Workshop Report

Building Stories – Building Cooperation: The Role of Narrative and Fiction as Constitutive Elements in Politics

13 May 2015

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The workshop was organized by:

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Cooperation requires understanding and appreciation of the realities of one another. In the context of international relations, this entails a certain degree of agreement upon facts, as well. In order to achieve global cooperation on any given subject the parties must first agree on the definition, problematization and solution of the issue at hand. Making sense of common problems requires not only a shared view on arguments and interests, but also on shared forms of narration. Even though this agreement is not a complete consensus, a policy area with a relatively concordant, inter-subjectively constructed amount of facts is needed to begin cooperation. Such concordance is possible when registers are shared, similar to what Hannah Arendt calls ‘common world’, a shared and public world of human artifacts, institutions and settings separating us from nature and providing a relatively permanent context for our activities. Regarding politics as a practice of collective storytelling, in which the role of fiction and narrative is a constitutive element instead of being ‘mere rhetoric’, is still under-theorized. From a narrative point of view the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurring. Thus, an important but largely ignored part of this common world is shared imageries, which are expressed or represented in stories, myths, legends, and literatures.

Against this background, this workshop focused on narrative and fiction as a critical albeit under-researched element in the social sciences. Despite increasing interest, and the so-called linguistic turn in social sciences, the role of fiction and narrative in explaining, expressing, and representing identities, frames, and in giving meaning to political practices has been largely absent. In order to begin to change this, this event brought together different disciplines from the social sciences, political science and development studies to literature and cultural studies, and history to reflect on these various matters. Additionally, it sought to inspire reflection on how academics can work differently in mediums such as writing and presenting.

The workshop was guided by the following key questions:

■ What are the narrative modes through which the factual is being communicated, constructed and shared in the fields of global cooperation and international relations?

■ Who uses which kind of stories and why?

■ Are there differences in the ways we can analyze data from different media; and if so, what are they? Can these differences really be generalized?

■ Are the problems of global cooperation linked to weak plots and boring stories by uncreative political storytellers?
Opening Remarks

The workshop began with opening remarks by Frank Gadinger and Christopher Smith (KHK/GCR21). Gadinger went over the conceptual and substantive background of the workshop and introduced the Centre as well as the workshop’s organizers to all participants. Smith provided an overview of the workshop’s general structure and emphasized its unconventional goal of encouraging alternative academic output styles, which the Centre’s in-house publication, Global Dialogues, suitably complements. After these comments, the floor was given to the first contributors to present.

1st Panel:
Making Sense of Contemporary World Politics through Narrative

The first panel sought to make sense of contemporary world politics through the use of narrative. In the first presentation, Sebastian Jarzebski (University of Duisburg-Essen) provided a concise analysis of the now infamous middle finger incident in the German media involving Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis shortly after the election of Syriza in 2015. In his presentation, Jarzebski effectively showed that the thin line between fact and fiction increasingly faded in the fallout of this incident as various actors positioned themselves according to their complex backgrounds and interests. By reconstructing the incident on the micro-level, Jarzebski made a convincing plea to use analysis through the lens of narrative to adequately demonstrate the mechanisms at play during controversies such as this. This form of analysis is particularly pertinent for matters concerning the efficacy and possibility of global cooperation as the (un)conscious use of speech devices in such situations is a critical, albeit underdeveloped, aspect in political science. David Lewis (LSE, UK) followed this provocative start to the workshop by discussing the recent rise of popular ‘blockbuster’ books written by international development industry insiders and produced by commercial publishers. He explored a common set of stylistic devices found within this emerging genre by emphasizing a key trope found in most of these books: The story of the specific author’s earlier professional life and the hard lessons resulting from it. Lewis showed that authors use their first-hand accounts of challenges involved in development work, various mistakes made, and resulting epiphanies from these experiences to question romanticisms surrounding development policies. Lewis proposed that these blockbusters should not only be considered the result of reification and commodification, but also as part of the development gift itself.

Axel Heck (University of Freiburg) continued the first panel with a presentation on the fictional legitimacy narratives of the Islamic State. To do this, he demonstrated the results of his analysis of a 2014 VICE News documentary that featured unprecedented access to the group’s manifold activities. Heck’s main argument was that beyond the obvious unrivaled brutality of the IS’s self-released videotapes, the videos are also laden with strong narratives aimed to justify and legitimize their actions. By deconstructing these narratives using the VICE documentary and Weber’s theoretical concept of
legitimate rule, Heck compellingly revealed how the IS is actively creating a fictional narrative of a legitimate order. Furthermore, Heck provided some theoretical insight into the delicate relationship between “authenticity”, “reality constructions” and “fictional narratives” in the documentary-genre. For the final presentation on the first panel, Nicolina Montesano Montessori (VU Amsterdam) presented the discursive representation of the protests of the Spanish Occupy movement. This was primarily represented by the 'Indignados' who started their struggle in 2011 and occupied the central squares in Madrid, Barcelona and elsewhere. She particularly concentrated on analyzing the narrative of these protests, taken from the placards and images from the Internet. The narratives created through these powerful images showed how a process of meaning making emerged and went back and forth from the streets to cyberspace in a continuous spiral that rearticulated the meaning of the crisis and its main agents: politicians and banks. Montesano Montessori made a great case for analyzing narrative as an instrument for both protestors and those in power that goes beyond free market technocracy and dives into difference, culture, and a politics that speaks to the imagination of the people.

2nd Panel: Political Imagery in Film, Visual Artifacts, and Development Narratives

Frank Gadinger began the second panel with his presentation on narratives of war in film, taking a look specifically at The Hurt Locker and its relation to the legitimacy of U.S. discourse. Gadinger introduced his contribution by reminding participants that the ‘war on terror’ has become one of the most powerful narratives in global political discourses in the 21st century. He submitted that this longevity lies in its continually innovative narrative configuration, which has managed to integrate ambiguous causalities and, in the words of literary studies scholar Albrecht Koschorke, produces a “semblance of natural evidence”. According to his findings, various reconfigurations with multiple narratives enabled those affected by the aftermath of September 11th and the ensuing military interventions to cope with the contradicting experiences of this episode. Significantly, Gadinger submitted that these processes of political storytelling are deeply rooted in cultural practices of everyday life. For Gadinger, cinema, and in this case Hollywood films, provides great insight into the dynamics of how political storytelling is constructed and policies are legitimized. His in-depth analysis of Kathryn Bigelow’s The Hurt Locker pointedly demonstrated the ambivalence of overlapping narratives experienced throughout the war on terror; these include, but are not limited to, robotization/technologization and dehumanization, and the impossibility of being both a highly-trained specialist abroad and a family father at home. Complementing Gadinger’s focus on the war on terror and film, Gabi Schlag (University of Magdeburg) focused on the visual narrative of the ‘real and fictional’ death of Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Using another one of Bigelow’s films, Zero Dark Thirty, Schlag showed how the interplay between fact and fiction in the film and other powerful images (such as the doctored image of bin Laden’s corpse) demonstrate the dynamics of the construction and
deconstruction of key visual narratives. Indeed, she persuasively found that they play an elementary role in legitimizing certain accepted interpretations of contentious events.

Following this focus on the war on terror, the second panel turned its attention to the topic of development and aid. Martina Kopf (KHK/GCR21, and University of Vienna) explored the continuum of cultural representations of aid discourses floating between Africa and Europe from the colonial past to the present. She particularly focused on the symbolic dimensions of “giving” and “taking” between Africa and Europe. To do this, she drew on the Senegalese film *Hyènes*, based on Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s play *The Visit of the Old Lady*, by reading it as a philosophical, artistic and political reflection on truths and fictions of this giving and taking between the two continents. To close this panel, Pat Noxolo (University of Birmingham) theorized the relationships between postcolonial fiction and development geography by focusing on official development data from and on the Caribbean region. She argued that in addition to looking beyond stale statistical facts on growth, a focus on fiction offers more nuanced and moving descriptions of what it is like to experience poverty in place. It furthermore provides development geographers the possibility of shifting the centers of development theories, strategies and narratives, producing a more ‘fictionable’ world.

**A Story-teller’s Reflections on the Interplay between Reality and Fiction**

The workshop and the Centre were treated to a special performance by storyteller Sahand Sahebdivani from Mezrab Café, Amsterdam. Sahebdivani captivatingly told a rich story about his ancestors and relatives’ practices of storytelling and the effect it not only had on his personal experience, but also that such storytelling has on all of us. He reminded participants that the thin line between fact and fiction and the occasional overstepping of those boundaries are at the source of our understanding of the world and its past. Sahebdivani beautifully demonstrated how easily it is to stretch a certain truth for innocuous, strategic, or potentially more malicious ends. His performance was ultimately a way for those interested in narrative and fiction as analytical tools (or even those who do had never considered their influence) to see their undeniable complexities and inedible effects on both everyday life and political reality unfold before their very eyes.

**3rd Panel:**
**Political Imageries in Utopias, Historical Myths, and City Narratives**

After Sahebdivani’s unique and refreshing contribution, the focus was turned to the effects of fiction and narrative in realms of climate change, foundation myths, and urban spaces. In her presentation, Ayşem Mert (KHK/GCR21) discussed representations of climate change in online video games. Working from the premise that video games are quickly becoming a constitutive part of our social imaginary, Mert explored this realm that is troublingly still largely unknown and under-researched in the social sciences. Specifically, Mert focused on climate change in online video games from the theoretical perspective informed by insights from Huizinga, Wittgenstein, as well as Laclau and
Mouffe. She effectively showed how three games in particular help better understand the social imagery constructed around the climate crisis and its possible solutions. Next, Bülent Somay (Bilgi University, Istanbul) touched on the subject of the foundation myth in relation to Turkey in the aftermath of the Medz Yeghern, the notorious deportation and massacre of the Armenian subjects of the Ottoman Empire. Somay went into the details of memoirs from this era, which he finds tell us a better story than any pile of “tested and verified” evidence ever could. This is because they manage to capture “the Soul of the Age”, something no ideologically motivated, embedded historiography ever could. Somay importantly suggested that foundation myths are definitely always embedded and ideologically motivated as the selection of ‘truthful’ facts is more often than not a matter of careful strategy.

Following this, Kirsten Rüther’s (University of Vienna) presentation took the workshop in a new direction by focusing on narratives of African healing in South African urban areas. She showed how, firstly, cityscapes can be read and narrated through a lens on urban healing in Johannesburg from 1930s to the present and how, secondly, through that lens urban dwellers’ assessments look like of change taking place far away – at times even in the sphere of the global. She argued that with regard to knowledge emanating from the field of African healing global cooperation takes place between international companies and knowledgeable persons “on the ground” – often without compensating them adequately. In the final contribution of the event, Carla Gierich (KHK/GCR21) covered Anglo dominance and dominance of space in Los Angeles City Narratives, specifically in Mexican-American literary discourse. Using two significant books, she sought to show how notions of the city as a dominant space have been received, perpetuated, or altered in Mexican-American Literature and Literary Theory. She elucidated how the two dominance discourses of city space and Anglo are played out, perceived and/or challenged in contemporary Mexican American Literature and if they hinder, reify or eventually promulgate the emergence of a different city discourse.

The workshop ended with summarizing comments from the workshop organizers on what was learned throughout the duration of the event. Participants agreed that a focus on the interplay between fact and fiction or evidence and story is something researchers in narrative and fiction studies need to focus on moving forward. The organizers expressed their overall satisfaction with the engaging presentations and the fruitful exchanges, which also provided avenues for future research on narrative and fiction.

Report by Christopher Smith