

**"Narrativity in
History, Culture,
and Lives"**

Sherry B. Ortner

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At a recent conference at the University of Michigan, called "The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences" (October 1990), a variety of scholars from a variety of fields talked about the shift toward a historical perspective in their respective fields. Professors of anthropology, sociology, history, political science, law, and literature discussed the ways in which history is being used in their fields, and the kinds of impact this historic turn has been having. One of the many things that was interesting about the conference was how difficult it was to stay on the subject of the historic turn. The discussion kept slipping into a consideration of (and a battle over) the discursive turn, the more or less simultaneous shift in all these fields not only to history, but to culture, language, and discourse. In the middle of one of these moments of slippage, the historian Geoff Eley said, "the anthropologists have totally lost control of the culture concept." This is clearly true, and all for the good in my view (I don't view it as losing control but as colonizing all the other disciplines), but the same must be said about the field of history: the historians have totally lost control of the history concept. But while we have some good idea of what the culture concept is or has been, what is the "history concept?"

There was little agreement about this at the conference and actually little effort even to worry about it. I would suggest that the central concept over which the historians have lost control is narrativity, the telling of stories. Actually, it is probably more accurate to say that they have abandoned narrativity rather than losing control over it. There has been a long debate about the fate of narrative history among historians which I cannot summarize here, but in general it is safe to say that simple narrative history, telling stories about the past, or rendering the past as story, is now considered a low prestige line of activity in that field - "mere" narrative history. Indeed when the historians at the conference themselves worried about the historic turn - what does it mean for history that

everyone else is turning to history - they tended very specifically to turn away from narrativity, into a realm that they thought of as "theory." Rather than trying to retheorize their central term, as anthropologists tend to do with culture in every generation, they were embarrassed by it, it was not "theoretical enough".

Now essentially I want to make two points today. First, I want to argue that one of the most interesting modes of contemporary social and cultural theorizing is heavily dependent on narrativity - here I refer, at the risk of boring those who have heard me beat this particular drum before, to the various modes of so-called practice theory. And second, I want to argue that the one major mode of contemporary theorizing that poses itself as anti-narrative - post-structuralist and/or post-modernist theorizing - fundamentally mislocates its own subject matter.

In my version of practice theory, social life is triply narrativized. First, and most obviously, much of what anthropologists collect in the field is stories. They may be fragmented, discontinuous, contradictory, and so on, but unless we force informants to perform unnatural acts like answering questionnaires, making lists, or helping us fill in genealogical grids, what they tell us is stories, or pieces thereof. Second, we make stories - analytic, interpretive, explanatory, and so forth - of their stories. I need not elaborate here on the kinds of stories we make - the list would include all the theoretical modalities in which anthropology has operated since its inception. I only note that most of the kinds of stories we have made, at least in anthropology, have effectively obliterated the storyness, the narrative nature of the material, from which they emerged. Contemporary practice theory, on the other hand, attempts to incorporate and build on those stories, to integrate the intentionality, the purposefulness, embodied in informants' narratives, with our own stories of structural determinations of various sorts. And finally, for both the people we study and for ourselves, local

stories - meaning anything from villagers' gossip to grossly ambitious academic works - are always versions of larger cultural and historical stories - cultural schemas, cultural scenarios, cosmological dramas, and so forth. It is not only us as academics who swim with varying degrees of self-consciousness in a sea of so-called master narratives; this is the general condition of human beings in culture and in history.

At the heart of practice theory is an assumption that actors' intentionalities, purposes, desires are integral, rather than incidental, to both the reproduction and transformation of culture and history. These intentionalities are always heavily structured by cultural frames, and heavily constrained by material and political life, but purposive actors make those frames and constraints as much as they are made by them. Whether one emphasizes the structurally undergirded bricolage of ordinary social life, as Bourdieu does in Outline of a Theory of Practice (1977), or the historically cataclysmic clash of culturally orchestrated practices as Sahlins does in Historical Metaphors (1981), or some combination of the two as I did in High Religion (1989), the point is the same: social actors are engaged in trying to make something of their lives, and neither history nor culture make a great deal of sense unless one understands what they were trying to do - unless one understands their narratives, and the cultural and/or theoretical master narratives from which they construct them.

In all of this Foucault is a pivotal figure. Foucault does not appear to be interested in narratives, and certainly not in intentionalities. Yet Foucault's concern (e.g., 1982) with the ways in which power-saturated discourse and power-saturated practices construct and constrain subjects is central to my version at least of practice theory. One way to read Foucault's arguments about the discursive construction of subjects, and the way I choose to read him here, is that discourses are worthy of analytic and political attention precisely because they

place people in narrative frames not of their own choosing or, to put it more extremely, they systematically rupture people's capacity to narrate their own scripts. Foucault is not suggesting that there could be some world in which everyone is free to narrate him- or herself, only that for every discourse that prevails, there are other discourses that are disabled from taking shape - although there is always the possibility that they may at some other moment of history.

Let me pursue for a moment this notion of the rupturing of narrativity. I said earlier that there is one strand of modern theory that can be taken as largely anti-narrative - what is now commonly called postmodernism. Postmodernism identifies a specific set of characteristics of social life, and of our representations of social life, that have been hitherto unrecognized and/or unrepresented. These include, among other things, what Frederic Jameson (1984) has called "depthlessness" - a kind of flattening of affect in postmodern subjectivities, paralleled by the abandonment of various "depth models" in social theorizing (base/superstructure, ego/id, etc.) - as well as "a consequent weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in...new forms of...private temporality"(1984:18), or in other words a depthlessness of time as well as of subjectivity. As Jameson recognizes, there are at least two stances involved in the recognition of these (and a whole host of related) postmodern phenomena. One stance posits the phenomena as general characteristics of the human social and cultural condition, and celebrates theoretical and methodological shifts that mimic, even embody, them. The other - Jameson's own position, as well as that of several other thinkers - posits the phenomena as historically specific to late capitalism, requiring critical deconstruction rather than celebration.

The postmodernist line in anthropology has tended to be framed within the first of these two stances. Focusing specifically on the question for this paper - the fate of narrativity - postmodernist theorizing in anthropology criticizes

the discipline's unreflexive embeddedness in master historical narratives, whether these be narratives of modernization or of revolution; it criticizes our tendencies to write hypercoherent accounts of fundamentally messy societies, cultures, and events; and it criticizes our tendency to construct actors as coherent unitary subjects and agents with coherent unitary purposes and desires.¹ These points are well taken, so long as - in my view - one does not buy the larger underlying claim: that the radical disruption of cultural narratives, the radical incoherence of cultural forms, and the radical decentering of the subject and of what we think of as subjectivity, are characteristic of the human condition as a whole. My position in other words is closer to Jameson's, in seeing postmodernism as historically specific, but I think Jameson does not go far enough. He is inclined to see all the inhabitants of late capitalist societies as victims of postmodernist disruption and flattening, and I think this is true in certain limited areas, particularly in the realm of consumer culture. But Jameson never arrives at what to me is the central, essentially Foucauldian, point: that the decentering and flattening of subjectivity, and the disruption of both pastness and futureness, are specifically effects of power. Fragmented identities are not equally distributed over the social landscape, even in late capitalism, nor is the inability to formulate and enact one's own projects, to narrate oneself as both a product of a coherent past and an agent of an imaginable future. This point is well put by Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd in their discussion of minority discourse:

But where the point of departure of poststructuralism lies within the Western tradition and works to deconstruct its identity formations "from within," the critical difference is that minorities, by virtue of

1. All of this is consistent both with the ahistoricity allegedly central to the postmodern condition, and with one of the striking characteristics of anthropology's founding postmodern text, Writing Culture (Clifford and Marcus 1986): the absence of any historical thinking in that text. At a time when not only a good part of anthropology, but most of the other human sciences, are taking "the historic turn," the absence of history in that text is remarkable, but consistent with its basic premises.

their very social being, must begin from a position of objective non-identity which is rooted in their economic and cultural marginalization vis-e-vis the "West." The non-identity which the critical Western intellectual seeks to (re)produce discursively is for minorities a given of their social existence. But as such a given it is not yet by any means an index of liberation...On the contrary, the non-identity of minorities remains the sign of material damage to which the only coherent response is struggle, not ironic distancing. (1987:16)

Let me connect this notion of identity damage with a phrase I used earlier, the rupturing of narrativity. There are as many varieties of this process as there are forms of powerlessness, but I will here give two brief examples. The first comes from the 1967 ghetto ethnography, Talley's Corner, by Elliot Liebow. Liebow opens his second chapter with a brilliant scene:

A pickup truck drives slowly down the street. The truck stops as it comes abreast of a man sitting on a cast iron porch and the white driver calls out, asking if the man wants a day's work. The man shakes his head and the truck moves on up the block, stopping again whenever idling men come within calling distance of the driver. At the Carry-out corner, five men debate the question briefly and shake their heads no to the truck. The truck turns the corner and repeats the same performance up the next street. (p. 29)

Liebow goes on to discuss the history of structurally induced failure from which one must understand these men's refusal to work: failure in schools, in relationships, inability to get jobs in the past or to keep them, and especially inability even when working to earn enough to support a family and thus - circling back to other failures - to sustain long term relationships of husbandhood and fatherhood. Liebow says about the men's refusal of menial and low-paid work, in favor of idling about on the street corner,

To the middle class observer, this behavior reflects a "present time orientation" - an "inability to defer gratification." It is this "present-time" orientation - as against the "future orientation" of the middle class person - that "explains" to the outsider why Leroy chooses to spend the day at the Carry-out...; why Richard, who was paid Friday, was drunk Saturday and Sunday and penniless Monday;...[and so forth]. (64)

Liebow argues that it is not true that the streetcorner man has a "present-time orientation;" he has a perfectly good sense of the future. The future

however is fundamentally empty: "It is a future in which everything is uncertain except the ultimate destruction of his hopes and the eventual realization of his fears."(66) The book goes on to describe a kind of postmodern subjecthood of these men, full of contradictions, disjunctions, and incoherencies: they take great pride in their children but do not live with them and cannot support them; they seek good relationships with women but often wind up abusing them; they form intense friendships among themselves which nonetheless burn out quickly and often violently. As Liebow sets up the argument, these patterns emerge from (and of course feed back into) the repeated history of failures, and the fundamental emptiness of the future. In the language of the present argument, they flow from and feed back into a subjectivity that has been systematically denied the possibility of enacting or even formulating projects of self-creation, self-realization, self-respect.

A second example is drawn from a different genre. Long ago I began a paper on female protagonists in Grimm's Fairy Tales (1944) which I never finished. At the time I had never heard of practice theory, but I was interested, in a vague and fuzzy way, in essentially the question I am considering here today. The tales have been interpreted many times over, most recently from a set of specifically feminist perspectives (e.g., Barzelai 1990). My points today pick up on pieces of various other interpretations, but bend them in the direction of the present argument: that one must see the rupturing of narrativity, the fragmentation of the subject's ability to formulate projects, as specifically a condition of oppression. In the Grimm's Tales, the process is almost entirely directed against female characters, and with a systematicity that seems, despite the fact that these tales have no authors as such, virtually conscious and intentional.

In the tales, the idiom in which this point is developed may be shorthanded as an idiom of activity or "agency" on the one hand, and passivity and renunciation of agency on the other. I should note first that for the most part the only consistently active female characters in the tales are wicked - the wicked stepmothers/witches who do have projects (to kill the heroine, to ensnare the prince into marrying their daughters). They are almost always killed at the end, which is of course the end of their narrativity with a vengeance, as well as the end of the story as such. But I want to focus on the heroines, the little girls and young princesses whose tales form a rather surprising 50% of the stories. Most of these heroines are in the mode of what the folklorist Propp calls "victim heroes"(1968): although they are the protagonists, the action of the story is moved along by virtue of bad things happening to them, rather than their initiating actions as in the case of the majority of male heroes. Thus passivity is to some extent built into most of these females from the outset.

Yet a closer look at the tales shows that even many of these victim heroines take roles of active agency in the early parts of the story. Though their initial misfortunes may have happened to them through outside agency, they sometimes seize the action and carry it along themselves, becoming - briefly - heroines in the active questing sense usually reserved for male heroes. But - and this is my central point - they are invariably punished for this. The action of the tales systematically, and often ruthlessly, forces them to renounce this active stance, forces them to renounce the possibility of formulating their own projects and scripting their own narratives.

At the simplest level, I take these stories (as many other writers have done) to be tales of "passage", of moving from childhood to adulthood. For the female protagonists, as I will illustrate here, this passage centrally, almost exclusively, involves the renunciation of agency. Agentic girls, girls who we may say narrate

themselves and others too much - even for altruistic reasons - are punished in one of two ways. The less common form of punishment, first, is the denial of passage to adulthood. Five of the tales have heroines who are fully active and fully successful in enacting their projects. In one version of "Little Red Riding Hood", the girl and her grandmother get up on the roof and successfully kill the wolf and turn him into sausage. In "The Seven Ravens," the girl goes to seek her brothers, and finds and rescues them with great resourcefulness, virtually unassisted. In "Hansel and Gretel", it is Gretel who kills the witch. In "The Robber Bridegroom," the girl is helped by an old woman and between the two of them they bring about the execution of the robber and his band. And in "Fundevogel," the girl actively and resourcefully saves her brother from a wicked old woman. In all these cases of active and specifically successful heroism on the part of the heroine, the girl does not achieve what the vast majority of Grimm's heroines achieve - the mark of female adulthood, marriage. Rather than getting married she returns to her natal home at the end of the story, and does not achieve passage.

In the more common female tale, as we all know very well, the heroine gets married at the end. But if she has been at all active in the early part of the tale, she must invariably pass through severe trials before being worthy of marrying the prince, or indeed being worthy of any man at all. These trials always involve symbols and practices of utter passivity and/or total inactivity, as well as practices of humility and subordination. In "Sweetheart Roland" (a variant of "Fundevogel") she cleverly saves her skin at the beginning, and then saves both herself and her lover, but for her pains her lover betroths another woman. In response, the heroine turns herself first into a stone, then into a flower, and finally cleans house for some time for a shepherd before marrying her sweetheart in the end. In "The Twelve Brothers" and "The Six Swans" (variants of each other and

of "The Seven Ravens") the heroine actively sets out on a quest to rescue her brothers; in both cases, despite her good intentions, she causes her brothers damage as a result of her activities to save them, and goes through a seven year period of complete silence and solemnity (including in one case making shirts for her brothers and in the other case simply spinning for seven years) before getting married at the end.

Marriage is both the end of the narrative and the end of the girl's narrativity. The prince wakes her up, or releases her from her trials, only to take over the remaining action of the story. We do not know what form of subjectivity emerges for the heroine after this point - that is always left to the reader's imagination - but it is safe to say that it is no longer of her own making.

As this example from Grimm's fairy tale suggests, the rupturing of narrativity as an exercise of discursive power has a very long history. Yet even if we accept the point that this process is intensified under the conditions of late capitalism, it is important to recognize the ways in which people themselves have always been trying, and are still trying, to make their lives and worlds coherent, to narrate themselves and the worlds in which they live in stories and practices of order and especially of purpose. In a recent paper, Josh Limsn explored the meaning of barroom dancing and brawling among Mexican Americans of south Texas (n.d.). Limsn argues eloquently that, while life for these poor, ethnically hyphenated, and socially discriminated against people is indeed full of discontinuity, disruption, contradiction, and fragmentation, the forms and patterns of their dancing represent a struggle against these things, an effort, however momentary and inadequate, to construct a world of coherence, or simply a world that they make themselves.

I may seem to have wandered quite far from the questions of history and culture with which I began. Nor has this paper been "historical" in any

commonly recognizable sense. But my point has been that the doing of history and the doing of anthropology share (or should share) a common figure, the figure of narrativity. Historians have increasingly turned away from narrative history as untheoretical, yet important domains of social theory are recognizing the centrality (and the theoreticality) of narrative in both the making and the interpreting of social life. Moreover, as I have tried to illustrate, those forms of social theory that pose themselves as anti-narrative fail to understand, or choose to ignore, that the rupturing of narrativity is always an act of violence and an effect of power.

This point is beautifully embodied in Salman Rushdie's recent novel, Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1990). Haroun's father Rashid is a story-teller who puts together wondrous stories from the many colored streams of the great Story Sea. The father's ability to tell his stories is paralyzed by the operation of dark forces that are intentionally polluting that Sea. The son goes off to save his father, and eventually confronts the Cultmaster of the forces of silence. He says to him:

"But why do you hate stories so much?..Stories are fun..."
 "The world, however, is not for Fun," [the Cultmaster] replied. "The world is for Controlling."
 "Which world?" Haroun made himself ask.
 "Your world, my world, all worlds," came the reply. "They are all there to be Ruled. And inside every single story, inside every Stream in the Ocean, there lies a story-world, that I cannot rule at all. And that is the reason why."(161)

Haroun goes on to defeat the forces of silence, and to restore his father's ability to tell stories once again. I end with a plea for us - anthropologists and historians alike - to recognize both the creative and the subversive power of stories. We need to work with theoretical frames that incorporate a sense of all the things that I have subsumed under the rubric of narrative in this paper - purpose, intention, desire; human practices and human projects - even as we continue to recognize the powerful operations of society and culture in the

formulation and enactment, as well as the rupturing, of those narratives. For without human narratives in our theories, we can only construct victims.

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