

POLITICAL NARRATIVES

This series of 5 linked panels explores the topic of political narratives, described elsewhere as ‘stories people tell about how the world works, how they explain the engines of political change, and the role they see themselves, and those whom they regard as being part of their group, as playing in this ongoing struggle’ (Andrews 2007:8). Broadly speaking, stories – both personal and communal – are pivotal to the way in which politics operates, both in people’s minds (i.e. how they understand politics, and their place within and outside of the formal political sphere) as well as to how politics is practiced. These stories are not just within the domain of the individual, but are built upon the collective memory of a group, just as they help to create how that memory is mobilised and for what purposes. The five panels offer a range of perspectives on political narratives: from acute trauma (massacre in Norway) to daily life (women’s experiences of pregnancy); from politics in the playground to the Indian parliament; from joining the political cause in Northern Ireland to leaving the English Defence League; from Rosa Luxemburg’s love letters to a documentary of post-industrial town in Poland; from French hip-hop to the legacy of living with the Stasi. Hannah Arendt has argued that “storytelling is the bridge by which we transform that which is private and individual into that which is public, and in this capacity, it is one of the key components of social life” (Arendt 1958) Taken together, these five panels demonstrate the potential of political narratives to bridge the gap between individual storytelling and seismic shifts of history.

Political narratives I: ‘European moments’, trauma and identity

Chair: Molly Andrews

Discussant: Richard Sparks

Catarina Kinnvall, University of Lund

“Trauma and the Politics of Fear: Europe at the Crossroads”

This paper is concerned with the unfolding of traumas as structural and socio-psychological narratives focused on the bordering of identity and the governing of past, present and future. Proceeding from a Lacanian conception of trauma and fear, the paper isis centred on hegemonic counter narratives, even crises, involving the bordering of Islam and Muslim identity on the one hand and the bordering of Europe and national identity on the other. This European trauma, or psychological moment, is perceived in terms of Chosen Traumas and Chosen Glories, referring to the mythologization of past events that are retold, reinvented and awarded new meanings in the present. Such traumas and glories can create a foundation for radical action in which hegemonic interpretations of identity turn into normalizing narratives that

justify violence. Through an empirical discussion of a number of recent European events, such as the London bombings and the massacre in Norway, this provides a novel perspective on trauma and the politics of fear as structural and socio-psychological processes.

Marta Rabikowska: University of East London

“Visual narratives of a post-Communist Estate:
Transgression of memory and the ruins of community”

By using a video camera I investigate the personal narratives of the members of one community in a post-industrial town in Poland. In the process of analysis I approach the local narratives as representations prompted by myself - once a member of the very same community. By appointing myself a role of the receiver and the producer of memories ‘on location’, I create a framework for representation understood as an embodied experience. In this paper it is the act of creation of the visual narrative, which enables the investigation of the memory of the past and the social conditions of the present. By reflecting on the process of filmmaking ‘on location’ materialised in the memories of the local people, I want to understand how collective memory builds into the social and cultural identity of a post-industrial community, what narrative of place and community is produced through memory and what implications this narrative has on the political and economic situation of the people and the place they live in today.

Neil Ferguson, Liverpool Hope University

“‘My fence-sitting days are over’:
The role of critical moments in fuelling political activism in Northern Ireland”

Northern Ireland has endured a history of violence and political turbulence since its inception in 1922 which have only begun to abate with the strengthening of the peace process over the last decade. This presentation is based on a series of interviews with some of the ‘players’ who have been involved in violent and non-violent political action in Northern Ireland since the late 1960’s. The focus of these interviews dealt with the participants interpreting the processes which led to them to ‘get off the fence’ and begin to operate as political activists. In many ways the findings resonate with Denzin’s (1980) ‘epiphany’ moments, in which the participants paid particular attention to critical incidents which caused them to re-evaluate their lives, and make the transition away from a normal life to one in which they engage in a campaign of

legal or illegal political activism. The presentation will explore how these critical moments collide with social and environmental factors to force the individual to engage into a period of reflection that has the potential to create a radical change in personality and worldview strong enough to push the individual to ‘put their heads about the parapet’ and begin a new life as a political activist. These findings highlight the degree to which individuals bear, and accept personal responsibility for engaging in political activism, as opposed to activism simply being stimulated by uncontrollable dispositional or situational forces.

Political Narratives II: Challenging normative narratives

Chair: Shirin Rai

Discussant: Maria Tamboukou

Marion Smith, University of Edinburgh

“Women’s work: Undergoing pregnancy,
the management of self, and encounters with care”

This paper discusses how women use narrative techniques in qualitative research interviews to convey a deep sense of challenge to identity in the face of pregnancy and biomedical care priorities. All the women were experiencing desired, healthy pregnancy, but suffered from one or more of the often expected (and accepted) so-called ‘minor disorders’. These are conditions that are considered harmless to mother and baby and too common to be of interest, but which nevertheless can be severely painful or distressing and disruptive of daily life. The heavily medicalised context of antenatal care in which women become patients requiring professional oversight but without crossing a clear division creates a framework within which women attempt to maintain their usual lives and sense of self – or have to relinquish them.

Ruth Ballardie, Victoria University

‘Tomboys’ and ‘Tarts’:
Performing childhood memories of female masculinities

One's earliest childhood memories may often be critical sites of both anchorage and change in personal identity, situated as they are, so close to that ongoing question of becoming – 'Who am I?'. The common association between tomboy and childhood, as moments of ambiguity and gender transgression 'contained' by age-specific boundaries, belies the rampancy of the imaginary of female masculinities for many women, and their significance to the performativity of gender identity throughout life. This paper explores the performance of female masculinities in the childhood memories of two women, marking out the tensions and ambiguities engendered, and (briefly) following their traces in ongoing dialogues about gender identity across their lives. Action (who acts, who should act) and (hetero) sexuality emerge/merge in relation to the sheer pleasures of physical embodiment in a world amongst significant others. While these narratives are positioned in relation to local gender norms and the possibilities for transgression, this work offers a counterpoint to debates about female masculinities centred on solely on resistance/conformity, by considering the affectivity (and effects) of 'doing female masculinity'.

Corinne Squire, University of East London

“Living on: HIV, neoliberalism and borderlines”

This paper reports on a study of support used and wanted for living with HIV in the UK, involving 50 semi-structured interviews, the majority conducted during 2011, with a group of participants split roughly equally between gay men, and women and heterosexual men. The paper discusses three common narratives appearing within the interviews and their accompanying countervailing narratives: narratives of medicalisation and demedicalisation; narratives of normalisation and non-normalisation; narratives of marketisation, and living outside the market. The paper relates these prevalent narratives to research participants' liminal, at times resistant and in some cases explicitly oppositional positioning as subjects within neoliberalism. The findings' relations to findings from other qualitative HIV research are also discussed.

Political Narratives III: Contested belongings and political identities

Chair: Corinne Squire

Discussant: Catarina Kinnvall

Marion Smith and Richard Sparks, University of Edinburgh

“And we scream back”:

Schoolyard stories, communities of sentiment and the micro-politics of civility”

There may be many ways in which we learn about appropriate conduct and come to a sense of ourselves as moral agents. Some of these might involve emulating admired others or telling stories about overcoming challenges and dilemmas. Others however arise from instances of injustice or from experiencing ourselves as powerless subjects of abuses of authority. In this paper we discuss some examples of nine-year old children’s accounts of these issues in a school setting. We demonstrate both how the children generate collective stories – their ‘community of sentiment’ (Appadurai) – in the face of a common experience of powerlessness and how these joint products might be disentangled from the individual narratives that comprise them. We make some suggestions about theorizing the social character of moral emotions and about how speakers craft their stories of unfairness as appeals to the impartial sympathy of the witness. We argue that these procedures are of value in helping us to think about how we respond *in situ* to civil and uncivil treatment at the hands of others. The violation of conduct norms evokes intense reactions, but there may also be avenues to repair that allow participants to move beyond thinking about social life as a series of ‘continual contradictions’ (Hume). Approaching matters in this way carries implications for how we study the moral life of institutions at close quarters and perhaps indeed for thinking about larger political questions as they bear upon the generation of moralities, memberships, enmities and exclusions.

Joel Busher, University of East London

‘I still support what the movement stands for but...’:
On leaving the English Defence League’

The English Defence League has been one of the most controversial social movements in the UK since it first emerged in 2009. Although the leadership and supporters have sought to distance it from the traditional far right, claiming that it is a single issue movement concerned only with resisting the advance of ‘militant Islam’, critics accuse it of fanning the flames of islamophobia and have raised concerns that the movement represents a return to the days of far right street violence last seen in the 1980s when the National Front was active. Confronted with accusations of being racists, fascists and extremists, for some activists involvement with the EDL has required a deep level of commitment and a constant labour of resisting and reordering the identities attributed to them by opposition groups and the mainstream media. Narrative has been at the core of this process – constructing themselves as part of a heroic vanguard defending the nation, their opponents as extremists and enemies of British and ‘western’ values – but what happens to these narratives when activists start to distance themselves from the movement? And what happens to the activist when the narrative starts to unravel? This paper explores the life history and biographic narratives of activists as they distance themselves from the EDL.

Jacomijne Prins, Free University, The Netherlands

“Collective identity in deliberation: Storytelling as a strategy to negotiate contested belongings among Moroccan adolescents”

Narrative is often used to study the construction of belonging. The notion of belonging becomes activated when there is a sense of exclusion. In The Netherlands, Moroccan Dutch adolescents share a collective story characterized by evaluations that suggest a widespread experience of exclusion (Prins et al, submitted). The exclusion the participants in my focus groups talked about, didn't refer to their exclusion from the Dutch identity alone: Participants often implicitly talked about their exclusion from the ethnic Moroccan (“when I am in Morocco I feel Dutch/ people address me as Dutch”), but partly and distinctly, also from the Muslim identity (“in the Netherlands I am not able to observe the rules of islam as I should”). In this paper, I want to explore how Moroccan Dutch adolescents, in face of this multiple exclusion, (re)construct specific belongings through storytelling. Moroccan-Dutch adolescents in my focus groups share several identifications. They are all of Moroccan descent, they are all Muslim and, all of them share the Dutch nationality. In my focus groups both the Moroccan and the Muslim identity have been made salient. In the context of the groups, people then, made strong identity claims regarding their belonging to each of these groups. Identity claims regarding the Dutch nationality were seldom made. However, at various moments, I discovered that participants implicitly or explicitly contradicted earlier identity statements or expressed how they thought thinking about particular belongings was ‘difficult’ for them. I found that in the partly normative context of the focus groups, in which everybody considered themselves to be either Muslim and/ or Moroccan, people used ambiguous and hypothetical stories to invite other people to think about the contested belonging to the Dutch identity.

Mastoureh Fathi, University of East London

“Classed identities: Narratives of Iranian migrant women in Britain”

Through narratives of Iranian women migrants working as doctors in Britain, this paper looks at the importance of dialogical approach to narrative and how the meanings of ‘classed identities’ are co-constructed in the interview setting. I argue that classed identities are constructed through the narration process of the class-coded performances. Narration itself becomes a class coded performance of one's classed identity. So class is constructed at two performative levels, performing and

narrating. This paper will show particular interview extracts in order to draw on the importance of narrative in construction of meanings of class and the construction of the meaning of class through narration for specific audiences.

Political Narratives IV: Reflections on a Political Life

Chair: Marion Smith

Discussant: Neil Ferguson

Maria Tamboukou, University of East London

“Love, Narratives, Politics:
An Arendtian reading of Rosa Luxemburg’s Letters”

In this paper I explore relationships between love and politics by looking into Rosa Luxemburg’s letters to her lover and comrade Leo Jogiches. My discussion is framed within Hannah Arendt’s conceptualization of love as a manifestation of existence through the Augustinian journey of memory and as an existential force binding together the three faculties of the mind in her philosophical analysis: thinking, willing and judging. While I emphasize the importance of epistolary narratives in carrying traces of Luxemburg’s political and amorous discourse, I also point to the limitations of working with edited and translated collections of letters. What I argue is that letters are crucial in enacting plurality and communication and that Luxemburg’s letters to her lover and comrade intensify rather than obscure the force of the political in opening up radical futures.

Ann Phoenix, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education

“To take or not take it politically:
Accounting for political engagement through the racialised family story”

One of the intriguing elements of narrative analysis is how childhoods that apparently share many features are drawn on in different ways to account for adult habitual practices and worldview. This paper considers how adults who share similar experiences that marked their childhoods and have often had long-lasting impact account for themselves as having become or not become politicised by it. The paper draws on a study of the narratives of adults who grew up in households that many would call ‘non-normative’ because they were serial migrants who spent time living away from their parents or grew up in a household whose members were visibly

ethnically different, or were language brokers for their parents. It examines the ways in which some reconceptualise their childhoods as productive of politicisation, while others (sometimes even siblings) eschew politics. The paper aims to throw some light on what accounts for a narrative engagement with a political life. In doing so, it aims to illustrate why some of their childhood stories are reflected on as communal, while others are claimed as individual.

Molly Andrews, University of East London

“Political lives over time”

The collective political memory of a community – its struggles, how they were fought, and the contested meaning of what those battles represent – is constantly in flux. One moment of acute political change – the East German ‘bloodless revolution’ of 1989 – serves as the focus point of this paper, as key political actors who help to create the unrest look back on their political involvement at that time. As people look back on their own political engagement, do they see this as something which is integrated into the self they later became, or is their activism constructed as being tied to a very particular moment in their own development? Do they link their protest(s) with political struggles of the past? Of the present? Can one extrapolate from the narratives of political activists to speculate on the development of social movements more generally?

Political Narratives V: Politicisation narratives and the reworking(s) of memory

Chair: Molly Andrews

Discussant: Ann Phoenix

Cigdem Esin, University of East London

“Narratives of Re-politicising selves”

The paper explores the complex and sometimes contradictory self narratives of a group of cultural migrants in London. It draws on interviews with 4 women from Turkey who chose London to do their postgraduate studies and stayed continuing their professional careers. This paper focuses on the narrative moments in their interviews in which they describe how they have been re-constructing their selves as migrants in relation to political contexts of both Turkey and the UK while they're positioning themselves simultaneously inside and outside of both contexts.

Ronan MacDubhghaill., Centre D'Etudes Sur L'Actuel et le Quotidien (CEAQ), the Sorbonne,

“Digital narratives and the resources of contemporary European nationalists”

This paper will address the question of social and cultural memories as they have come to be expressed, transmitted, read and re-read in the digital age. In particular, this study seeks to explore and understand the architecture of socio-cultural memory in narrative form, one of the main symbolic resources of nationalism. The presentation will survey the role these narratives of memories play in the broader narratives of contemporary European nationalisms, such as they are being expressed and understood in real time by people around the continent, via the various and ever-expanding resources of the internet. This investigation shall ask questions about the implications of these narratives, particularly concerning the networking and expanded audience penetration which the internet enables. This is a question of great importance for contemporary Europe, under the shadow of political and economic uncertainty, threatening to unravel decades of peaceful cooperation

Shirin M. Rai, , University of Warwick

“Narratives of politics and leadership: Indian women MPs”

Women MPs in India are in leadership positions by the virtue of the fact that they are elected members of parliament. And yet, within the political system they often don't see themselves as leaders but followers of party leaders. Even more startling is the fact that many MPs do not describe what they do as politics at all. Rather, they define their work as 'social service' – helping the poor and the needy, helping the *janata* or the people. Based on interviews with 20 women MPs over a period of one year, in this exploratory paper I outline these narratives of politics and leadership and suggest that women's precarious position within parliament, party politics and on the borders of the public and the private generates this vocabulary of service, which is seen as an appropriate characterisation of women's public work. Defining their work as service allows them the space to define themselves in particular ways - as not ambitious, as workers rather than leaders in their parties, and also as social workers within their communities rather than competitors in the political arena and finally, as 'problem solvers' rather than political leaders. I reflect upon whether their subjectivities are crafted to present themselves on a continuum which takes them from their hearths and homes to the homes of others who need their help. The discourse of service within the

home continues to define their work outside it and whether because of this their articulations of leadership qualities also reflect a 'modesty' of ambition? I argue that such a narrative about their work allows their work to be 'de-politicised' – it becomes more about the delivery of public goods and social choice than about competition over scarce resources that define traditional understandings of politics