

IT WAS LIKE A FEVER

STORYTELLING IN PROTEST AND POLITICS

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Why Stories Matter

Modern Americans are ambivalent about stories. On one hand, we celebrate storytelling, and especially personal storytelling, for its authenticity, its passion, and its capacity to inspire not just empathy but action. Everyone has a story, we often say, and that makes for a discourse with uniquely democratic possibilities. In recent years, storytelling has been promoted in surprising places. Managers are now urged to tell stories to motivate workers and doctors are trained to listen to the stories their patients tell. Reporters have rallied around a movement for narrative journalism and psychologists around a movement for narrative therapy. Every year, tens of thousands of people visit the International Storytelling Center in Jonesborough, Tennessee, join the National Storytelling Network, or flock to one of the more than two hundred storytelling festivals held around the country. And a quick scan of any bookstore reveals scores of popular books on the art of storytelling as a route to spirituality, a strategy for grant seekers, a mode of conflict resolution, and a weight-loss plan.¹

To be sure, we battle over storytelling as well as celebrating it. Museum curators, history textbook writers, and holiday parade organizers have all been the targets of groups vociferously insisting that their story be told the right way. For the beleaguered organizers of a Smithsonian exhibit on the Enola Gay and the planners of sesquicentennial commemorations of Christopher Columbus, the public's investment in storytelling has been a mixed blessing but an undeniable fact. Getting the story right, we feel, is of real political consequence.²

Alongside testimonials to the power of stories, however, run deep anxieties. We worry that stories are easily manipulable, that the line between art and artifice too often blurs. The emotional identification that stories produce may compel moral action but may also undermine rational action. And perhaps stories are simply too variable to serve as the basis for social policy. After all, if everyone has her own story, then whose story should be privileged when it comes to making policy for everyone? Finally, we worry that, in the end, stories may be just stories. They may be untrue: fiction masquerading as fact. Or they may be true, but fleeting in their impact, with their normative force easily trumped by considerations of economic efficiency or political expediency. As a New Yorker deliberating with his fellow citizens about a memorial to the victims of the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center put it, "Yes, we could float bonds, but is the legacy we want to leave to our children an inspiring story, a fine view, and a pile of debt?"³

What accounts for this ambivalence? Postmodernists argue that the grand narratives of progress, faith, and rationality that once held the status of common sense have lost their force, replaced by a babble of competing moral values and authorities. If that is true, our testimonials to the power of narrative may be wishful and wistful, and set against nagging doubts about the actual reach of any moral discourse. Alternatively, with the old master narratives now suspect, *stories*—particular, local, claiming only verisimilitude, never absolute truth—may be all that we trust. Whether or not either of those explanations is right, I begin with them because, for all scholars' attention to narrative in recent years, there has been little discussion of how people commonly view narrative as a discursive form. We have rich analyses of the broad cultural preoccupations that popular narratives reflect and careful examinations of how storytelling in small groups sustains relations of solidarity and deference. By contrast, we know relatively little about what narrative is popularly seen as good for. Outside a limited range of settings, such as courtrooms and medical diagnostic interviews, we do not know when narrative is considered an appropriate form of discourse, how people are expected to respond to stories, and what kinds of stories and storytellers are thought to be credible.⁴

Yet grasping the prevailing common sense about storytelling is important to understanding not only how narrative figures in everyday life but also how it figures in efforts to bring about social change. In this book, I stake two claims that go against the grain of current scholarship. Most recent theorizing about narrative has attested to its value for disadvantaged groups. Personal stories chip away at the wall of public indifference,

scholars argue. Stories elicit sympathy on the part of the powerful and sometimes mobilize official action against social wrongs. Where authorities are unyielding, storytelling sustains groups as they fight for reform, helping them build new collective identities, link current actions to heroic pasts and glorious futures, and restyle setbacks as way stations to victory. Even before movements emerge, the stories that circulate within subaltern communities provide a counterpoint to the myths promoted by the powerful.³

Without denying narrative's political potency, I argue that for disadvantaged groups, narrative comes with risks as well as benefits. The story lines available to modern American activists make it more difficult to tell a story of long-term endurance than one of short-term triumph and more difficult to argue that to "keep on keeping on" is success. When people recount their experiences of inequality or injustice in court, they may simultaneously win legal victories for the cause and alienate potential recruits who are unwilling to see themselves as passive victims. And if those challenging the system can tell stories that elicit sympathy, so can their opponents. But the risks in storytelling, I argue, come as much from the norms of narrative's use and interpretation as they do from the norms of its content. This is the second claim I want to stake. Stories are differently intelligible, useful, and authoritative depending on who tells them, when, for what purpose, and in what setting. When telling your own story in a loan office, you will probably say very different things than when telling it in a church confessional or a courtroom. If you are a woman, you will be expected to tell certain kinds of stories. If you are a professional, your story will carry a certain kind of weight. If your story is true, people will expect it to be the same in each retelling.

Those who want to effect social change understandably try to capitalize on familiar conventions of storytelling. After all, they want to frame their message in ways that will rally support. But playing by the rules may be difficult. If the fact that everyone can tell his own story makes it easier for people to challenge the assurances of the powerful that certain policies are to everyone's advantage, the fact that narrative is seen as less authoritative than other discursive forms may weaken that challenge. Encouraging disadvantaged groups to tell their stories may give others a new appreciation for their plight. But the limited range of responses to stories that are popularly considered appropriate may prevent people from doing much more than expressing appreciation. Political officials struggle to assert the contemporary relevance of a past movement, but the occasions on which they are permitted to do so may communicate the movement's pastness, and present irrelevance, no

matter what they say. Popular beliefs about storytelling—about how authoritative it is, when it is appropriate, and how it is properly responded to—may curb the impact of otherwise compelling stories.

Toward a Sociology of Storytelling

This is not to say that people fighting for social change should stop telling stories. To the contrary, I believe that in some respects, narrative's political potency has been underemphasized. But I do want to press for a better understanding of how narrative works politically. To advance such an understanding, I treat storytelling in diverse political arenas. I analyze how black congressional representatives tell stories of Martin Luther King, Jr., on the House and Senate floor and the difficulties they face in using such stories to argue for more generous social policies. I study citizens deliberating in a public forum to determine whether people with unpopular views are better served by making arguments or telling stories. Conventions of news reporting and television talk show production shed light on why some victims of social injustice are appealing and others simply pathetic.

Given my interest in narrative's capacity to bring about social change, however, I focus on storytelling by organized collective actors. The movements I study are diverse, ranging from sixteenth-century French tax disputes to the twentieth-century American civil rights movement and from nineteenth-century abolitionism to 1970s advocacy on behalf of battered women. Movements by adult survivors of child abuse, Mexican farm workers, abortion reformers, Nicaraguan Sandinistas, and people with AIDS all make appearances in the following chapters. Throughout, I am interested in how activists have used stories strategically. I try to identify what it is about stories, as opposed to arguments or analyses, that equips them to forge mobilizing identities, and why some stories bridge differences while others harden them. I ask whether compelling stories have simple moral messages or complex, even ambiguous, ones. I compare the stories of victimization told by activists now with those told by activists two hundred years ago to figure out why victims today have a harder sell.

But I also want to show how stories set the very terms of strategic action. Familiar stories make some courses of action seem reasonable, fitting, even possible, and others seem ineffectual, ill-considered, or impossible. Familiar stories shape the interests and identities on behalf of which people take strategic action in the first place. These are processes

that remain poorly understood by sociologists of social movements, for reasons that I explain below. But the questions they raise about the relations between culture, power, and practical action extend well beyond social movements. In short, we know that people in all settings use culture practically and creatively to pursue their interests. But culture also defines what counts as practical and what counts as an interest. And most of the time it does so in ways that, willy-nilly, reproduce existing arrangements of power and privilege. For analysts, this presents a conundrum—actually, two conundrums. To talk about culture as constituting people's interests seems to suggest that culture is all-powerful. Surely, my interests are shaped as much by my structural position, that is, the fact that I am a woman, a citizen of the United States, and an employee of a university, as by my left-liberal political beliefs or my atheism. If, along with many other left-wing atheists, I were to develop an interest in banning the teaching of evolution in public schools and sociologists wanted to explain that peculiar development, they might well cite the new popularity of Christian fundamentalism among university professors. But they would then want to account for that popularity, which they would do by identifying structural trends such as, hypothetically, the growth of a grassroots fundamentalist mobilizing network or generational rebellion among left-wing academics. Claiming that culture is constitutive of people's interests seems to confine analysts to simply describing current ideas. To talk about culture constraining people's practical options, for its part, seems to suggest that people are practical dopes or ideological dupes, somehow unable to imagine courses of action that would better serve their purposes. Surely, people's imaginations are unlimited, or at least no more limited than those of the analysts who study them.⁶

The task, then, is to grasp not only how culture shapes interests and identities but the structural conditions in which it has more or less independent force in doing so. We should also be able to identify the typical features of ideas that gain political purchase even in circumstances that do not seem auspicious for cultural innovation. Finally, we should flesh out the discursive and organizational mechanisms by which culture defines the bounds of strategic choice, rather than locating those mechanisms in people's heads. The field of social movements should be an especially useful place in which to do those things. Although some social movements simply escalate routine contention, many involve new issues and new contenders. The mix of structural and cultural processes that produce new identities and interests should be thrown into sharp relief. Too, we should be able to identify rhetorical patterns in the kinds of

challenges that succeed in unsettling familiar calculi of interest and risk. Once movements are underway, activists have a real stake in using culture strategically, embracing dominant beliefs and conventions of representation where it serves them and refusing them where it does not. It is at the point where they reproduce such conventions in spite of their strategic liabilities that we should be able to see culture operating to constrain activists' options.

Studying movements should therefore provide insight into much broader dynamics of cultural innovation and constraint. Surprisingly, sociologists of social movements have not capitalized on that opportunity. To be sure, in recent years, they have made cultural processes central to their models of mobilization. Movement scholars now recognize that it is through the lens of shared values and understandings that people perceive opportunities for effective collective action and come to feel a moral obligation to act. As normative commitments—to nonviolence, say, or radical democracy—cultural factors shape groups' tactical choices. And whether or not groups seek mainly to change laws and policies, the outcomes of movements are often most visible in the arenas of culture and everyday life rather than in institutional politics. Yet, for all the attention to culture, movement scholars have still tended to conceptualize culture narrowly: more as furthering people's interests than as constituting them; more as people's explicit normative commitments than as their practical assumptions; and more as a resource than as a constraint. The focus is understandable. Movement scholars too have been wary of the kind of cultural fundamentalism that makes obdurate structures such as laws and political party systems simply epiphenomenal to hegemonic ideas. And they too have been wary of false consciousness arguments. But the result has been to foreclose important questions about protest and its effects. For example, we now know a great deal about the conditions in which people mobilize on behalf of long-standing interests, but we still know relatively little about why certain areas of social life—race relations, say, or nuclear policy, or university curricula—suddenly generate new or newly conflicting interests. We know something about how activists juggle instrumental commitments with ideological ones as they choose among tactical options, striving to stay true to their normative beliefs as they aim for concrete victories. But we know very little about where activists' beliefs about what is instrumental come from and how those beliefs eliminate options as well as opening them up.⁷

Studying the stories people tell can help to answer those questions. Certainly, scholars already have an arsenal of concepts for studying culture in movements: *ideology*, *frame*, and *discourse*, as well as older terms

like *rhetoric* and *belief*. Why not simply talk about the structural conditions in which particular frames gain force, or draw on Marxist notions of ideology to show how a cultural common sense reproduces existing economic arrangements? The reason is that narrative has several features that make it worth studying in its own right. Methodologically, it is fairly easy to identify a narrative in a chunk of discourse. Narratives have beginnings, middles, and ends, as well as features that set them off from other forms of discourse. By contrast, it is difficult to say where a frame begins and ends, or what is *not* ideology. The fact that we can isolate narratives in discourse and can isolate different versions of the same narrative makes it possible to trace the careers of particular stories, exposing not only the political processes by which they come to be tellable or authoritative but also the dynamics by which newly legitimated stories produce new modes of action and new terrains of contention. This should help to identify the structural conditions in which culture has independent force in defining new interests and identities. We can also trace the processes by which stories become canonical *within* movements and what effect that has on groups' tactical choices. Comparing personal accounts of mobilization in different historical periods can shed light on how logics of agency have changed over time.⁶

Thanks to a substantial literature on narrative in diverse fields, we also know a good deal about how narrative operates rhetorically: for example, how shifting the point of view establishes and conceals authority and how plot structures causality. This makes it possible to work in from the other side of the structure/culture mix: along with identifying the structural conditions in which new ideas and identities are likely to have political force, we can determine *why* particular cultural narratives gain currency even in structural conditions that are not primed for cultural innovation. But narrative's value in this respect goes further. Research in cognitive and social psychology has documented how storytelling helps to make sense of the anomalous, how it elicits and channels emotions, and how it sustains individual and group identities. These processes are all critical to collective action, and we can draw on them to develop the microfoundations of collective action that we still lack.

Finally, and, again, unlike frames, ideologies, and discourses, all of whose referents are defined by analysts rather than the people who produce or act on them, most people know when they are telling a story. They know how to construct a story, and when and why they should tell stories, as well as how to respond to a story. In some settings, such as a courtroom, conventions of storytelling are formalized and recorded. Even where that is not the case, we can extrapolate narrative conventions

from stories' distribution across settings, speakers, and topics of discussion. People often reflect openly on what they see storytelling as good for and where they see its limitations. From there, we can begin to determine the work that such epistemologies do in legitimating institutions and in shaping strategies for transforming them. Of course, people operate with different ideas of how stories work. But I argue that those ideas are socially patterned. Concerns about stories' credibility and authority are more likely to be engaged in some settings than others and with respect to some storytellers rather than others. That has implications for people's ability to use otherwise persuasive stories effectively.

So I study storytelling especially in movements because movements have been such important forces for social change and because they illuminate cultural processes that operate much more broadly. I draw ideas and methodological tools from literary theory, psychology, anthropology, legal theory, and sociolinguistics. But I also want to demonstrate the yields of a fully sociological approach to narrative, one that focuses on *storytelling* as much as on stories, and, in particular, on the social organization of storytelling authority. Such an approach may be used with other cultural objects: we can study the ways in which concerns about statistics' manipulability or bureaucracy's inefficiency are more likely to be engaged when some people use the form than when others do. I will have more to say about all this. But let me turn now to narrative: to its distinctive formal features and the ways in which it is conventionally used and then to its role in dynamics of contention that remain poorly understood.

What Makes a Story? Conventions of Narrative's Form

What makes a story a story? The lines that rhetorical scholars once drew between prose and poetic discourse and between epideictic, deliberative, and forensic forms of persuasive rhetoric are now recognized as not so neat. People tell stories when making speeches and logical arguments, when deliberating, and when interpreting scientific phenomena. Still, narrative has features that distinguish it from other discursive forms—for example, arguments, descriptions, explanations, and reports—as well as from concepts such as frame and ideology that have been used to analyze political discourse (note that here and throughout the book, I use the words *narrative* and *story* interchangeably).⁷

Like a speech or a song, but unlike a chronicle, a frame, or an ideology, a story has an identifiable beginning, middle, and end. "When we 'tell a story,'" writes literary theorist Peter Brooks, "there tends to be a shift in