

## THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN HISTORY: Individual Bias or Collective Truth?

by Leslie Lehninger

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People have always told their histories in conversation.

Throughout the ages, history has been passed on by word of mouth. Fathers to sons, mothers to daughters, grandparents to grandchildren, village elders to younger generations, gossips to eager ears; all in their own way tell of past events, interpret them, give them meaning, keep the collective memory alive. Even in our age of general literacy and pervasive media communication, 'the real and secret history of humankind' is told in conversation, and most people still form their basic understanding of their own past through conversations with others. (Grele, 1975, vi)

Grele's compelling and poetic words in the preface to a book on oral history raise important questions. What is "the collective memory?" as opposed to an individual's "own past?" What is humankind's "real" history? How do we know it when we hear or see it? Which interpretations are the most useful in understanding our own and collective past? Dependent upon the perspective of literary critics and clinicians in the helping professions, narrative interpretations may or may not be of interest. But to historians, they strike at the core of the historical enterprise, and undergird the debate about the role of narrative in understanding history. To understand the uses and role of narrative in

history, then, one needs first to appreciate the nature of this debate.

Scholars in many disciplines use narratives in their work; and probably agree with the historian Paul Roth's definition: "narratives are stories, a telling that something happened" (1988, p.1). History can be seen as essentially the telling of stories. Yet while individuals in fields such as psychology and clinical social work focus on personal narratives as endeavors to fashion identity and understand the world (see, e.g. Reissman, 1993), historians add another dimension — explanation of the nature and outcomes of events. As Roth notes, "a narrative explanation ... presents an account of the linkages among events as a process leading to the outcome one seeks to explain" (1988, p. 1). The notion of explanation, as described by Roth, implies that there exist "true" accounts of what actually happened in the past, which is the historian's job to uncover.

Here is the major dilemma faced by historians in their use of narratives — is there such a thing as "true" history, and if so, how can we deal with the great variety of individual narratives of events? If narratives are the product of individual imagination, how can they represent truth? Or, which are "true" and which are not?

Until fairly recently, historians believed in the

existence of a "Universal History," or a single, great, true story about humankind waiting to be discovered (Mink, 1987). Universal history assumed that human nature was the same across time and culture. By the nineteenth century, however, recognition of the diversity of individual cultures and the growth of nationalism brought the decline of the overt sense of universal history. Mink argues, however, that while this decline allowed people to see that there were many stories in history, and different stories about the same events, the implicit idea of universal history remains. It exists in the conviction that the past really "did happen" in a particular way, even though we may never capture what "actually happened."

Thus historians (and the general public) continue to refer to "known facts" and "true accounts" about the past. The idea of true accounts makes it difficult to deal with the multiple versions of history represented in diverse narratives.

Some historians handle the situation by simply rejecting the usefulness of narratives in history. Others, like William Cronon (1992, 1972), rely heavily on the narrative approach, even though often a frustrating process. In the conclusion of a study of historians' narratives about the effects and the meaning of the 1930s Dust Bowl in the Great Plains, Cronon notes that it is possible "to narrate the same evidence in radically different ways." This suggests a vision of history as "an endless struggle among competing

narratives." Yet he reassures the reader (and himself) that his goal throughout "has been to acknowledge the immense power of narrative while still defending the past [as a real thing] to which our storytelling must somehow conform lest it ceases being history altogether" (p. 1370-1372).

What is the immense power of narrative which compels Cronon and other historians to use it, despite their ambivalence? There are at least three important attributes that the narrative approach brings to history: 1) it allows historians to learn about how people have understood their lives and the events around them; 2) it offers a way of organizing and giving meaning to a particular history; and 3) it presents pluralistic pictures of the human experience.

Reissman (1993) notes that narratives reveal how people interpret their experiences. Historians use narratives, for example, to see "not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing," and what they thought about what they did (Portelli, 1991, p. 50). As Mink (1987, p. 194) suggests, "the significance of past actions must ... first ... be understood in terms of their agents' own beliefs." Studies like Banks' *First Person America* (1980), a selection of life histories collected by The Federal Writers' Project during the Depression, indicate the ways in which people thought about and responded to the crisis of unemployment and poverty. Works like Linda Gordon's

*Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (1988), and Beverly Stadum's *Poor Women and Their Families: Hard Working Charity Cases* (1992), use the narratives in case histories to describe how clients felt about the social service system, and how they attempted to shape it to their own ends. Gordon and Stadum's accounts illustrate the particular relevance of the narrative approach to social welfare history. In my own study of professionalization in social work (Leighninger, 1987), I used interviews with social workers to explore the meaning of professionalism in their careers.

Narratives also offer a way of organizing history. Historians not only use the narratives of other people, but also construct their own narratives as a way of presenting history. As Cronon (1992, p. 1349) explains, a narrative plot (with beginning, middle, and end) can be used to bring order and meaning to an "overwhelmingly crowded and disordered chronological reality." Nicholas Lehman (1992), in his poignant chronicle of the great Black migration to America's metropolitan North in the mid-twentieth century, draws on the narrative of one particular migrant from the South, Ruby Lee Daniels of Clarksdale, Mississippi, to tie together his story of the causes and effects of this vast movement in African American history.

Finally, narratives provide much of the "meat" of the new social history, and history "from the bottom up." This

history present stories of ordinary people rather than Presidents, business tycoons, and other elites, and concentrates on their contributions to larger historical processes. It calls attention to the experiences of women and people of color — groups often excluded from formal sources of power and authority. Most individuals in this social history do not leave behind formal documentation of their lives, so their histories must be gleaned through narratives, oral histories, letters, and other informal sources. However, it is important to note one caveat — the use of narrative form does not in itself guarantee a pluralistic understanding of history. Narratives — either those used by historians or those constructed by historians as they present an historical story — can leave things out. An historical narrative about the cultivation of the plains states, for example, can ignore the roles of women and American Indians. Yet individual narratives remain one of the most potent sources of understanding of the lives of ordinary people — of a multitude of backgrounds — in our society.

Debates about the incompatibility of multiple narratives and a single historical "truth" will no doubt continue. Yet, the usefulness of narratives in understanding and presenting the meaning of historical events will continue to compel many historians to use the narrative approach. □

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