



ALEXANDER PLATZ
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What is Narrative? Connecting micro and macro political stories

bp bildarchiv preussischer
k kulturbesitz

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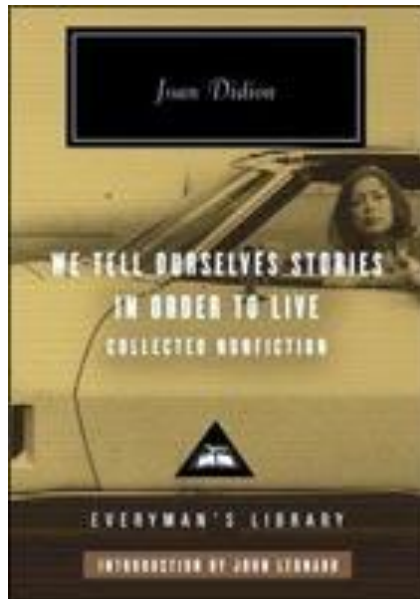
What are political narratives?

- the stories individuals tell about their lives within the context of political change, even though those stories may not necessarily be overtly about politics; these stories often reveal how individuals position themselves within the communities that they live, to whom or what they see themselves as belonging to/alienated from; how they construct notions of power and the processes by which such power is negotiated; and
- the broader umbrella of national stories, within which individuals position themselves
- Macro and micro narratives; narratives always exist in relation to culture and context; counter-narratives

What can political narratives do?

- Strategic use of narratives, eg. narration as a means for moving from traumatic past into a future:

By individuals



Joan Didion (2006)
We tell our stories in order to live

By states



Mandela presenting the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission



We pray that all those people who have been injured in either body or spirit may receive healing through the work of this commission... We are charged to unearth the truth about our dark past. To lay the ghosts of that past, so that they will not return to haunt us and that we will hereby contribute to the healing of a traumatized and wounded people.

(Desmond Tutu, at first victim healing of TRC)



*Lord Nelson's column,
Trafalgar Square, London*

- Bridging gap between self and others – communication/bonding

“Storytelling is the bridge by which we transform that which is private and individual into that which is public. Ultimately, it is one of the key components of social life”

-Hannah Arendt

- Creating/recreating histories in light of desired future
- National identities: this is who we are

Relationship between political narratives and social change?

- Social change narratives as one particular kind of political narrative
- Articulating experience of marginalisation into a public narrative form can contribute to building of a group consciousness; recognition of self in stories of others; 'I am not alone'
- Narration and agency
 - “Narratives are capable of extending the symbolic space which a culture unfolds at a certain point in history”
(Brockmeier 2005)



Political Narratives and Time



- Narratives as linking the life story together- ‘the storied and storying self’
- Interweaving life story into larger movement of history – “Keep your eyes open to individuality and to the modes of epochal change” C.Wright Mills

The fall of the Berlin Wall, November 9, 1989



Were all East Germans celebrating?

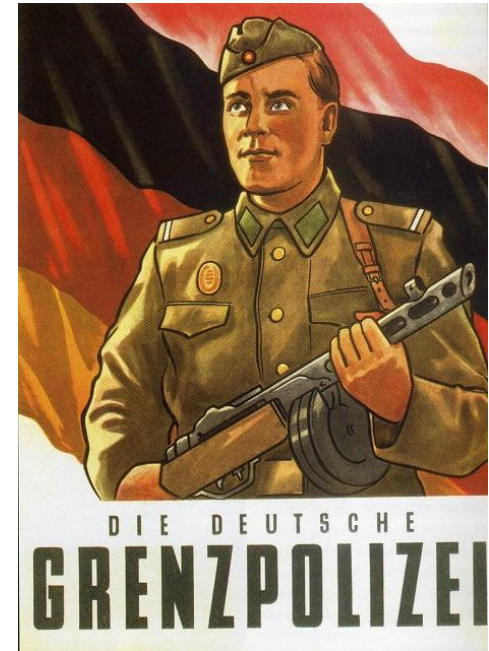


*The Trabant,
Symbol of East Germany*

On the way home [at about 10:30 pm] I noticed many people all running into the same direction... they were all running to the end of the world... the street was full of cars and one could hardly walk at all... I then walked with the stream and got to the border crossing, Bornholmerstrasse... which was the first crossing to be opened. Two hundred meters from here.



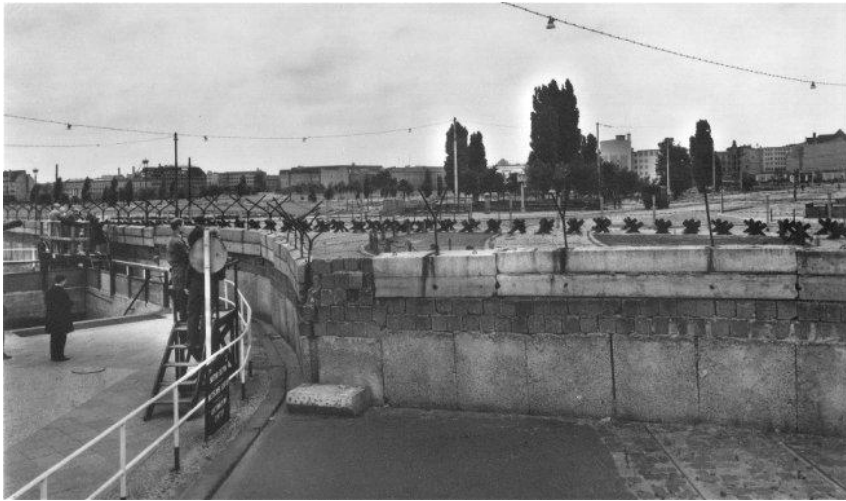
Bornholmerstrasse November 9 1989



It was so crammed full with people you couldn't move. And everybody was pushing through the crossing. The policemen were just standing around, they didn't know what to do and were completely puzzled. I asked a few people... what was happening. Of course, I know, I could see, but I didn't actually, I didn't understand.



And I stood there for about a half hour in this crowd and then went home and switched the television on. Then I watched everything on television, transmissions from everywhere, Kundamm and all other border crossings. And I could see that people were coming over, that is as seen from the west.



Berlin Wall at Potsdamer Platz, August 1962

.... I was totally paralysed...
all this continued for the
next few days and it took
me a whole week before I
went across, Potsdamerstr.
It is difficult to describe...
this was such a very
elementary transformation
of one's existence, of ... the
whole world in a way...



November 10, 1989

I' ll try to explain. I have lived.. I have been in Berlin since '73 and I have always lived two hundred meters from the wall. And this wall, to me, has become a symbol of captivity in every respect, also in a metaphoric, symbolic sense. And this is what I have been ramming my head against for the last twenty years. And I had, as a way of survival, I had resolved to ignore this wall as far as I could... And I tried to do the same throughout the week, when the wall had gone. I did not only try to suppress the fact that the wall had been there previously, but I also tried to suppress the fact that it had gone. And it didn' t work.



When I went across the wall for the first time, I did so at Potsdamer Platz, where there hadn't been a crossing, they had only torn a hole, simply torn a hole into the wall, yes. And that's where I wanted to go through, precisely there. I walked through like a sleepwalker. I could not conceive of the idea up to the moment when I was through, that that was possible. Well, and then I stood for a very long time over at the other side in no-man's land, and could not move forward or backwards. And then I cried, I was totally overwhelmed.

Political narratives: Methodological and Strategic Questions

- *Who* is telling? Who is not?
- *Why* are they telling this particular story? What is the function of the narrative for the speaker? For the listener? Who is the intended audience?
- *What* are they telling? What is left unsaid?
- *Where* is the story located in relation to where it is recounted? What kind of cultural translation is necessary, and how is this accomplished?
- *When* does the story begin? End? How does this influence what story can be told? When did the story occur in relation to when it is being recounted?
- *How* do the mechanisms which are used for data gathering enhance/limit what can be said (e.g. Tape recorder? Video machine? Art supplies?)

Who is telling? Who is not?:

- Reinhard Weisshuhn: Member of Initiative for Peace and Human Rights. Long-standing reputation as leading opposition figure.
- Who he is not: most East Germans, who either implicitly went along with the oppressive regime or actively colluded with it. Neither is he someone who euphorically embraces the opening of the wall.
- Other 'who's in this story: the police; everybody who was pushing through the crossing

Why this particular story?

- The power of the story of ‘the fall of the wall’ .
- A ‘counter-narrative’ of reactions to the fall of the Berlin Wall.



What are they telling?

What is left unsaid?

- Series of responses to the opening of the Berlin Wall. Identity narrative, revealing the complexity of his emotional response to the events as they unfolded.
- Left unsaid: critical moment both in terms of his own biography and in terms of historical change

Where is the story located in relation to where it is recounted?



Importance of place in this narrative; Bornholmerstr. Versus Potsdammer Platz; the symbolic importance of finding one's own way through the opening of the wall; a 'torn hole'

When: questions of time



- time in the narrative (from 10:30 pm Nov 9, 1989 till one week after opening of wall);
- time of recounting (two years later);
- present time – 20th anniversary of fall of wall, Potsdammer Platz

How do the mechanisms which are used for data gathering enhance/limit potential findings?



- Why interviews?
- Use of tape recorder; strengths – unobtrusive, economic, convenient
- Weakness: no visual input, emphasis on what is said (i.e. audible) and sayable



20 years on

Molly: On November the 9th, 2009, did you have any feelings at that point, did you do anything to mark that day?

Reinhard: Well every day on my way to work, I pass the border twice; I pass to the west, and I pass back to the east, there at Bolholmerstrasse. That means thousands of times I pass back and forth, in my every day life. That means I don't think of it every day. But from time to time. And of course in other situations. And still today I can break into tears when I hear this story and see these pictures. It is absolutely elemental, then and still now.





Molly: Did you feel distant or connected to all of the public acknowledgement, of this 20th anniversary?

Reinhard: Two years ago when the 20th anniversary of the fall of the wall was celebrated, there was a huge event organised by the State, at the Brandenburg Gate, to which I was invited. It was really embarrassing, a big event, with thousands and thousands of people, and a show. But it doesn't, um... I didn't like it because it was too much show, superficial. It doesn't move me.

M: But it doesn't break you either?

R: No, it doesn't touch me.



Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead to an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling.

Hannah Arendt
The Human Condition