

Narratives, Maps and the Theatre of Politics

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Workshop 22: The Political Uses of Narrative

Introduction

The purpose of our workshop, as I understand it, is less to focus on the content of particular narratives than to consider the function of narrative within political discourses. This reference to political discourses is however ambiguous, since politics could refer to political life itself or to the discipline of politics that studies it. I will begin, then, by offering a distinction and some connections. The distinction is between narratives that are used for pedagogical purposes in political studies and narratives which are a constituent of the political process. The connections are between narratives of the latter sort and: ideologies and philosophies of history; literature and art; maps and dramatic performances.

Narratives are often used by political scientists or political theorists for heuristic, illustrative or modelling purposes. It does not usually matter whether or not these are empirically true stories since their main functions are to grant the arid details of formal hypotheses a sense of existential liveliness and intuitive familiarity; to draw parallels between abstractions and real life, or to demonstrate the plausibility of a model. Such narratives occupy a circumscribed space within a non-narrative structure and their function is determined by the broader objectives of the study that deploys them. My interest in this paper does not lie with this type of narrative, although I will return to it briefly in my discussion of social contract theory. My main concern is rather with narratives that are a constitutive element of the political process. That is, they are not used by the discipline of politics as an aid to understanding political life, but are an integral part of political life itself and as such, their contents and functions are themselves profoundly political.

Before saying more about these narratives of the political process (as I will call them), I should be more explicit about my definition of politics. I am not defining politics narrowly as an activity related solely to the state, although this is obviously a privileged site of the political. But more generally, politics is the domain of collective life. It concerns the way coexistence is constituted and sustained through processes of negotiation where conflict as well as agreement have their place. This is where shared projects and identities, alliances and hostilities, are engendered: phenomena that might or might not have the state as their target (e.g. regarding policy, law or constitution; questions of representation or legitimacy) but

which relate to practices performed across a variety of public and even private spheres. Thus politics concerns the way the rules that facilitate collective life are made and contested, as well as the way they distribute resources such as power, material goods or status.

Narratives play an important (unavoidable? desirable?) role within this process. They tell a story about the past; a shared history is (re)constructed on which basis populations forge an identity, build a nation, sustain a sense of communality or patriotism. Narratives, then, are important in helping to constitute the associations which are the stuff of collective life; they help bind individuals together by telling them who they are and what they share in common. They are generally a mix of 'true' history (they select privileged events, such as the state's origins or victories in war), which grants them plausibility, and fabulous construction (events are linked in a fanciful way), which renders them emotionally attractive. Thus Rorty writes that what 'binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes', where the principal function of these vocabularies is 'to tell stories about future outcomes which compensate for present sacrifices.' For Rorty such stories are a means of inventing, rather than discovering, identity and accordingly they function more as literature than history.¹ But in either case, such narratives become lodged in the popular imaginary where they are heavily invested with desire. In this sense they might be defined as the imaginary equivalent or complement to the social contract. But as such they become closely associated with ideology and with questions of legitimacy and power.

It is important to note that these narratives need not necessarily be coincident with the citizens or subjects of a particular nation-state. Because particular groups may tell different (local) stories about themselves, they are potentially a source of conflict as well as of community. At the same time, these narratives of the political process may obscure their relation to any specific group if they are presented as the story of History per se. Such big stories are closely related to philosophies of history and are today often referred to as grand narratives, a phenomenon of modernity.

So far, then, I have distinguished heuristic from political narratives and I have likened the latter to ideologies, philosophies of history and literature. The next connection I want to make in this introduction is between narratives and maps; a connection I will return to later when considering whether (grand) narratives still play a significant role within the contemporary (postmodern) political process. Narratives suggest a historical trajectory: some continuity over time of unfolding, connected events. They etch a time-line within the complexities of becoming. Maps might then be described as spatial narratives in that they represent certain continuities across space which inscribe the density of extension. Indeed politics could also be defined using these terms. For here is a carving up of both time (the history of a people as it is narrated) and space (into territories under specific jurisdictions); incisions drawn within the intricacies and flows of social life between legitimate and illegitimate acts as well as a (literal and metaphorical) policing of boundaries and limits.

These analogies relate to some general characteristics of narrative: as a (true or fictitious) recounting of facts or events which establishes their connectedness and temporality. It is the latter which grant to narratives their constructive/inventive nature. For narratives, like art, impose/elicit a certain style, configuring the mass of shifting and minute details of existence according to certain lines of force and their trajectories; emphasising some events and relationships while ignoring others. While such story-telling may comprise merely fanciful entertainment or inventive experimentation, tales of social life cannot be wholly innocent inasmuch as they convey it in a certain light, shifting its meaning and operating criteria of selection. Although this observation applies most obviously to narratives of the political process, where they operate as ideologies or even as grand narratives, it is also a subtle and insidious effect of the pedagogical narratives deployed by social scientists.

In these last senses one could then claim that narratives are unavoidably political because they are vehicles of power. They are distinct from simple descriptions of scattered empirical data (although even here, of course, a quiet selection operates) in the way they weave connections which allows them to say more than their raw data alone permits and thus to slant it according to a certain perspective. One must always then ask who tells the tale; with what authority and from what position within the social fabric. For while empirical approaches might aim faithfully to present reality, stories do not claim an exact representation of the facts (even if they claim to be true in some other sense). Like theory they exclude and privilege, speculate and prescribe, although unlike theory (at least in its more orthodox, Anglo-American versions) the story is mediated by being told so that its manner of representation, style or form, in short its narration, is as important as its content. In this sense it is surely more compelling than theory but also more dangerous, since narrative generally lacks the self-critical reflexiveness of theory while sustaining a more intense emotional investment.

The violence enacted by narrative on the heterogeneity of the real is an act of both power and empowerment. It invites us to make sense of the past, the world, in a certain way by inscribing a particular order there. It is common to narratives, maps and politics - or better, it is what renders narratives and maps both intrinsically political and elements of the political process. Political narratives impose a certain reading of the past in order to legitimise (or challenge) the present. Their concern is thus with questions of legitimacy. When they also sketch lines of force within the present - embarking on what might be defined as a mapping exercise - their function becomes more strategic, concerned with orientation and the action that is summoned by narratives of the political process.

This leads me to the final linkage I want to make in this introduction. It concerns the third noun in my title: theatre. Theatre suggests dramatic performances and as such, it is related to but not synonymous with story-telling. Dramatic performances often tell a story or choreograph a carving up of space through dance or gesture. In narratives of the political process some performative dimension is

frequently invoked inasmuch as they recount the past in order to justify the maintenance or negation of the present, thereby summoning a final act whose performance will lead the story to its conclusion. In this way political narratives, unlike say popular fictions but more like moral fables, are exhortations to action as well as legitimations of particular agents. Thus within grand narratives, especially, the present is but a moment within an ongoing narrative that is History itself. History, in other words, is a script or text, an interactive story whose telling is a moment in its plot and whose final act - of redemption or catastrophe - has yet to be enacted but is to be influenced by the telling of this particular tale. Such narratives are then doubly political: they are not just power-inscribed perspectives that interpret the world but also vehicles for changing it and as such, they must pass from narrative to a drama whose theatre is society; whose stage is the world.

II. Social Contract Theory as Narrative

In the next two sections I will consider the narrative and dramatic elements of two sorts of political discourse: social contract theory and grand narratives. The most obvious point about the former is that the classic versions of contractarianism can all be rendered in terms of a simple story. This concerns the transition from a state of nature to civil society, with the contract marking a leap from unruly individualism and unbridled passion to political association and the rule of law. The story is more or less extravagantly embellished by its exponents, but even in its thinner versions it draws on a more pervasive narrative that seems to be lodged in the imaginary of (western) civilisation itself as the story of its own becoming (a more ancient version is for example Aeschylus' *Oresteia*). For herein lies the very origin of society; the leap from nature to culture, from passion to reason. If Freud is right that ontogenesis recapitulates phylogenesis, then it is also the story of every individual who matures from the drive-driven, pre-Oedipal infant to the adult who has reason (ego) and conscience (superego), albeit at the cost of renunciation and repression. This would account for the social contract story's profound resonance; its familial terminology (patriarchy, fraternity etc)² and the fear of a return of the repressed which it plays upon in calling for sacrifice, order. It looks like a modern, rationalistic tale but it draws on deep-seated anxieties as well as a long-standing metaphysics.

This narrative also cuts across a theological version - of evil or fall and redemption - and becomes entwined with a materialist variant: a story of economic development from scarcity and inequality to prosperity and justice. In all these versions, the sought-for end is at risk if right actions are not performed and it is the purpose of the narrative to make clear what they are plus the costs of failure. For only obedience to authority, to the law (the sovereign, God, the father, the market), can prevent regression to a pre-political state of war and chaos; damnation; psychosis; poverty. Freedom and pleasure must be sacrificed to stave off the chaos they threaten.

Despite their somewhat meagre narrative resources, social contract theorists thus draw on a more pervasive story, or myth, while rendering it in an explicitly political version: it is the state that now guarantees social order and which coercively prevents regression or free-riding. They also participate in the dramaturgical aspect of political narratives, as the example of Hobbes' Leviathan makes clear. The theory looks like a reconstruction of the past, a story of the commonwealth's origins in a state of nature, but it only works politically if its tenses are reconfigured. It is a warning of the fate to come should we fail to obey the sovereign (it is true that Hobbes begins to rewrite a familiar script inasmuch as authority will henceforth achieve legitimacy only through consent, but his conclusions are intended to be compelling to any rational, self-interested actor and their acceptance is therefore no more voluntary than the consent he describes). Hobbes' theory accordingly participates in a broader tale whose plot it seeks to affect. It is oriented towards the future rather than the past (hence the emphasis on promises). This is why examples of current distrust (of thieves and servants) are mentioned alongside references to primitive tribal cultures.

Second, in terms of a sub-plot starring narrative itself, it might be noted that alongside the unpleasant absences experienced in the natural state (which wants for, among other things, building or machinery, industry or arts, in short, commodious living) there must be a lack of narrative itself. For in this atomised state individuals are disconnected; they lack the social bonds and archives that would allow them collectively to weave any narrative, any history. In the war of all against all there is only monotonous repetition. The state of nature has no story to tell and is without the means for telling or recording it, while accession to civil society is potentially an entry into a narrative world (although this possibility is scarcely redeemed in the static and fragile culture described by Hobbes). The connections woven by the narrative form, in other words, are analogous to, dependent upon, even metaphors for, the actual connections forged within social life.

Third, social contract theorists often in fact disguise their narrative format by presenting their stories as scientific deductions (perhaps because they associate narrative with pre-modern modes of legitimation?). Their theories nevertheless occupy a transitional and ambiguous position between the political scientist's heuristic deployment of narrative and the grand narratives that participate dramatically in the political process. For while the narratives constructed by social contract thinkers tend to be presented as merely formal and illustrative, their function is one of legitimation and as such they aim for political efficacy as opposed to merely increasing knowledge about political matters. This is again most evident in Hobbes' work. While Hobbes has bequeathed us the most arresting image of the state of nature as nasty, brutish and short, he claims to derive it from the sort of deductive reasoning he discovers in the geometer's method. Beginning with a materialist account of the human machine and its appetite for life (motion), he allegedly deduces the effects of putting such individuals together without any common power to constrain them.

Hobbes accordingly seems only to be suggesting a plausible deduction of how political right emerged from self-interest and calculating reason and the implication he can therefore convey is that his findings are ahistorical and universally valid. Such claims help to reinforce the legitimacy of the unchanging order he insists upon and thus operate ideologically. For as Hobbes perhaps realised, there is something subversive about the narrative approach once it is associated with the story of historical development. If it is history, and not just the narrative, that evolves over time - if, in other words, history itself has a narrative structure - then everything is suddenly in-process, provisional and relative. Such implications are anathema to Hobbes' absolutism and will only be redeemed by Hegel and Marx, who will recognise the linkages between history as narrative, critical method and political radicalism (but who will also try to save their own theories from these implications by declaring that history and its story has ended or is about to do so). But I am also going to contend that the seeds of this philosophy of history were already germinating in social contract theory despite its formalistic appearance.

For fourthly, the rational-deductive methodology of Hobbes' thinking is already confused by his appeals to an actual past. In citing historical evidence he trades on an impression that his deductions are true to a historical narrative that validates them. While conceding that his audience may doubt the actual existence of the war-like state he describes, Hobbes insists that 'there are many places, where they live so now' and gives the example of American 'savages'.³ In his work there is as yet no suggestion of any necessary historical evolution from the latter state to civil society - it is reason, the formal exercise of 'foresight', that inspires individuals to form a commonwealth - but the lure of commodious living already inspires contractees and the historicity implied by the comparison between this and the savage state will be increasingly redeemed by Hobbes' successors.

Ambivalence regarding the deductive or historical reasoning behind the state of nature is also evident, then, in Locke. His version is ostensibly derived from his workmanship model of God. But like Hobbes, he also cites savage Americans ('in the beginning, all the world was America')⁴ and appeals to the authority of one Josephus Acosta to demonstrate that in Peru, Florida, Brazil, something like the state of nature does or did reign. The importance of the discovery of the New World, of new maps of the present which appear to give insight into its past, should surely not be under-estimated in the incitement to constructions of such narrative history.⁵ Moreover I want to suggest that Locke's references to native Americans are indicative of a more historical and materialist way of thinking that renders them an early version of what will become the Marxian grand narrative. Locke distinguishes between two stages of the state of nature, which are divided by the 'invention of money'. It is money that allows exchange and, eventually, commerce and prosperity, but it also permits the overcoming of natural law limits on accumulation and so facilitates the greater inequality that will render the natural state more Hobbesian and sufficiently inconvenient to drive individuals into civil society. What tribal society lacks is not only the law but also the means of material development; the world that was all once America was a world

Example?
How can
we release
this reasoning
in their work?

fabula narratur!⁸ Like his predecessors, Smith illustrates the lowest state with the example of North America while associating the need for government with the emergence of property (stage two). He nevertheless identifies a modern exchange economy with prosperity and freedom: for him individual greed translates into class harmony and wealth while the replacement of service by market relations means greater liberty. The outcome of his materialist story is thus a legitimization of the liberal state and a call for the reform of anachronistic, pre-modern political forms that meddle with market forces. Indeed it should not be forgotten that while contract theory legitimates the bourgeois-liberal state that now prevails, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it represented a call for radical political reform, even revolt.

If Smith shared Locke's optimistic assessment of material and political progress, he was at odds with a rather different narrative tradition; one that also concerned the development of civilisation but told it a pessimistic story of nihilism and decline. My second point about Rousseau's narrative then concerns his identification with this latter version; one he shares with Nietzsche, Freud and (the first generation of) the Frankfurt School. Now the division of labour and prosperity mean dependency and hard labour, not freedom; competitive individualism means atomisation rather than community and amour propre rather than fraternity; the representative state means servitude not civil liberty; the liberal commonwealth means rulers versus ruled and is thus remains illegitimate. Like other purveyors of this narrative Rousseau does not so much prescribe efficacious political acts to change the world as describe an alternative state to show how far it falls short of its own ideals.

To summarise this section, then: I have suggested that despite its claims to being politically scientific and predicated on rational deductions which yield universally-valid, merely formal, conclusions, social contract theory is full of narrative assumptions and anticipations. These are evident in its appeals to and constructions of the past; in its exhortation to future dramatic acts; in its use of stories for purposes of legitimization (or critique); in its participation in a larger narrative of material development which sweeps the political along with it. These early modern political theories already then anticipated the grand narratives of the Enlightenment and themselves operated ideologically, as narratives of the political process, while being disguised as formal theories or fictions internal to the discipline of political inquiry.

It is interesting to note in this context that Rawls tried to preclude these narrative interruptions in his contemporary version of contract theory by substituting the Original Position for the state of nature, yet found himself obliged later to situate his theory within a narrative of specifically western development. Indeed the immense interest - and criticisms - generated by the Original Position suggest that its appeal - and problems - perhaps lay in readers' compulsion to interpret it, contrary to Rawls' intentions, in a narrative mode.⁹ I cautiously suggest that it is in fact almost impossible to insulate rational inquiries about social life from their narrative reception. But is this because such insulation necessarily remains

illusory in the context of sociopolitical life? Or is it because - as a Nietzschean might argue - we always try to understand the unfamiliar by way of the familiar and we grasp abstractions better if we clothe them in the attire of narrative? Given the temporal flow of the seasons and the life cycle of our bodies, do we even have some innate propensity to think in the narrative mode? Or is it the modern experience of history and change that gives a particular predisposition to we moderns to think in this way (a way that could therefore be challenged by different experiences of time)?

III. The Rise and Fall of Grand Narratives

The term 'grand narratives' is one popularised by Lyotard in his book The Postmodern Condition. Lyotard's specific concern here was with narratives that legitimise knowledge (the book's subtitle is A Report on Knowledge) and the detail of his reasons for associating postmodernity with incredulity towards such grand narratives is rarely rehearsed today. However the general terminology of grand narratives, together with Lyotard's provocative claims regarding their demise, have inspired much of the current interest in the narrative tradition. In its popular reception, Lyotard's argument has tended to be flattened out into something akin to the end of ideology thesis, with modernity's hegemonic grand narratives being linked to liberal-capitalist faith in progress on the one hand, and a Hegelian-Marxian philosophy of history on the other. These cold war adversaries are now presented as two ideological sides of one modernist coin and both are opposed to a Nietzschean-inspired scepticism associated with postmodernity. Although this is something of a travesty of Lyotard's actual argument, it does fairly faithfully - and paradoxically - capture the narrative which Lyotard himself implies and that many postmodernists find credible.

There are in fact four aspects of narrative in Lyotard's work: traditional narratives (taking forms like myth, legend and ritualised story-telling); the two grand narratives of modernity; the local, small narratives he thinks are replacing them and the grand narrative in which he unwittingly participates himself. All of these add something to our understanding of the nature and political functions of narrative while questioning its future role.

There is widespread agreement, Lyotard argues, on one point (or, one might say, on one particular story): that customary knowledge, where '[n]arration is the quintessential form', is to be distinguished from knowledge in the scientific age. [PMC 19] He then goes on to remark on a number of characteristics typical of traditional narrativity. In particular it is associated with a legitimating function; with an undifferentiated conveying of knowledge and with a particular temporality. In the first case, these narratives establish who has the authority (as author, narrator) to speak and to be heard and thus ascribe the correct roles which participants must perform. In terms of knowledge, they present a unified viewpoint which is able to combine a variety of language games - factual, prescriptive, interrogative,

evaluative - that will later be distinguished. Regarding time, Lyotard disputes suggestions that traditional narratives are a primitive means for remembering the past. In their ritualised performances, he claims, it is meter, accent, musicality, which are important: not a chronological unfolding of time with distinct periods but a rhythmic beating which allows the past to be forgotten rather than stored (as in nursery rhymes or proverbs, those 'little splinters of potential narratives'). In collectivities where narrative is the key form there is no need to remember the past since the raw material of the social bond is already intrinsic to the meaning and reciting of the narrative itself. Such narratives are thus self-legitimizing and do not require extrinsic rules of legitimation.

Modern societies no longer rely on this narrative pragmatics: legitimation here relies on rational argumentation rather than narrative performance, at least in the eyes of modernity's scientific protagonists. Because narrative knowledge lacks proof, science equates it with ignorance and denigrates narratives as 'fables, myths, legends, fit only for women and children.'[PMC 27] (In fact, it seems to me, this is also what happens to ideologies when they are dismissed as grand narratives, i.e. as stories deficient in the truth-value they once claimed for themselves.) In Foucaultian terms, one could say that the scientific régime of truth marginalises and subjugates this mode of knowing, although Lyotard also recognises the sense of loss that accompanies it. 'Lamenting the "loss of meaning" in postmodernity boils down to mourning the fact that knowledge is no longer principally narrative.' [PMC 26]

Even science, however, is tempted to weave a narrative of its own epic story in order to justify itself and its public funding, while modernity spawned new imperatives for political legitimation. Although they differ from traditional narratives, modernity does therefore witness 'two major versions of the narrative of legitimation' of its own. These are an emancipatory narrative Lyotard associates with Kant and liberalism (but which I have also associated with social contract theory and its materialist trajectory), where knowledge is a universal right and related to liberty, and a speculative narrative associated with German Idealism, Hegel in particular, where knowledge is justified in terms of its place within the system of Absolute Knowledge. Marxism is actually presented by Lyotard as wavering between these two.

Before moving on I want to make a few comments about the Hegelian version, which seems to inherit aspects of traditional narrativity since in its totalising project universal History is presented as the self-presentation of Life or Spirit. Here knowledge is self-legitimizing and defines what society, subject or state are. It is in this sense that it is a meta-narrative. It seems to me that Hegel's philosophy is in fact the consummate narrative inasmuch as it is not Hegel (allegedly) who writes, but the narrative of Being that writes itself through him, where this writing is its highest act and the completion of its story. There is no longer any distinction between narrator and narrated. Ironically, it is only then in this most rationalistic, scientific modern age that the grand narrative becomes possible. For while previous cultures told stories about themselves these remained partial and their truth is only

redeemed in this final narrative which is Truth itself. Although this unfolding of reason's becoming is conveyed formally in The Logic, it is the historical story narrated in The Phenomenology that captures our imagination. Moreover, dialectics seems to have an inherent affinity with narrative since it too makes connections that allow events to unfold over time in a way that is meaningful and in no sense fictional (for according to Hegel, the discursive resources of its telling evolve reciprocally with the development of the story; this is no arbitrary imposition of gratuitous relationships on indifferent events).

Liotard's account of grand narratives has caught the postmodern imagination, however, mainly because of his diagnosis of their contemporary decline. 'The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.'[PMC 37] In fact the argument here remains very sketchy - which only makes it more evocative.

As far as the narrative of emancipation is concerned, it looks at first as though it is economic and technological development which is to blame. Like the Frankfurt School, Lyotard argues that reason has become increasingly instrumental and calculating, so that it is only the 'performativity' of knowledge (i.e. its utility in enhancing productive efficiency) that continues to justify its funding in liberal-capitalist societies. Knowledge for its own sake (as end rather than means), or as part of a broader quest for liberty, thus becomes irrelevant as do the stories which presented it in this way. Lyotard nevertheless doubts that performativity (alone) can explain this narrative's demise (as he surely must inasmuch as otherwise he would be subscribing to a Marxian grand narrative of economic determinism). The seeds of the emancipatory grand narrative's collapse actually seem to lie in the Kantian philosophy that engendered it since he failed to unify factual and practical knowledge. There is no reason why cognitive-instrumental understanding must have moral-practical consequences and the two have now definitively parted company. Science is incapable of providing normative justification even for itself.¹⁰

As far as the speculative narrative is concerned, Lyotard insists that its delegitimation and nihilism were already apparent in the nineteenth-century. In claiming that knowledge is only legitimate if it can account for itself in the context of the whole, this narrative already harboured a certain scepticism and when the whole fell apart, as it did under Nietzschean perspectivism, so did its legitimating capacity. If the first narrative succumbs to a diremption of two language games, the cognitive and the normative, the second thus suffers from a multiplication of language games which will yield postmodern incredulity and an accompanying legitimation crisis on the one hand, and the pluralisation of local narratives and temporary contracts on the other. This is then the grand narrative to which his own presentation subscribes (a transition from traditional to grand to plural, local narratives) and as with other narratives of the political process, this contains an exhortation to future acts. Rather than responding to nihilism by

of the social bond, this would have to be rethought and reconstructed according to a very different (non-contractarian? non-sacrificial? Dionysian?) script. Although poststructuralism is generally considered weak when it comes to a transformative politics, its prescriptions indeed tend in this direction. It subscribes to the pessimistic version of civilization's evolution as one of denial and it anticipates transgressive/experimental performances that would reverse this, while denying itself the metaphysical comfort provided by narratives of progress and salvation.

A further point thus relates to a general postmodern suspicion of the narrative form itself inasmuch as it does suggest connections and temporal continuity or, worst of all, a beginning and an end. Both Hegel and Marx are charged with spinning humanistic, totalising myths that are in turn blamed for inhuman, totalitarian effects (the gulag). The plot of the narrative they recount looks theological; its continuities look deterministic and monocausal; its suggestion of an idealised origin and telos seems to ignore and suppress the pluralities, contingencies and discontinuities of history. Philosophies of history that present themselves in terms of narrative metaphors are thus especially dangerous. Indeed there is a tendency among postmodernists to perceive History as a phenomenon constituted by narrative discourses themselves, while the past is perceived as lacking any narrative structure of its own. It is this postmodern emphasis on random events, ruptures and freely-flowing mobilities; on the fragmented and multiplicitous, that renders any grand narrative suspect in its eyes.

On the other hand, there is much sympathy for the sort of small, local narratives that Lyotard had mentioned. These do not claim to discover the truth of the past, but to invent new connections and alliances, freed from the legacy of older tales. They thus differ from modern ideologies which worked with an appearance/reality structure, implying that the underlying connections unearthed were true in a way that mere experience was not. In place of this model there is simply a proliferation of different stories which are all recognised as fictions. At the same time the emphasis on being small and local is important. For the political problem with grand narratives and their projects of legitimation is that they tell the stories of particular groups, constructed from their own perspective, but pass them off as universal. The idea of a postmodern social fracturing is thus consonant with claims that henceforth, many previously marginalised groups will tell their own stories about their own diverse identities. Moreover some of these groups will inherit cultural dispositions towards narrative structure, as opposed to rational or scientific discourse, so story-telling will be a privileged mode of knowing and relating for them. Subjugated forms of knowledge, silenced language games, can then take their place alongside science as legitimate ways of knowing. In this sense postmodernism is about a rejuvenation of narrative which is linked to a process of radical democratisation.

The question however is whether these small, multiple, fictional stories can yet provide the basis for an efficacious politics. If the sheer fact of their non-hierarchical plurality is what defines them as

democratic, do they have any power to realise and struggle for a politics (and economy) that is actually democratic and inclusive? Can they offer sufficient orientation or motivation to permit strategic interventions? Or does the idea of a radical politics, as a project with mass support and emancipatory ideals, die along with the grand narratives that summoned it? In which case, was liberation all along no more than a literary trope? If the project of emancipation is contingent on narrative, should we file it under romantic fiction or adventure stories, rather than politics? Or inversely, should we file narrative under politics? Is the political itself discursively constructed, so that telling new tales is the really important act? Or have modernist politics and narratives simply fallen victim to the same syndrome of postmodern disintegration and passive idealism?

I will conclude by making two final points in light of these questions. The first concerns political efficacy. Even small groups and alliances, to be effective, need to understand the force field in which they intervene. Whatever stories they tell to sustain their alliances and dreams, they will require more than fictions if they are to change the world. This brings me back to my earlier allusions to dialectics and maps. A dialectical approach permits an understanding of the processes and connections, forces and potentials, that structure the social world: not as fantasy, but as historical mediation. It does not claim to mirror reality but to reconstruct it in a manner that can guide political practice strategically. Given postmodern antipathy towards dialectics and its grand narrative legacy, this might better perhaps be rendered now as a process of mapping; of tracing the trajectories of the real in a manner that would permit effective, planned intervention; a politics that sustained some narrative structure rather than random, fortuitous acts.

My last point concerns an anxiety I have developed while writing this paper, which is about the whole language of narrative as it is gaining popularity within political studies. Is this an insidious move that translates politics into literary criticism, where truth becomes fiction, ideology becomes the imaginary and society becomes a text? Is there a whole literary metaphoric here, where rewriting scripts or retelling tales substitutes for 'real' political acts that change the (material, institutional) world? And if so, is this shift not itself ideological, political - part of a yet grander narrative, of de-politicisation?