of related stories and an ideology, so a term or a simple reference in any political text may evoke a full-fledged story. In political discourse, narratives are largely

evoked by a term or a reference rather than recounted. The term "spic" evokes well-known stories about the dubious moral character and dignity of Hispanics, the role they play in American life, and the appropriateness of demeaning them, even while the same reference generates very different stories for other people—accounts of the provincialism, stunted moral and intellectual development, and bigotry of persons who use such a term.

That narratives spring from pregnant references is central to the analysis of political communication. It means, for one thing, that every text is a sequence of evocations that are accepted unselfconsciously. A news story, a political speech, or a television newscast makes reference to a set of overlapping scenarios featuring settings, characters, and actions not included in the text. A reference to the CIA may bring to mind a vision of vigilant agents protecting the national security against terrorists and subversives, or a story about ideologues overthrowing popular governments and supporting right-wing despots. References to the president, an election in a Third World country, abortion clinics, or a labor dispute evoke a similar range of scenarios.

While the associations and their attendant stories that pass through one person's mind will not be identical with those that intrigue another viewer or auditor, they are not likely to be idiosyncratic either. The cues in a text set off similar resonances in people who share a common characteristic like class, gender, ideology, ethnicity, or color. Textual references that trigger diverse narratives therefore may reinforce or exacerbate social conflicts.

A variety of political texts, including speeches, debates, and official reports, are, thus, rich generators of stories and reveries. Political pronouncements can even call to mind the seeds of narratives for things denied in and excluded from those pronouncements. Derrida (2) has made us aware of the impossibility of extinguishing meaning by erasing it from a text or by affirming something else. It remains present, as he puts it, "under erasure." When Ronald Reagan or other administration officials affirm the fairness of their social policies, they both make their point and recall stories about their assaults upon workers, blacks, and the poor. Political communications, then, are not very often completed narratives in themselves, but they are always seedbeds of stories: incitements to the imagination that reflect and reinforce social divisions.

That political narratives are more often implicit than fully recounted helps protect them from criticism because it reduces the chance that they will be challenged. To declare that welfare recipients are poor because they are lazy and will always be parasites unless forced to work is to invite a rebuttal and counterevidence; but a reference to "workfare" provides those who are inclined to do so with an opportunity to supply that particular narrative. Evocative references that permeate political and statutory language serve as Pavlovian cues for people who have

been conditioned to use language to reinforce their ideologies rather than to challenge them. This may well be the most important and most common function that political communication serves.

*The basic idea behind narrative closure is that completing a well-known plot lends authenticity to the selected documentary "sense data," which in turn warrant its standard and familiar interpretation.*

Stock stories seem all the more authentic when their messages and morals are taken from the normative order of society. The normative order consists of the ideologies, social conventions, and subjective probabilities for events from which authorities and the well-socialized public construct the range of mundane realities that vie for attention in a given situation. Where stock political narratives display and reinforce the morals and beliefs of the normative order, reality seems perfectly objective because it has been transformed into idealized empirical and moral terms. It is this contradiction between pointing at the world and seeing the heavens of the mind that concerns us. When plot fragments evoke familiar beliefs and values, the psychological inclination is to regard selected documentary detail as "facts" that authenticate the story. In this fashion, fragments of real-life situations become perceived as wholes, while the excluded aspects of situations are neglected, rationalized away, or dismissed as the weak arguments of opponents who have failed to grasp the real issues at stake.

Consider, for example, the claims of the U.S. administration about the El Salvadoran election that saw Jose Napoleon Duarte and the Christian Democratic party come to power in 1984. The election was declared by the U.S. government and media alike as a triumph for democracy, a victory of the people, a step toward stability in the country, the best and the most honest election that El Salvador had ever had. These pronouncements were based on the "facts" that two parties had competed in a relatively peaceful campaign that was followed by a large voter turnout. It would be easy to leap from these sketchy details to a conclusion that El Salvador was on the road to a liberal democracy much like the United States. For those who leap to it, this conclusion requires no more facts to support it, suggesting that it is compelling primarily due to its comforting normative message that U.S. political values are alive and popular in the world (as well they should be in the minds of those who cherish them). The only problem with this process of narrative closure is that it allows for comforting normative conclusions at the price of overlooking a number of possibly significant details about the political situation in which the Salvadoran election took place. Among the excluded details are the following:

First, there was no mechanism in the electoral process for altering the balance of power in El Salvador—a balance still weighted down by a small number of wealthy families who balked at peace talks with the rebels and continued to support death squad activities through their direct ties to military officers and paramilitary organizations. Where in the official media and government narrative was the realistic concern about how it is possible to graft democracy onto existing cancerous political organs?

Second, the election occurred in an atmosphere of political violence in which some 40,000 civilians had been killed by the security forces of the same government to which Duarte was elected.

Third, 20 percent of the Salvadoran population living in rebel territory was not able to participate in the election.

Fourth, there were only two opposition parties left to run the race, as 12 major opposition leaders had been assassinated since 1979.

Fifth, it is doubtful that the two remaining choices were meaningful even to the United States, as the CIA reportedly spent over \$1 million to steer the victory in the direction of Duarte and away from his unacceptable right-wing alternative.

Sixth, the Salvadoran people were forced to vote. Observers reported that panic broke out at many voting stations when ballots ran out and people waiting in line feared that they would not get their voting cards stamped, which meant that they might be branded political enemies. Did the large turnouts represent a celebration of democracy, another helpless recognition of the terrible power of the state, or something else?

Finally, there was no opposition press alive in El Salvador at the time of the election. Since 1980, two opposition papers had been closed due to threat and attack by government security forces, and thirty journalists had been killed. Is this one of many indicators that the voices of Salvadoran people were prevented from being raised in dialogue about the meaning of their own elections? What should the narrative have made of the fact that the Salvadoran people and the world heard the meaning of their own election from the U.S. government, through the U.S. media?

The above details were excluded from the official U.S. account of the elections, perhaps because a different narrative would have been required to accommodate and evaluate them. The trouble with the alternative narratives is that they would not have evoked the fantasy of U.S.-style democracy thriving at home and abroad. An attempt to rationalize away the excluded "facts" would have transformed a pristine fairy tale into an unheard-of potboiler in which the author included an epilogue justifying the fatal weaknesses in the plot. Thus, the official line was closed to many relevant features of the situation. While there were fringe outlets available to alternative versions, the mass media

presented the dominant official version as a take-it-or-leave-it alternative. It is unlikely that many members of the isolated mass U.S. public would have had any idea about how to proceed in reconstructing an alternative view had they rejected the dominant account of the situation.

The trouble with the "triumph of democracy" story in El Salvador is that, by many daily life measures, democracy has not triumphed in El Salvador. As with most standard narratives, the audience to the El Salvador story is directed to look away from much that seems to be going on in the real world situation and toward the projection screen of popular fantasy and ideology. The shred of evidence required to support the El Salvador story becomes meaningless or at least hard to interpret when taken out of the narrative context that gives highly selected details the standing of meaningful facts. The "fact" that lots of people voted for one of two candidates in El Salvador can be interpreted as a triumph of democracy in one story or, in one of many alternative accounts, as a public relations ploy designed to help the U.S. people ignore a Salvadoran political reality of death, torture, poverty, and the absence of any significant power sharing. The same "fact" supports radically different stories.

In this fashion, facts are often (especially often in politics) established by prior belief rather than through a process of creating new beliefs and values. A story about free elections in El Salvador may become widely adopted simply because it appeals to broadly shared norms, hopes, and fantasies. Yet, the key question about the psychological grounds for accepting versions of events should be whether those grounds accommodate critical feedback and provide guidelines for goal-attaining action. If El Salvador is not making progress toward democracy, anyone truly concerned about democracy should want to know about it. Yet the fantasy of U.S. goodness (defined in this case as promoting democracy) may be so strong that evidence to the contrary is lost on the story. Given the history of U.S. assistance with Third World democracies, there is reason to look at more than just the number of votes cast for two parties of dubious representative standing. There is nothing in the isolated fact that there were two choices to suggest that El Salvador will not join the ranks of other nations that the United States has assisted down the path toward democracy—nations like Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Guatemala, Honduras, South Korea, the Philippines, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Iran. While some of these countries (notably the last three) have achieved independence from U.S. intervention at great cost, their liberation process has not been accompanied by much understanding and support on the part of the U.S. government or its people. To the contrary, the countries that have freed themselves from U.S. export democracy immediately become captured within one of the many "enemy" stories that government officials have available to shape

popular thinking. The tragic price that the U.S. people pay for this distorted communication is the virtual absence of learning about world problems and new approaches to solving them. To the contrary, narrative closure results in a routinization of problem formulation and resolution. The political process, burdened with these constraints, becomes more a forum for belief reinforcement and superstitious learning than an arena for constructive dialogue, critical insight, and creative action.

It is important to understand that the process of narrative authentication and closure outlined above does not mean that everyone believes the same thing. It is possible for a political position to be authentic or legitimate without eliciting universal agreement. As suggested in the earlier discussion of stereotypical ideological opposition, the question is whether the differences in interpretation that are built into the narrative repertoire are adequate to the tasks of constructive dialogue and action. The proliferation of standard narratives locks the political process into habitual behavior patterns by creating a short circuit between beliefs about reality and enduring political predispositions. The political experience that results from the exchange of standard narratives may be full of sound and fury, with very little significance. Most political accounts based on the normative order will evoke support from some groups and opposition from others. In fact, the relationship between political legitimacy and narrative authenticity is so strong that political actors and journalists alike maximize their chances of gaining credibility with the mass audience by fitting new events into old symbolic molds. Each iteration of the symbolic process reinforces the cycle and prepares the mainstream audience for the next time. Idealizing reality may alienate those who reside at the margins of the normative order, but it evokes all the more emotional commitment from those whose self-interest translates easily into the condensational symbols and life dramas of the status quo. Thus, the political process driven by standard narratives booms and buzzes with conflict and activity while the fundamental structural relations and contradictions of society remain unchanged.

*Although our focus is on the structure of political narratives, our concern is with distortions in thought that inhibit people's ability to recognize which public policies will improve the quality of their lives and which will damage it.*

The distortions and contradictions apparent in political communications do not stem from the properties of language but from the inequities and strains of daily life: the incentives of the privileged to justify their advantages and augment them and the need of the deprived to rational-

ize their disadvantages or struggle against them. Stories about the critical uncertainties in public affairs must be understood as an integral part of everyday efforts to live with the tensions between moral codes and pervasive inequalities in wealth, status, and power over others. As long as there are blatant inequalities, there will be narratives that will display these characteristics:

1. They will rest on claims of dubious historical standing (e.g., that war is necessary to achieve peace), and they will rationalize such claims in tautological fashion, as with the premise that human nature or historical inevitability requires resort to war.
2. They will overlook features of a situation that would change the narrative if they were taken into account. For example, administrative references to totalitarian oppression and electoral sham belied the participation of seven political parties in the Nicaraguan elections of 1984—all seven of which won seats in the National Assembly.
3. Their significance will be changed, often into an ideologically opposing view, when documentary details are moved from central to peripheral positions in the narrative structure. For example, an emphasis on party collusion and suppression of opposition in one account of an election may create the impression of a "show election" staged as a cover story for continued oppression. Another account of the same election may marginalize such details by setting the scene as a new beginning for democracy, and, therefore, a hopeful first step for a country from which too much should not be expected. Political opponents may insert their friends in one version and their enemies in the other, and thus use both formulas in complementary opposition to suit their ideological purposes.

These and other evaluative criteria suggest the need for a "new political narrative" designed to focus contradictions and normative dilemmas within the same story. There is little information to be gained from the standard communication format of presenting "both sides" in the form of two separate narratives, since the storytellers still have control of both. Any new narrative style (whether journalistic or popular) that responds to the dilemmas of closed and stereotypical political communication must set the scene for a critique of the material conditions that give rise to the standard competing political accounts as well, for language, like all signifiers, is part of the material realm it helps interpret.

While narrative is therefore bound to be distorting in the measure that life chances are unequal, it can be creative, too, as the resourcefulness of human beings in constructing alternative narratives from the same material demonstrates. The seedbed of creative use and creative reception of narratives lies, we believe, in learning to recognize and

appreciate the inevitability of contradictory stories, the multiple realities they evoke, and their links to the conditions of people's lives. Creative literature sometimes achieves such recognition. The goal of narrative analysis cannot be either the verification of some one kind of story or the achievement of an ideal speech situation, but rather an understanding of the strains that make alternative narratives inevitable and a recognition of the diversity of human frustrations, aspirations, satisfactions, and imaginative constructions. This in itself might help provide a basis for action to alter pathological conditions and might generate new narratives to explain such action.

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