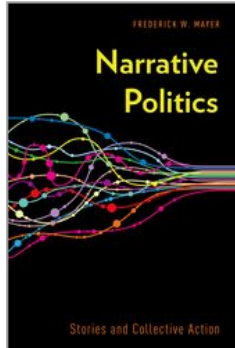


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## Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action

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## Constructing the Collective Good

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### Abstract and Keywords

Usually, theories of collective action assume the existence of a collective good, but before a community can act collectively, its members must share a common interest in some end. Often, the task is to construct the collective good. Shared stories have such power: if stories can construct individual interests, commonly held stories can create common interests. The question is what determines when a single story will capture the minds of the community. That depends on several factors, among them alignment with self-interest, trust in the storyteller, and frequency of the telling, but also resonance with those widely held narratives a community already holds in mind, the narratives of culture.

*Keywords:* culture, collective action, community, interests, collective good

# Constructing the Collective Good

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*There is no way to give us an understanding of any society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources.*

Alisdair MacIntyre (1981, 216)

*Every people gets the politics it imagines*

Clifford Geertz (1973, 313)

Before a community can engage in collective action, its members must share an interest in some end: protecting civil rights, ending abortion, preventing climate change, combatting terrorism, banning landmines, resisting globalization, promoting democracy, or some other common concern. That an individual would have such interests is far from inevitable; that a group share them is even more problematic. Interests of these kinds do not inevitably arise out of circumstance and primal concerns for security, power or wealth. Rather, they must be constructed through some mechanism. Indeed, they must be *commonly* constructed, so that individual interests align to form a shared interest in a collective good.

In the last chapter, we saw how narratives can alter individual beliefs and construct interests. But narratives are not only transporting, they are also *transportable*. We *share* stories. Because narratives can be held simultaneously in many minds, they make it possible for individuals to “transcend their different private worlds” (Ragnar Rommetviet, quoted in Wertsch 1998, 112) and “appropriate to assign to groups as well as to individuals terms such as ‘think,’ ‘attend’ and ‘remember’” (Wertsch 1998, 111). And just as narratives in mind can construct interests, shared narratives held in many minds can create common interests.

**(p.102)** In this chapter I explore how and under what circumstances narratives have this power. I argue that several factors contribute to the efficacy of narratives, among them alignment with material self-interest and frequency of exposure. I stress, however, that the power of particular narratives also depends on their resonance with the stories a community already holds in mind, particularly with the public

narratives—religious, historical, ideological and popular—that are at the core of a community’s culture.

I begin, therefore, with a description of the landscape of public narratives and their role in creating a community’s identity, worldview, and ethos. The canon of a community’s public narratives can also be thought of as constituting a core element of its *collective memory*. The literature on collective memory derives from the work of the French scholar Maurice Halbwachs on the social basis of memory. For Halbwachs, “it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (Halbwachs and Coser 1992, 38). Although collective memory is held in the minds of individuals, those memories are established and reinforced through the shared rituals of society. Just as individual memory is central to individual cognition, affect, and identity, collective memory plays an important role in aligning individual minds into common consciousness, shared passion, and collective identity.

In foregrounding the narrative dimensions of collective memory and their functions, I am not arguing for cultural determinism any more than I am arguing for material determinism. Rather, I am taking a middle position with respect to the relative importance of cultural factors and material interests, with respect to the balance between socialization and individual agency, and with respect to whether collective memory is relatively stable over time or is constantly recreated to suit the needs of the present. My orientation draws particularly on the work of the Russian scholars Lev Vygotsky and Mikhail Bahktin, especially as interpreted in the work of American anthropologist James Wertsch, whose concept of “mediated action” provides a way of thinking of cultural texts as tools that enable but do not determine thought and action, and who conceives of collective memory as similarly mediated by the text of culture. My argument is that public narratives at once establish a community’s basic orientations—its worldview and its ethos—and serve as what MacIntyre (1997) has called an “initial cultural stock” from which new stories may draw, either by directly referencing them or by appealing to the basic

understandings of who *we* are, what *we* believe, and what *we* value that they construct.

I then turn to a discussion of how political actors use narrative to construct shared interests in collective goods. As I discussed in chapter 2, complex interests involve two elements: an underlying core interest in some (p.103) outcome and a belief about the implications of some action for that outcome. For shared egoistic interests, in security for example, narrative may only be needed to construct beliefs about what course of action serves that fundamental interest. But for non-egoistic interests, in reducing current carbon emissions to benefit future generations, for example, narrative may also be crucial for constructing the core interest itself, in this case environmental protection. To assert that narrative *can* construct such interests, however, does not predict when it will. For that reason I explore the question of what factors affect when a story will be taken up by a community, acknowledging that the efficacy of a story depends in part on alignment with material interests and in part on who has access to the megaphone, but also arguing that the power of the story depends on the skill of the storyteller in telling a story that resonates with the stories a community already has in mind, with the narratives of culture.

## The Narrative Landscape of Culture

To be in a culture is to share a canon of public narratives—religious, historical, ideological, and popular—that together constitute a society’s mythology, in the sense that myths are “the stories that tell a society what is important for it to know, whether about its gods, its history, its laws, or its class structure” (Frye 1982, 33).<sup>1</sup> The canon of available public narratives is a central element of a community’s collective memory. As such, it helps define common identity, determining who “we” are (and who is “other”) and what kind of people we are, and helps establish common beliefs about how the world works and what a community views as proper, just, and moral.

Religion has historically been a core element of culture in most societies. And at the heart of every religion are

narratives: creation myths, stories of gods and humans, stories that deal with the vagaries of fate and the possibilities for agency, stories that define what is right and what is wrong. As Hauerwas has said, “There is no more fundamental way to talk of God than in a story” (Hauerwas 1983, quoted in Jackson 1995, 9). Judeo-Christian narratives have long been a central element of Western culture, and, therefore, particularly important elements of the American cultural landscape. Exodus—the escape from slavery in the symbolic hell of Egypt and the long journey to the Promised Land—and the Christ story—the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus—are clearly the most important. Many other Biblical stories are also deeply ingrained: Adam and Eve, Noah and the Ark, David and Goliath, and the Good Samaritan, to name just a few.

(p.104) A community typically also has a set of widely shared historical narratives, including accounts of how it began, how it arrived where it is today, and where it might be going. This might be called its *folk history*, the story a community tells itself about its past.<sup>2</sup> The predominant folk history of the United States illustrates the point. Wertsch reports on experiments in which high school students asked to produce accounts of American history converge around a “quest-for-freedom narrative” (Wertsch 1998, 88). As with autobiographical memory, the salient incidents are those that figure most prominently in the larger narrative sweep: the colonization by Europeans seeking religious freedom, the Revolutionary War cast as a war for the colonies’ freedom, the Civil War as the great test of freedom, the World Wars in which the United States saves the world from tyranny, the civil rights movement as making good on the promise of freedom for all Americans, and the Cold War as a triumph of American economic and political freedom over communism.<sup>3</sup> Events that do not fit the larger narrative are either reframed as bumps in the road or simply left out altogether. The fate of Native Americans and the failure of the Vietnam War, for example, have relatively low salience. A strong element of “American exceptionalism” also permeates America’s folk history, a theme that nests the historical within the religious. In this telling, not only is America the great champion of freedom, but also Americans are the chosen people, called to be, as John

Winthrop put it at the beginning, a “city upon a hill.” (Winthrop 1994).

Ideological communities share ideological narratives—stories about politics, society and public policy. These narratives convey basic orientations towards such matters as the proper roles for governments and markets, the balance between individual freedom and social obligation, or particular stances on such issues as abortion, gun ownership, and environmental protection. Contemporary American conservatives, for example, share a political ideology in which the meta-narrative is essentially a “fall” story. In the beginning, set in some vaguely located golden past, America was strong, its people self-reliant, its government limited, its markets strong and productive, and its families intact and moral. Liberals (the villains) brought America down by erecting a welfare state (“big government”), which spawned dependency, created a permissive environment in which crime and deviancy flourished, overtaxed and over-regulated the market, and weakened the military and law enforcement.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, at the heart of American liberalism is a progress narrative. From the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of slavery, to the suffragettes and women’s right to vote, to the civil rights movement and its triumph over Jim Crow, to the effort to extend equal rights to gay Americans, the story is a journey towards freedom and equality.

(p.105) Communities also share popular myths. At different points in American history, certain tales have been particularly prominent. One genre has concerned our relationship to nature. In colonial America, captivity narratives enjoyed enormous popularity. In these tales, in which typically a European was captured by the “savage” Native Americans and then rescued, nature (and the native people who exemplified it) were depicted as forces to be feared, controlled, and subdued. Later, the Daniel Boone legend offered an alternative vision of nature. The Boone stories involve a series of immersions into the wilderness, which is no longer a symbolic hell but a reflection of the divine order (Slotkin 1973). Civilization and its corruptions became the villains; nature the victim. Boone served as an archetype for many American fictional heroes that followed, from Cooper’s

Natty Bumpo to the typical hero of the American Western: a solitary, tough, and incorruptible figure. For Robert Jewett and John Lawrence, this is the American “monomyth”:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity.

(Jewett and Lawrence 2002, 6)

By all-too-briefly surveying the landscape of American public narratives, my point is not to provide anything approaching a comprehensive picture. Rather, it is to demonstrate the range of shared narratives that members of a community will hold in mind. Too be clear, too, I am not arguing that every member of a community will subscribe to every narrative. Even within communities, there may be contests among competing narratives. And in the contemporary world, we are all members of many communities, religious, political, ideological, and other. Nonetheless, within each of these communities there are shared cultural spaces defined in part by these kinds of public narratives.

## Collective Identity, Shared Worldview, and Common Ethos

What work, then, are these public narratives doing? In part, they serve for communities many of the same functions that private narratives serve for individuals. They help to define who we are, what we believe, and what we value. As Malinowski (1926) said about myth, public (p.106) narrative “expresses, enhances and codifies belief; it vouches for the efficacy of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is then a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale but a hard-worked active force” (quoted in Miller 1994, 158). So, too, is myth in contemporary society, although it is always harder to recognize one’s own myths as such.

### Collective Identity

Shared narratives are not just a consequence of being in community, they also help to constitute the community in the

first instance. As individual identity is constituted by autobiographical narrative, so is community identity by its autobiography, by its history. As Carr puts it, “[a] community...exists by virtue of a story which is articulated and accepted, which typically concerns the group’s origins and its destiny, and which interprets what is happening now in the light of these two temporal poles” (Carr 1997, 20). By sharing a story about “us, ” a people comes to see itself as a whole, comes to see the community as an actor in a history.<sup>5</sup>

The way in which narrative can delimit who is included in the “we” (and who is not) is nicely illustrated by Wills’ (1992) exploration of Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. After the carnage at Gettysburg and the pivotal Union victory over Robert E. Lee’s Army of the Confederacy, nothing would have been more natural than to honor the dead Union soldiers as heroes in a battle between the “us” of the North and the “them” of the South. Yet Lincoln’s genius was that he rejected such a formulation in favor of a story in which the central character was the nation as a whole, and the villain was the war itself. His short speech told the nation’s story. “Fourscore and seven years ago” he began, “our forefathers brought forth...a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” The war was the pivotal moment in the national story, “testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.” Thus framed, tragedy would be to fail the test, triumph “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” Whatever its impact in the moment, the Gettysburg Address has become a nearly sacred document in America’s historical imagination, and part of the historical canon to which contemporary leaders commonly refer when they seek to remind Americans of their common identity (Wills 1992).<sup>6</sup>

Beyond defining “we, ” a community’s narratives also establish what kind of character “we” are. In America’s self-story, for example, the United States (p.107) is cast as the chosen nation, the freest, most democratic, most vigorous and virtuous on earth. From John Winthrop’s description of America as a “City on a Hill, ” America has seen itself as



exceptional, a beacon of hope to the world, the champion of liberty, the land of opportunity, in which those who work hard and live virtuously can share in the “American Dream.” American exceptionalism echoes Biblical notions of the chosen people, in which God is seen playing a hand in America’s expansion and rise to power, as in narratives of America’s “manifest destiny.”

Myths that establish core national identities are certainly not unique to the American experience. The Masada myth is central to the identity of contemporary Israelis, for example (Ben-Yehuda 1995). The story is of heroic resistance by a “small group of Jewish warriors [who] fought to the bitter end against overwhelming odds and a *much* larger Roman army” (Ben-Yehuda 1995, 10). In the words of Moshe Dayan, the Masada myth says that Israelis are the people who “fight to the death rather than surrender; prefer death to bondage and loss of freedom” (quoted in Ben-Yehuda 1995, 14). Similarly, in contemporary France, the story of the Nazi atrocities in the village of Oradour has become a central part of the French national memory of World War II. In June 1944, Nazi soldiers entered the village, sealed the town entrances, separated the men from women and children, and systematically massacred the entire population. As Sarah Farmer (1999) has documented, the story as remembered is one in which all resisted and none collaborated. Farmer argues that the story serves to help the French see themselves as resisters and victims of the Nazis, and not as passive and complicit.

Events that conflict with a community’s identity tend not to be included in its historical narrative. For example, the dominant historical narrative of white Atlanta managed to completely suppress its memory of the Atlanta Race Riot of 1906, in which a startling fraction of adult white males went on a two-day rampage against Atlanta’s black neighborhoods and business district, and in which perhaps as many as 100 African Americans died (Dittmer 1977). Yet within a couple days after the uprising, no further mention of the riots found their way into the white newspapers, and there was, until the 1970s, no mention in the official histories of Atlanta. How could an event of such magnitude, arguably the most important between

Sherman's burning of Atlanta and the Olympic games of 1996, be "forgotten"? The answer is that the story did not fit with its identity as the progressive city of the "New South" after the Civil War, whose mayor declared it a "city too busy to hate" during the turmoil of the civil rights movement. Of course, memories of the riot lived on in the African American community, which saw Atlanta in a very different light.

**(p.108) Worldviews and Ethos**

Public narratives also help to establish a community's basic beliefs and values, its *worldview* and its *ethos*. A worldview can be thought of as the shared cognitive schemata of society: general institutionalized knowledge that establishes categories and causal patterns. An ethos can be thought of as the shared normative schemata of society: general orientations and values that describe the proper order of things and that define the rules and obligations of moral behavior.<sup>7</sup> Both are shaped by shared religious, historical, ideological, and popular narratives.

Religious narratives obviously convey moral messages. But in addition to their normative content, they also carry with them beliefs about the way the world works and why things are as they are. In Clifford Geertz's words, religion allows for "the formulation, by means of symbols, of an image of such a genuine order of the world which will account for, and even celebrate, the perceived ambiguities, puzzles, and paradoxes in human experience" (Geertz 1973, 108). For example, as Michael Walzer (1985) has explored, Exodus provides a perspective about the role of divinely inspired leadership in human affairs, about the meaning of hardships in life, and about the prospects for ultimate rewards. The Exodus narrative has been particularly important in shaping the worldview of the African American community, as the historian Taylor Branch (1989) has powerfully documented. It has provided a way of making sense of the tribulations of slavery and Jim Crow, and of seeing the civil rights movement as a journey out of Egypt. King's acute awareness of that narrative tradition and his skill as a preacher in drawing upon it were the source of his extraordinary rhetorical power, as Richard Lischer (1995) has shown.

# Constructing the Collective Good

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Historical narratives establish a community's worldview and ethos. For example, in the American story, America's emergence in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century as the pre-eminent global power is framed not as an accident of geography and history (the beneficiary of the devastation of other powers by World War II), but rather as the consequence of our virtue. Similarly, in an earlier era, America's westward expansion was viewed as a matter of "manifest destiny, " (Merk and Merk, 27) a term coined in 1845 that summarized a narrative in which, in Andrew Jackson's words, annexation was about "extending the area of freedom, " (Correspondence of Andrew Jackson, ed. John Spencer Bassett, quoted in Wilson 1967, 623).

Historical tales also teach particular "lessons of history" and serve as touchstones for those who use narrative to construct the meaning of contemporary events. The story of Chamberlain's 1938 capitulation in Munich to Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland, often invoked in US politics, is (p.109) a parable about the dangers of appeasement, an available trope for making sense of subsequent events. As Yuen Foong Khong (1992) has documented, the Munich fable was very much in the minds of Lyndon Johnson and his circle of advisors as they made the fateful decisions in 1965 that committed the United States to deep engagement in Vietnam. In Johnson's words,

a great many people started by compromising and trying to mediate the situation. And Chamberlin [sic] came back and he thought he had obtained peace in our time, but it remained for Churchill—who had warned all these years of the dangers...to rise to the occasion....

I frequently referred to the fact that Churchill standing alone, after the Battle of Britain and after France had fallen, and after it looked like fascism was in the ascendancy—that Churchill almost by himself had provided the courage and the resistance that stopped Hitler.

(Khong 1992, 176)

Johnson desperately sought to avoid being Chamberlain, and sought, in vain, for a Vietnamese Churchill, who would stop the

dominos from falling as they had in Europe after Munich. Of course, academic historians have a much more nuanced view of Chamberlain and his role that is certainly nothing like the caricature of the popular historical narrative (McDonough 2002). Similarly, after the Vietnam War, the story of “Vietnam” became a countervailing parable (although somewhat more contested than that of “Munich”), a cautionary tale about the potential “quagmire” of foreign intervention.<sup>8</sup> Marvin Kalb and Deborah Kalb (2011) document how the specter of Vietnam, a story in which a well-meaning America finds itself trapped in an endless war with no prospect of clear victory, shaped the views of foreign policy makers in the years after the war. When Yugoslavia came apart at the end of George H. W. Bush’s administration, for example, and evidence of Serbian atrocities against Bosnian Muslims mounted, the legacy of Vietnam weighed heavily on Bush and his advisors. As Hal Brands notes, “[b]y late 1992, the lessons of Vietnam had become omnipresent in Bush’s statements on Bosnia and other areas rife with ethnic strife” (Brands 2008, 91). The same framing limited President Clinton’s initial response in Bosnia, as it would also shape his decision to withdraw from Somalia and his hesitancy to commit any ground forces in Kosovo in 1999. Not surprisingly, Bush and Clinton’s caution evoked the appeasement narrative from those favoring intervention, with Serbian behavior characterized as “genocide.” The editors of *The New Republic* published a book titled *The Black Book of Bosnia: The Consequences of Appeasement*, the reference being to the “Black Book” of Jewish names kept by the Nazis (Mousavizadeh 1996). The (p.110) discourse over what to do in Bosnia became essentially a contest of two competing narratives, one in which Bosnia was another Vietnam, the other in which inaction was another Munich (Hansen 2006).<sup>9</sup>

It is useful to note that the familiarity of the Munich and Vietnam parables is such that each can be invoked without actually retelling the story. It might seem, therefore, that both might be better classified as symbols or metaphors than as narratives. Yet, because we know the moral of the story, the *fabula*, we don’t need to actually tell a tale with beginning, middle, and end in order to invoke it. If pushed to explain our

meaning, we know the narrative that produced the moral and can reconstruct the story that “must have been.”

Ideological narratives convey the beliefs and attitudes of political communities. Individuals generally are poorly informed about policy and politics, as Downs’ (1957) theory of “rational ignorance” would predict. Nevertheless, political communities tend to have reasonably coherent beliefs and values that are “among several correlated dimensions of a master concept, ideology” (Zaller 1992, 26). The puzzle is how communities reach such coherence. A clue is to recognize that ideology is at its heart a form of political mythology, a collection of narratives that together establish shared positive and normative schema about such matters as the proper role of government, the virtues (or evils) of free markets, and the use of force in international affairs (Flood 1996; Bottici 2007). Classic Marxism, to take a clear case, involves an epic contest between capital and labor, a tragic tale of exploitation that can only be redeemed through revolution.

Some ideological narratives may be shared by an entire national community. In the United States, many of our stories convey suspicion of government and politicians (the original Boston Tea Party, for example), while others transmit our belief in the American Dream of rising from poverty to wealth through personal virtue. Other ideological narratives are shared within narrower political communities of like-minded citizens—Republicans and Democrats, for example—or even more narrowly, contemporary Tea Party members and environmental activists. These communities will tell different stories, and differ, therefore, in their perspective on such matters as the roles of governments and markets, and the international order and America’s place in it; their beliefs about such policy questions as the causes of poverty (circumstance or volition), climate change (man or nature), and the AIDS pandemic (disease or behavior); and their value judgments about such issues as abortion, civil liberties, and affirmative action. The division here between historical and ideological narratives is somewhat artificial, of course. Historical narratives are almost inevitably ideological, and ideological narratives are often framed as history.

## (p.111) Socialization, Agency, and the Politics of Public Narrative

The discussion of the relationship of cultural texts to community identity, worldviews, and ethos has so far elided two issues. The first concerns the mechanism through which those texts are transmitted from society to the individual, with its implications for the relative importance of socialization on the one hand and the possibility of individual agency on the other. The second concerns the stability of public narratives, particular the extent to which they are either relatively timeless and stable or largely reinvented to reflect present circumstances, a debate central to the literature on collective memory. I will take a middle position on both issues: we are neither fully culturally determined nor fully autonomous, and the texts of our culture are neither static inheritances nor completely malleable.

Humans are social animals, made whole through the acquisition of social knowledge, beginning with language itself, and including more complex symbolic structures such as narrative. We are *socialized*. As Mead put it about the human being, "The very speech he uses, the very mechanics of thought which is given, are social products. His own self is attained only through his taking on the attitudes of the social group to which he belongs. He must be socialized to become himself" (Mead 1934, 18).

Not surprisingly, sociologists and cultural anthropologists have tended to emphasize the role of social processes and structures in shaping individual cognition, even when they disagree sharply on the genesis and nature of those structures. For Durkheim and other functionalists, the purpose of culture was to maintain the institutions of society, enable the resolution of conflict, and socialize individual behavior in ways that serve society. Marx shared this functionalist view of culture, arguing that "[i]t is not the consciousness of men which determines their existence, but on the contrary it is their social existence which determines their consciousness, " but saw its purpose, the exploitation of the working class, as less benign (quoted in Burke and Gusfield 1989, 4). A stress on culture as reflection of power has also been at the core of

critical studies, which seeks to “deconstruct” the rhetoric that masks the underlying power realities that disadvantage the poor, women, and minorities. As Michel Foucault put it, his project “has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (Foucault 1982, 777). For Edward Said, “ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configuration of power, also being understood” (Said 1979, 5).

(p.112) In contrast to both the functionalists and critical theorists, symbolic interactionists have had a view of culture as more autonomous and have been more focused on the role of culture in enabling human meaning making. For Geertz, for example, culture is an “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols” (Geertz 1973, 89). Going back to Mead, Geertz and others have stressed the impact of socially constructed symbolic systems not only on what we think but also on how we think. For Mead, the “mind develops and has being only in and by virtue of the social process and activity, which it hence presupposes, and that in no other way can it develop and have its being” (Mead 1934, 243).

The process through which culture is transmitted from society to individual is often left unspecified by those who see culture as determinative; cultural beliefs and norms are said to be “transmitted, ” “absorbed, ” and “learned” without much regard to the mechanisms through which this happens. Vygotsky’s work is an important exception, however. On the one hand, Vygotsky argued that mental functioning represented an internalization of social interaction: “[I] n their own private sphere, human beings retain the function of social interaction” (quoted in Wertsch 1991, 27). In his studies of childhood development, he explored how children, working with an adult, learn by doing, at first interacting by speaking, for example, and then internalizing speech as a way of thinking. In this way culture enters the mind, including, importantly narrative. On the other hand, Vygotsky insisted that the internalization of culture did not preclude agency. Indeed, it provided the tools for agency, for creative thought and action.

Building on Vygotsky, Wertsch argues that we “live in the middle, ” between cultural forces and individual agency (Wertsch 1998, 141). Wertsch stresses the role of narrative in mediating between society and mind. Storytelling is essential for transmitting culture to the young, for socialization. But the same narrative capacity that allows for the transmission of culture to mind provides the tools for agency and resistance. We are not simply listeners; we are all storytellers, all authors. Our narrativity enables us not only to see how things are, but also, and importantly, to imagine other circumstances. If a human is, as Geertz has said, a creature “suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun” (1973, 5), we are still vigorously spinning.

There remains the issue of the status of the cultural texts themselves, how they are generated, whether they are static or dynamic, and, if dynamic, what determines their content. Here the debate in the collective memory literature is helpful. Most of the literature has a “presentist” orientation, arguing that our collective memory, including both the selection and interpretation of texts, is highly malleable and largely reflects present (p.113) concerns. Certainly Halbwachs leaned in this direction. As Lewis Coser puts it, “For Halbwachs, the past is a social construction mainly, if not wholly, shaped by the concerns of the present” (Coser 1992, 25). Although they differ in others ways, functionalists in the tradition of Halbwachs, as well as neo-Marxists, are in the first camp, arguing that history is constantly reinvented to serve the interests of society or of the powerful within it. In the other camp, some in cultural studies tend to treat culture as a timeless and independent institution. In some of his writings, Geertz, for example, seems to come close to this position.

As Barry Schwartz has argued, neither extreme stance is satisfactory for understanding collective memory, or what I am calling *folk history*. In two studies, one on the treatment of George Washington and the other of Abraham Lincoln, Schwartz demonstrates that while each figure’s story was told differently at different moments in American history—in accounts that clearly reflected the exigencies of the present—there were also elements of continuity in the characterization of both figures and of their meaning (Schwartz 1991; Schwartz



2000). He argues for a middle position. “In most cases, as in the contemplation of Washington, we find the past to be neither totally precarious nor immutable, but a stable image upon which new elements are intermittently superimposed. The past, then, is a familiar rather than a foreign country; its people different, but not strangers to the present” (Schwartz 2000, 303). Consistent with Schwartz, Wertsch treats collective memory as a form of mediated action. On the one hand, the shared texts of culture, what I have called *public narratives*, have a certain stability that arises from the repeated rehearsals they enjoy as part of social life, but on the other, they are sufficiently open-ended as to allow for new interpretations and new uses (Wertsch 2002).

Wertsch’s middle stance avoids the danger that by focusing on the role of culture we squeeze out the possibility of agency. As Ortner notes about cultural studies, “the theoretical position generally taken as the more radical is that which excludes an interest in the ‘meanings’—the desires and intentions, the beliefs and values—of the very subjects on whose behalf the workings of power are exposed” (Ortner 1999a, 158). And once we accept both the power of narrative and the possibility of agency, we open a space for a politics of narrative. If narrative is as much a tool as it is a text, a tool available to those who would persuade a community of its interests, it matters what stories are told. Stories are always told by someone to someone for some purpose. Although the narratives of culture may provide an initial cultural stock, storytellers have wide latitude both in selecting which to reference and in interpreting them, and therefore in constructing new stories with new meanings. And their audiences retain a measure (p.114) of autonomy in how they respond to stories, including the ability to resist their messages. Jill Lepore, writing about the uses of the history of the American Revolution by contemporary Tea Partiers, puts the point nicely: “The Revolution was a beginning. The battle over its meaning can have no ending” (Lepore, 165).

Lincoln, King, and the other leaders I have been citing were not merely transmitters of culture; they were also agents whose power lay in forging new narratives from cultural ingots. In his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln told a story of the

Civil War that not only drew on and resonated with historical and religious narratives, but also provided a new interpretation of the war, one that created possibilities for reconciliation (Wills 1992). It is not hard to imagine another president telling a completely different narrative, indeed stories that demonized the Rebels and demanded retribution were commonplace at the time. Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr.'s brilliant location of the story of the civil rights movement in the great Biblical and historical narratives of American culture was not inevitable. Other stories—black separatist accounts such as Malcolm X's, for example, or for that matter segregationist fantasies such as George Wallace's—could also be told. All of these figures drew on the narratives of their culture, but their interpretation was not wholly determined by it.

Once we allow for narrative agency in the telling, though, the question becomes: What stories work? What determines when a story will be taken up by a community, when it will shape common beliefs and attitudes, and when it will construct common interests?

First, clearly, material self-interest matters. The wealthy are more likely to accept stories in which the rich earn their money and the poor are lazy, and to resist those in which the rich are merely lucky while the poor are oppressed. Oil company executives are more likely to accept the story that climate change is a hoax and to reject stories about impending environmental disaster. Such alignment can be seen as a way to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957): we act on our interests and then tell stories to justify our behavior. But even in these cases, it is interesting to note the need to justify. One never simply hears: "We are the dominant class, and we will exploit you because we can." At minimum, it seems, a story may be necessary to legitimize self-interest. But it cannot be only material self-interest that determines whether a story will capture the minds of a community, since many of our most strongly held interests are non-material and non-egoistic, as we explored in the last chapter. And even our material self-interest may not be obvious.

What else matters? Certainly, institutions that determine who gets to speak and who gets to be heard are important. The more we hear a story, (p.115) the more likely it is that it will get in our heads (Cialdini 1993). Those in positions of power, therefore, have a considerable advantage. In the United States, notably, presidents are privileged in their access to the news media, and hence in their ability to tell the story (Entman 2004). And exposure to narrative depends on the community one belongs to. As has been well documented, the market for news has become ideologically segmented (Hamilton 2003). Viewers of *Fox News* get a very different mix of stories than readers of *The New York Times*.

Receptivity to narrative also depends on prior attitudes towards the storyteller. If we expect to hear music to our ears, we are more likely to tune in. Conversely, if we distrust the storyteller, we (metaphorically speaking) know how to put our fingers in our ears. As Samuel Popkin (1991) has argued, reliance on trusted experts is among the information shortcuts citizens use to interpret political events. Popkin analogizes this to firefighters relying on fire alarms rather than constantly looking out for fires: If there is something I need to pay attention to, the commentators I trust will alert me to the danger. Similarly, we know how to tune out those wolf-crying voices we have learned to distrust.

The persuasive power of a story also depends on the telling. Good stories are seductive, particularly if we don't know quite where the story is taking us. Sonya Cin, Mark Zanna and Geoffrey Fong suggest that narratives are less susceptible to being filtered when the point of the story is not immediately clear: "The counter-attitudinal message in a narrative may unfold so slowly, be so unexpected, be so subtle, that the reader fails to realize that the message falls within his or her latitude of rejection" (Cin, Zanna, and Fong 2008, 179). And once transported, it's too late to resist.

In large part, though, receptivity to narrative depends on the extent to which stories resonate with the stories we already have in mind, with the narratives of culture. Those who would use narrative to persuade tell tales that invoke and align with historical, religious, and ideological narratives. They ring true

because they follow expected plot patterns, feature conventional characters, and repeat familiar meanings. The predilection for stories that fit existing cultural narratives can be so powerful that they all but construct themselves, which explains why urban legends propagate and persist. In literary terms, urban legends are synecdoches: specific instantiations whose form invokes more general narratives. They are stories that “must be true” because they so perfectly fit the story we expect. More commonly, though, there is some degree of narrative agency. Persuasive storytellers draw on the available cultural stock, but have considerable latitude both in choosing which cultural narratives to invoke and in shaping new narratives from them.

(p.116) Martin Luther King’s “Dream” speech, for example, draws its power from its skillful invocation of the great narratives of American culture, but freshly frames a story of the moment. From its opening echo of the Gettysburg Address to its recitation of the words of the Declaration of Independence, King’s speech drew the audience into the American story, with its familiar march-towards-freedom plot, its conventional casting of America as the beacon of liberty, and its reassuring message of American exceptionalism. And throughout the speech Biblical phases triggered associations with the comforting religious narrative of Exodus, aligning the meaning of the moment with that most meaningful story. Through these references, King wove a new narrative with pitch-perfect harmonic resonance with the old.

## Constructing Collective Goods

As I argued in Chapter 2, the need to construct the collective good is a great deal more common than we generally admit. Even classic public goods based on egoistic interests in security or economic gain usually involve an element of belief about the relationship between some choice and its consequences, and, therefore, require some construction to alert us to our “real” interest. And collective goods based on shared altruistic, ideological, patriotic, or other non-egoistic interests not only involve beliefs, but also, and fundamentally, require construction of those interests themselves. Moreover,

construction must be coordinated so that the group shares a common interest.

## Egoistic Collective Goods

Classic examples of public goods depend on common egoistic interests. We generally assume that people will recognize their personal economic and security interests, and that, therefore, we need not consider how such interests arise or how they come to be shared. Common interests simply arise from common circumstances. But on closer inspection even classic public goods are often at least partially constructed.

In part, the need for construction arises because one's "true" interests are not always obvious. Interests in trade policy, for example, are usually assumed simply to reflect economic circumstance. But the relationship between a free trade agreement and one's job security is not always easy to discern; indeed, economic experts often differ on such matters. To (p.117) understand the linkage requires both knowing what particular provisions (tariff schedules, rules of origin, etc.) pertain to one's particular sector of the economy and, often more difficult, projecting the effects of those provisions. If ever there were a case for remaining rationally ignorant, trade policy would be it. It follows that recognition of one's interests is not automatic and may depend on how the issue is framed (Hiscox 2006).

How, then, do individuals reach judgments about the effects of a trade agreement on their personal circumstances, and thereby recognize their self-interest with respect to supporting or opposing that agreement? As I have argued elsewhere (Mayer 1998), when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was voted on by Congress in 1993, for the vast majority of the public, beliefs about the economic effects of NAFTA, and therefore interests pro or con, depended less on analysis of facts than on the power of narrative frames. Opponents of NAFTA used several narratives to frame beliefs about the agreement. For example, union leaders portrayed NAFTA as a story of corporate greed and government collusion at the expense of workers. As a union worker wrote in the United Auto Workers magazine *Solidarity*,

“I see the destruction of America’s working class.... [I] t is the destruction of the dreams, the expectations of each of us that our children will have a better life.... Those on the top are pushing the ones at the bottom right off the ladder.”

(Mayer, 266)

For workers, this story resonated with a worldview established by a meta-narrative in which corporations, and the politicians beholden to them, were always at war with workers.

Advocates of NAFTA did straightforwardly tout the economic benefits of NAFTA for business, but even within the business community, as lobbyists at the Business Roundtable sought to energize their membership, the pitch was a narrative about the epic battle between free trade and protectionism. Vice President Al Gore used the same frame effectively in a nationally televised debate with Ross Perot, who had made opposition to NAFTA a centerpiece of his third-party campaign for president the year before. Gore surprised Perot with the story of the 1930 Smoot-Hawley “Protection Bill.” Holding up a picture of Smoot and Hawley, Gore said, “They raised tariffs and it was one of the principal causes...of the Great Depression” (Mayer 1998, 313).<sup>10</sup>

Like economic interests, security interests are usually assumed to need no construction, but that is not the case. We cannot always see where the danger lies, let alone know how best to confront it. A narrative may be needed to make security interests apparent, to awaken a community to a real danger over the horizon. Consider, for example, Winston Churchill’s (p.118) efforts to rouse England in the early days of World War II. Surely, one might think, the English needed no help in understanding the dangers posed by Hitler’s Germany, but even after the Nazis invaded France, many in Britain still failed to see the threat. How did Churchill seek to persuade his public? Not alone by facts and logic, but also by dramatizing the situation through narrative. In his first speech to the House of Commons after becoming prime minister in 1940, Churchill gave a short speech calling his people to arms:

[W]e are in the preliminary stage of one of the greatest battles in history.... We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind. We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering. You ask, what is our policy? I will say: It is to wage war, by sea, land and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us; to wage war against a monstrous tyranny, never surpassed in the dark and lamentable catalogue of human crime. That is our policy. You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: victory; victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be; for without victory, there is no survival. Let that be realized; no survival for the British Empire, no survival for all that the British Empire has stood for, no survival for the urge and impulse of the ages, that mankind will move forward towards its goal.

(Churchill 2003, 220)

Although Churchill tells only a small fragment of a story, his audience knew how to fill in the blanks. This is a tale that can only end in tragedy or triumph, defeat or victory, life or death. It is a tale intended to make clear the consequences of apathy, intended to inspire fear and awaken his people to the full implications of Hitler's menace: This is about survival! Clearly, the English people had a security interest in stopping Hitler. But note how Churchill frames the issue not so much about the personal survival of his listeners as about the fate of the British Empire, indeed even of the progress of mankind. To move his people, Churchill invoked the grand historical narrative of his people, a heroic myth of the British Empire as humanity's great civilizing force.

The role of narrative is also clear in George W. Bush's construction of US security interests after 9/11, but here, narrative did more than alert a people to its true interest. Images of the collapse of the World Trade Center Towers and the attack on the Pentagon were terrifyingly clear, but what they meant was not. As Americans struggled to comprehend the meaning of what had just happened, Bush used narrative to persuade the American public of his interpretation of its interests. In a speech to a Joint Session of Congress on September 20, a little more than a week after (p.119) the attacks, President Bush framed the attacks as an "act of war against our country, " unparalleled in American history

“except for one Sunday in 1941.” Bush cast the perpetrators as “the enemies of freedom” akin to the greatest villains in American history. “We have seen their kind before. They are the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions—by abandoning every value except the will to power—they follow in the path of fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism.” And in words that echoed Churchill, he said,

Great harm has been done to us. We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment. Freedom and fear are at war. The advance of human freedom—the great achievement of our time, and the great hope of every time—now depends on us. Our nation—this generation —will lift a dark threat of violence from our people and our future. We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage. We will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail.

(Bush, 2001)

Bush’s aim was to create a shared interest in fighting a “war on terror.” To do that, he invited Americans to imagine their present circumstance through the familiar narratives available to them. The attacks were, symbolically, Pearl Harbor; our enemies, symbolically, Hitler, Stalin, and the litany of historical tyrants with whom America has historically fought. And note that Bush, like Churchill, told a story in which what was at stake was not the personal security of his citizens, but rather the fate of his country and its ideals. The question was whether America would stand once more for freedom against tyranny.

A similar case can be made for the role of narrative in constructing common egoistic interests in many other arenas in which we usually don’t see the need for construction.

Workers share an egoistic interest in higher wages and better working conditions, but it may not be obvious that they have an interest in forming a union. It is no coincidence that union organizing is replete with storytelling. Fishers share an egoistic interest in maximizing their yields, but it might not be obvious that they have a commons problem or an interest in establishing an institution for mutual restraint without some tragic narrative to make their predicament clear. Indeed, it is



highly suggestive that it took a story, the parable of the “Tragedy of the Commons, ” for even academics to see the fundamental nature of the collective action problem involving commons. The role of story is even more important when non-egoistic interests are the basis for collective goods, as I will shortly argue, but before turning to that however, it is worth noting that by using terms of moral significance (p.120) for economic or security matters, storytellers seek to transform egoistic into non-egoistic interests. When America was attacked on 9/11, writes Brands, “This resurgence of evil presented an opportunity for Americans to resume their role as history’s heroes...” thus “depicting the war on terror as not simply a moral imperative but a historical imperative as well” (Brands 2008, 278). For reasons that will become clearer in the next chapter, it seems that even when egoistic security interests are at stake, leaders commonly seek to construct a good based on non-egoistic interests.

## Non-Egoistic Collective Goods

Narrative construction of collective goods is even more important when those goods are based on altruism, ideology, or patriotic interests. In the previous chapter, I argued that when individuals are engrossed in a story of other, of ideas, or of the community, they come to have altruistic, ideological, or patriotic interests. Here I show that when a community is engrossed in a shared narrative of these kinds, its members can come to share such non-egoistic interests, and the furtherance of those interests becomes a collective good.

For those in the international human rights community, for example, narratives have been central to constructing common altruistic interests in the fate of others. In their research about transnational human rights activism, Keck and Sikkink (1998, 27) note, “In order to campaign on an issue it must be connected to a ‘causal story’ that establishes who bears responsibility or guilt.” But why would so many around the world with no direct stake in the fate of those suffering human rights abuses be moved to take up their cause? Shared narrative appears to play a central role. Empathy for victims of human rights abuses depends on the power of their stories. Without stories we would not even know of the abuses; without identifying with the victims, we would not be moved to

care. As the novelist J. K. Rowling has recounted about her time working at Amnesty International's office in London,

There in my little office I read hastily scribbled letters smuggled out of totalitarian regimes by men and women who were risking imprisonment to inform the outside world what had happened to them. Amnesty mobilizes thousands of individuals who have never been tortured or imprisoned for their beliefs to act on behalf of those who have. The power of human empathy leading to collective action saves lives and frees prisoners. Ordinary people whose well-being and personal well-being are assured join together in huge numbers to save people they do not know and will never meet.... Unlike any other creature on this (p.121) planet, human beings can learn and understand without having experienced. They can think themselves into other people's places.

(Rowling 2008)

In part, the power of the personal narratives of the kind Rowling describes lies in the universal appeal of such tragic tales. The genius of Amnesty International, the most important international human rights nongovernmental organization (NGO), was the way in which the organization used the stories of particular victims, "individuals with names, histories, and families, " to build membership and to call attention to human rights issues (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 88). But translating empathy for particular individuals into an interest in the furtherance of "human rights" requires further construction, one that resonates with the worldviews and ethos of a larger community. As Mutua has argued, "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the grandest of all human rights documents, endows the struggle between good and evil with historicity in which the defeat of the latter is only possible through human rights" (Mutua 2002, 15). Mutua argues that the appeal of the human rights construct for those in the West was the way in which it resonated with a narrative of Western exceptionalism, in which human rights advocates could cast themselves as the heroic rescuers of the oppressed in backward places.

Similarly, in the environmental arena, narratives appear to have been essential in constructing the collective good of environmental protection. Few people have a direct stake in preserving rainforests, protecting endangered species, or,

indeed, minimizing climate change, yet many feel strongly about these issues. Interests in such environmental matters, therefore, must be constructed. For environmentalists of the 1960s, for example, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) was massively influential, a national bestseller and something of a bible for those in the environmental movement. As the preeminent biologist E. O. Wilson writes in his afterword to a recent edition of Carson's classic, it "delivered a galvanic jolt to public consciousness and, as a result, infused the environmental movement with new substance and meaning" (Wilson 2002, 357).

What is not widely recognized, however, is the extent to which Carson used narrative techniques. Carson begins her book not with a compilation of scientific evidence about the effect of pesticides and other chemicals, but rather with "A Fable for Tomorrow":

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings... Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community.... Everywhere was the shadow of death....

(p.122) There was a strange stillness....The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh....

No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.

(Carson 1962, 1-3)

The story told in the first chapter is a simple tragedy. Once upon a time, all was well. Then comes a complicating action, a "strange blight" and "an evil spell, " and the plot heads downward to death. Nature is the innocent victim; we (or those who create and use pesticides) are the villains.

# Constructing the Collective Good

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What accounts for the popularity and the impact of *Silent Spring*? Certainly, it arrived at a moment in which evidence of environmental degradation was growing and in which new environmental groups were organizing. It is hard not to conclude, though, that Carson's skill as a storyteller made a difference. By organizing the mounting scientific evidence into a narrative, Carson's tragic tale breathed meaning into the situation. The story told in *Silent Spring* also had power because it resonated with a story already in the minds of many Americans, as part of a tradition of elegiac environmental narratives of American popular culture, narratives in which America's identity, in part, is bound up with the American wilderness. Thus, Carson's narrative helped to construct an ideology of environmentalism and to make environmental protection a collective good for the nascent environmentalist community.

And, in the civil rights movement, narrative certainly played a pivotal part in constructing civil rights as a collective good not only for African Americans but also for the wider community of Americans who joined their cause. The issue of voting rights demonstrates the point particularly clearly. As late as 1965, blacks in the South remained almost completely disenfranchised. Newly elected President Johnson was sympathetic to the cause, but there was little political reason for a Democratic president or legislators to act on the issue. To support voting rights in the South would have (and later did have) real costs to party support in that region, and there was not a particularly urgent reason for Northern whites to press the matter.

But on March 7, 1965, the story of what happened in the little town of Selma, Alabama, changed everything. That evening, the national networks broke into their regular programming with news from Selma. (The largest television audience, remarkably, was watching the movie *Judgment at Nuremberg*.) Television cameras had been positioned perfectly to capture the story. As peaceful marchers crossed the Edmund Pettis Bridge at the edge of town, a line of Alabama state troopers—some with shields and gas masks, some on horseback—blocked their way. The marchers approached the

line and stopped. The police ordered the marchers to disperse. The marchers silently held their ground. A few seconds later, the troopers waded into the marchers, beating them with clubs and firing tear gas canisters. As the marchers fled, police on horseback pursued and clubbed them.

What Americans saw that evening was stunning: innocent and unthreatening marchers met by masked and brutal police. For viewers, it was hard not to be moved by the dramatic scenes of good versus evil, hard to watch without identifying with the protesters and raging at the police, hard not to desire justice. Johnson seized the moment. Ten days after "Bloody Sunday," he spoke to a joint session of Congress:

I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy.... At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama....

But rarely in any time does an issue lay bare the secret heart of America itself. Rarely are we met with a challenge, not to our growth or abundance, or our welfare or our security, but rather to the values and the purposes and the meaning of our beloved nation....

There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem....

What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.

And we shall overcome.

(Waldman 2003, 195)

In his remarkable speech, Johnson located the story of Selma in the larger American story, an episode in the American historical

narrative co-equal to Lexington, Concord, and Appomattox, and made passage of a voting rights act a shared patriotic interest. At stake was the fate of America itself.

In all of these cases, human rights, environmental protection, and civil rights, even trade policy and national security, storytelling leaders sought to define the collective good by providing the community with a story through which it could interpret its circumstance and establish its interests. Their stories had power in part because these storytellers had platforms from which to speak and credibility with their audiences, but also because (p.124) they skillfully told a story that resonated with the grand narratives of culture already in the minds of their audiences.

## A Note on the “Collective Interest”

Throughout this book, I have avoided the term “collective interest” in favor of “common” or “shared” interests, on the grounds that interests are held by individuals, not by groups. Whether and how one can think about the preferences of collectives is a central issue for the social sciences, of course. Normatively, as Arrow (1951) famously demonstrated, if individuals differ in their interests, it is logically impossible to aggregate from individual preferences to a common social preference without violating basic principles of consistency. In positive social science, the question of whether or not we can treat aggregates as if they were unitary actors with interests is more complicated. When there are significant differences within groups there is no particular reason to believe that the group as a whole will behave in ways that reveal a consistent set of interests, as the two-level games literature makes clear (Putnam 1988; Mayer 1992; Evans, Jacobson, and Putnam 1993; Mayer 2010). Nevertheless, in informal discourse and much academic literature alike, we commonly speak about the “national interest,” the “concerns of the environmental community,” and so forth, as if those collectives have coherent intentions.

One possibility, of course, is that this talk is simply in error, and that we should refrain from the fiction of treating collectives as actors with preferences. But it is also possible that our common language contains a profound insight: to the

extent that shared narratives serve both to construct and to align the interests of its members, we can indeed say that there is a collective interest. In a sense, then, the “collective interest” is more than a convenient fiction; it can be a fact established by our fictions.

Notes:

(1) . Of course, by myth, I do not mean “untrue.” Rather I mean it in the literary sense as a type of narrative. Indeed, as Frye (1982) notes, myths are often held to be the most true of stories, narratives that reveal what is “really real” about the human circumstances. We tend to associate mythology with primitive societies and to assume, therefore, that myths no longer operate in modern societies. In part this predisposition reflects the fact that it is harder to recognize as myth the narratives of one’s own culture than it is to see them in the exotic other. But it is also because in the mobile, globalized world in which we now live, there is no single mythology to which all in a given society subscribe. (Of course, even the “primitive” societies in which mythology was first studied were a good deal more complex than early anthropologists imagined.) Nevertheless, though perhaps more dynamic and fragmented than in primitive cultures, mythic structures continue to be a central element of the culture, or cultures, to which we belong.

(2) . My use of the term *folk history* is similar to Bruner’s (1990) use of the term *folk psychology*, by which he means the working theory of mind that people use to interpret the actions of others. Note that I am not focused here on the product of professional historians, or with the extent to which narrative should or should not enter their work. This is an interesting debate, however. One line of thought is that because both historian and audience share expectations about the form that significant human action must take, expectations determined by the possible narrative structures of culture, the act of producing a history inevitably becomes one of emplotment. As White puts it,

(3) . This narrative of the civil rights movement is not without contest. See Hall (2005).

(4) . For a liberal’s take on this, see Lakoff (2004).

(5) . Narratives that foster collective identity generally also define who is “other, ” and may, indeed, cast them as villains. A consequence of strong in-group identification, useful in securing local public goods for a community, is that it may come at great expense to those “others” who do not have standing in the community’s narrative. See, for example, Hardin (1995).

(6) . It is worth noting that the meaning of the Civil War is not entirely uncontested. In the South of my youth, it was still common to hear the war called “The War of Northern Aggression, ” in which the South and Southern way of life were the victims. Indeed, echoes of this framing still produce Confederate flag waving.

(7) . My definitions here are close to those of Geertz’s: “A people’s ethos is the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects. Their world-view is their picture of the way things, in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society” Geertz (1957, 421).

(8) . The Vietnam story is more contested than “Munich.” For some in conservative circles, the tale is about weakness of resolve in staying the course. In this account, America would have won were it not for liberals and their allies in the media who undermined our efforts.

(9) . During the first year of Clinton’s presidency, I served as a foreign policy aid to Bill Bradley, then-senator from New Jersey, and I had a front row seat for the debate about how to respond in Bosnia. I was struck then by how powerful the two narratives were in structuring not only the rhetoric but also the thinking of senators. It was clear that for some, Bosnia was “Munich, ” requiring that America meet the bully with force. For others, Bosnia was “Vietnam, ” implying that America had to resist the impulse to get involved.

(10) . Of course, the role of narrative in the politics of NAFTA was not confined to recognition (or construction) of economic self-interest. Many who engaged believed there was a threat to some other value. Although it was far from clear what



impact, if any, NAFTA would have on the environment, for example, many in the environmental community opposed the agreement. For them, the story of NAFTA was another case of corporate evasion of regulation and outsourcing of pollution, an episode in the familiar tragic decline narrative that animated that community. Nor was it clear what impact NAFTA might have on illegal immigration or drug trafficking. Yet for right-wing opponents such as Pat Buchanan, NAFTA was another step towards erasing the border with Mexico, opening America to a flood of drugs and illegal immigrants, a story that resonated with the conservative narrative about the decline of America (Mayer 1998).



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