

# The WEDF Student Initiative Submission

## Reclaiming the Narrative

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*'Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts.'* [Salman Rushdie]

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Rushdie's affirmation emphasises the often-disregarded power of narrative over human experiences of social reality. Humanity is defined by what it believes, as observed in our adherence to commandments of religious texts, laws of political states and internalised codes of social norms and values. Bearing in mind this dependence on socially-constructed ideology as the basis for the dynamics of civilisation, it is significant that narratives offer cohesive belief systems which govern human behaviour, therefore, the role of narrative cannot be underestimated. In the context of political epistemology, narratives expressed through political discourse can be seen to have great influence the reception of political ideologies, which both preserves social cohesion, as well as distorts social reality. Through analysis of how political narratives are constructed and transferred, the nature of the human response to narrative, and the efficacy of narrative in specific political agendas, I intend to explore the extent to which political narratives sustain political power through preventing revolt among the general population in creating collective consciousness and limiting discourse through distraction and deceit, as well as examining the ways in which such political narratives may be dismantled.

Foremost, the primary role of the narrative in political communication is arguably the promotion of unified thought. Social constructionism reinforces the notion that assumptions

of reality are shared within a society, claiming that ‘meanings are developed in coordination with others rather than separately within each individual’ (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009, p.891). This theory offers an explanation as to why humans are so impressionable to narrative, they can be used to establish a collective consciousness wherein a large group share a particular viewpoint, repressing individual thought and further discourse. This notion is reinforced in Marcuse’s examination of the linguistic style of politicians as promoting one-dimensional thought which ‘militates against a development of meaning’ (Marcuse, 2003, p.90). This interpretation offers insight into how narrative is used to the advantage of those in power. The formation of a collective consciousness ensures political agendas are sustained as, by controlling the reception of their policies through an appealing narrative, politicians can ‘make themselves immune against the expression of protest and refusal’ (Marcuse, 2003, p.93). When a large portion of the population believe in any given narrative, it gains power and becomes difficult to challenge, thus, through the promotion of a narrative, a political leader presents a story which people can believe in and identify with, enabling the political leader in question to gain power. The control of political narrative in establishing collective consciousness is evident when we consider how perspectives vary in different countries in accordance to their different policies. Cooke and Puddifoot’s study on the perceptions toward gun culture among women in the United Kingdom and women in the United States reveals that, compared to American women, ‘U.K. women largely rejected the idea of guns as representative of freedom or independence and clearly associated guns more with danger and violence’ (Cooke and Puddifoot, 2000, p.431). In the United Kingdom, where policies are set against weaponries and police do not generally carry firearms, people share more of an anti-gun sentiment. In the United States however, the Constitution states the right to bear arms and gun ownership represents a sense of liberty and cultural identity among many citizens. These disparities in perspective are largely the result of the political narratives surrounding weapons in each country. In the United Kingdom, shooting stories are highly publicised in association with violence and disruption. In the United States, the narrative surrounding guns often relates to notions of personal protection, freedom, or cultural identity (Cooke and Puddifoot, 2000). Evidently, the narrative expressed to a population largely influence their perspective, thus their collective belief in one particular narrative creates ‘an obstacle to other narratives that wish to challenge it or offer an alternative’ (Shenhav, 2006, p.250), thereby sustaining the political agendas of that country’s government. Having established the human tendency to identify within unified belief systems and the role of narrative in establishing these belief systems, the power of certain political agendas can therefore be attributed to the

construction of successful political narratives which limit rebellion through sustaining collective cooperation of the population which deters individual thought and further discourse that may challenge the narrative.

In addition to the formation of collective consciousness, the use of narrative in political communication also serves to sustain political power by generating distraction from underlying concerns. Jamieson acknowledges this political tactic in her examination of political corruption: ‘Candidates divert public and press attention from legitimate issues by calculated strategies of distraction.’ (Jamieson, 1992, P.205) These strategies may take a variety of forms, such as publicized political speeches or visually evocative images and videos, nevertheless, they ultimately serve as a means of deploying a compelling narrative to the public. In contemporary society, arguably the most effective method of constructing and spreading a narrative as a diversion tactic is through the mass media. Governments can manipulate the information which circulates in the public sphere by ‘focusing our attention on one set of visually evocative images and denying the media access to the others’ (Jamieson, 1992, P.205). This strategy allows for a narrative to accumulate collective thought, diverting public attention from other issues. Evidence of this notion can be observed in recent British media with the focus on the birth of the Prime Minister’s son despite being in the midst of a global health pandemic crisis. Conveniently, the news of the birth spread when journalists had begun to express criticism about the Prime Minister’s methods of tackling the country’s response to the current Covid-19 virus. (Kettle, 2020). Therefore, with the spread of this uplifting narrative the Prime Minister becomes a respectable father in the public eye, distracting public attention from the fact that the United Kingdom remains the highest death rate in Europe as a result of the disease (Campbell, D. et al, 2020). As a result, the media attention on the British Government’s failure to provide sufficient testing or protective equipment, in addition to their prior impulsive propositions of ‘herd immunity’, all foreshadowed by preliminary cuts in funding to the National Health Service (Sinclair and Read, 2020), are quickly disregarded within the public sphere, preserving political status and public cooperation. Political narratives have been employed as diversionary tactics throughout history, where their spread ensures the ‘repulsing and forgetting (of) the historical reality — the horror of fascism; the idea of socialism; the preconditions of democracy’ (Marcuse, 2003, p.101). Therefore, the influence of narrative in focusing the attention of the population on a particular representation of historical, social or political reality, ensures that

alternative narratives which do not reflect political agendas are omitted from public attention and therefore repressed from gaining power.

As well as through narrative distraction, the preservation of political agendas can be further sustained using narrative in distorting of political reality through deception. Through the channels of media, propaganda and publicised political speeches, fictional narratives can be established and portrayed as political facts which deceive the population into trusting their government's affairs, as affirmed by Segre (2016): 'Trust in a knowledge-based society involves unreflective acceptance of, and trust in, a given state of affairs as it presents itself and is perceived.' (Segre, 2016, P.98) The deceptive nature of politics is recognised and reinforced among the vast majority of theorists and scholars, particularly among social constructionists in their view of society's shared assumptions of reality: 'Social constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be' (Burr, 2015, p.3). In light of the explanation that understandings of reality are socially constructed, the use of deceptive narrative can be recognised as one of the methods through which they are constructed, highlighting the extent to which political narratives are unfaithful to political reality. These fictional political narratives are often conveyed through rhetorical manipulation in speeches and publicised discourse, where: 'Magical, authoritarian and ritual elements permeate speech and language...(therefore) facts are losing their authentic linguistic representation.' (Marcuse 2003, p.89). Incorporating Marcuse's explanations, it can be argued that governmental manipulation of rhetoric during narrative discourse serves to deceive the general population and convince them of the righteousness or necessity of corrupt policies or governmental positions. Some critics express the perception that political deception is necessary, such as political philosopher Leo Strauss, who shares Machiavelli's view that necessity transcends morality and, thus, leaders must deceive their people in order to maintain political stability and social order (Strauss, 1958). However, I consider this, arguably elitist, perception to be inherently flawed in its ignorance of the disastrous practice of such measures that can be observed throughout history, such as the murderous false narratives spread by Nazi propagandists during the Second World War, who used 'repression of a free press to spread lies and suppress essential facts...about the origins of World War II and the supposed role of the Jews' (Auerbach, 2013, p.91). More recently, political deception through false narratives continues to expose itself as a destructive abuse of power, such as the false narratives presented by former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in order to convince the British people of the necessity of going to war in Iraq in 2003 (Herring

and Robinson, 2014). Evidently, considering the destructive consequences of a government which lacks transparency, the role of the narrative as a means of deception in political communication can be perceived as a highly immoral strategy for maintaining power.

Having established the ways in which governments sustain political power and promote acceptance of their ideologies through the use of narrative, it is significant to consider how narrative can also be used to dismantle political power. Power is reinstated among those exploited by political agendas when they obtain power over the narratives that govern their lives and understandings of reality. This occurs when individuals in society recognise their lack of representation within a dominant political narrative and form a new narrative which resists the former. These narratives are often empowered through the use of ‘a sense of shared personal history’ (Fivush, 2009, p.93) between those who are marginalised, therefore their shared experiences enable them to construct and identify with the new narrative which acts as a catalyst for socio-political movements. Fivush (2009) also identifies the American Civil Rights Movement and the second wave of the Women’s movement as examples of political activism founded on the creation of an alternative narrative. This notion is reinforced by Rogan and Budgeon (2018) who acknowledge the success of the Women’s Liberation Movement as being dependent on the expression of their personal experiences of oppression which amplified their collective voice against a male-dominated government, as implied in the recognised slogan of second wave feminism: ‘The Personal is Political’ (Hanisch, 2009). Therefore, through shared accounts of personal experiences, those who are marginalised or underrepresented in governing narratives may identify with each other’s stories, recognise their lack of representation and form an empowered cumulative narrative which can initiate political resistance and social change. Whilst narratives are used by governing bodies to control and manipulate their populations into submission, it is poignant to recognise that the same strategies can be employed within the population, enabling them to gain control over their understandings of reality and establish shared resistance narratives for social and political change.

In conclusion, through exploration of the dynamics of social thought and function, as well as examination of historical and contemporary cases demonstrating the impact of narratives, their significant influence when employed as a tool of political communication is evident. Narratives both prevent public protest through limiting discourse and establishing shared values, as well as promote distractions and deceptions in the societal sphere, which

cooperatively aid the preservation of political power through denying the public recognition of political failures or corruptions. Ultimately, societies are highly impressionable to narrative, therefore, they are an effective political strategy for controlling the masses and sustaining power. Nevertheless, the calculated use of narratives by governments can distort understandings of reality, therefore being able to recognise the narratives that dominate society enables individuals to identify misrepresentations and form alternative narratives to resist political control.

Word Count: 1998

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