The Power of the Past – What Makes Us Believe That "Those Were the Days?"

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I Tyranny of the Past

Of course we turn to the past when we're worried about the future. The more uncertain we are about what will come, the more we cling to what has been. The less we know about the future, the more convinced we are that we really understand and believe what once we were. Colossal forces – above all in the world of IT and artificial intelligence – are shaping a revolutionary transformation of almost every aspect of human life. The result is a deep uncertainty.

The tyranny of the past over contemporary life has two principal pillars. Both are anchored deeply in human psychology. These mental posts are so firmly fixed that they cannot simply be eradicated. The result is a prison from which escape is an impossibility. They relate to elemental human experience. First, the most comfortable place we all ever were in was the mother's womb. Everything after that is exposed, uncertain, insecure. No wonder that we are nostalgic and crave a level of security that we can never again attain. Appropriately we howl when we come into the world. Therapy sessions try to reenact that primal scream, so that we can break out of the prison. Or we can be much more restrained about our nostalgia. In Japan, there is a business around Emperor Akhito's abdication of canning air "from a previous era" to resell.

A second fundamental drive, almost as powerful, is the way that the human mind is hardwired to be receptive to stories. An old Hassidic saying quoted by Kafka explains that "God created man in order to tell stories." A new feature of academic analysis over recent years is simply the extent of discussion of and reflection on the human addiction to narratives. It has recently been given a grounding in the dynamics of human evolution. The narrative form is satisfying, according to contemporary neuroscience, because we have evolved designed to assess other people's minds and motives, and only that sort of explanation consequently gives a psychological satisfaction. That was an adaptive response to humans' very early need to act persuasively in group settings. The downside is that in this interpretation of mind the results in today's social universe may be completely misleading: it served humans well when they wanted to chase and hunt animals, but is a handicap in a more complex world. Narrative becomes hopelessly confused with an explanation of causation, when it was evolved to deal with a completely different demand. Because the explanations superficially but erroneously produced by narrative are so intuitively graspable, they prevent a deeper understanding of what may cause social and political phenomena.[1] In consequence, the narrative addiction frustrates attempts to produce reasonable solutions to the dilemmas thrown up by our modern group behavior.

It has by now become a cliché of business and politico chitchat to say that we need a new narrative. International assemblies such as World Economic Forum or the IMF and World Bank Annual Meetings now resound with a litany that the old "narrative" of neo-liberalism is broken, and that a new "narrative" is needed. But then narratives are used in a sloppy way to replace the analysis of cause and effect. Thus, Meg Whitman at Davos: "We are in a unique point of time. We need to create a new narrative and restore hope for people who have been economically dislocated,

[1] See the powerful polemic by Alex Rosenberg, How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience of Our Addiction to Stories, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT press, 2018.

especially from technology."[2] Economists are now shifting to the analysis of "Narrative Economics."[3] Others refer to the "subjectivist turn." We can demonstrate how wishful thinking generates contagion,[4] and how ideas about the world shape the world. But the supremacy of narrative can also mean the justification for tall stories, for the "fake it till you make it" approach of Elizabeth Holmes (of the Theranos fraud) or the pretend German-Russian heiress Anna Sorokin/Delvey, the truck driver's daughter who fooled New York high society.

Narratives in fact often stand in the way of concrete and effective solutions. The most compelling and comprehensive ones are so fundamental that they lock us in a mental prison. Many of the new causal narratives go back a long way, and trace bad outcomes to fundamental problems that cannot easily be fixed: to basic emotions (greed), or to institutional features that originated hundreds of years ago. Thus the 2007–2008 financial crisis is widely attributed simply to human greed; or bad governance structures in today's Europe to the powerful legacy of early modern bureaucratic monarchies in Spain or the Kingdom of Naples. And what can we today do about either of those basic facts? These are in fact not really new narratives: they go back to the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

The immediate recognizability of stories is the key to their success and their emotional and dramatic power. They create an "aha" effect because of the way our minds work. That dramatic recognizability requires taking elements out of the past and weaving them in a way that is appealing because it is familiar and at the same time strange. The narrative captures the imagination and brings it into dangerous and uncharted areas.

We should acknowledge that this development is not simply a product of very recent communications developments, or of the new social media that have flourished since the 2007 introduction of the iPhone. Fake news is a notoriously old phenomenon. It was a major element in making the French Revolution. The 1989 revolution in Romania was set off by vastly exaggerated accounts of a massacre in Timisoara, that then led to claims that the whole affair had been made up. When a character – Deirdre Rachid – in a popular British television soap opera (*Coronation Street*) was sentenced to prison in 1998, a mass campaign for her release began and a Member of Parliament urged the Home Secretary to act. Gullibility is endless. The last age of globalization one century ago had its spectacular frauds and deceptions too – think of the drifter Wilhelm Voigt who as the *Hauptmann* (Captain) of Köpenick took over the city treasury. All that the new media has done is to make the deluge of fake news appear more uncontrollable, or to create the narrative that it is controlled by someone powerful and sinister. But was the flow of stories ever really controllable?

II A Case Study: Brexit

Nostalgia and a lust for narrative combine today in a powerful brew. Take Brexit. On the face of it, it looks like a crazy collective choice that has sent politics, society and perhaps the economy into an almost unrecoverable meltdown. Social scientists have found it hard to explain where it came from. The UK was, according to social surveys, a rather happy and contented place in comparison with the rest of the European Union (see Figure "Country Results", with survey results indicating

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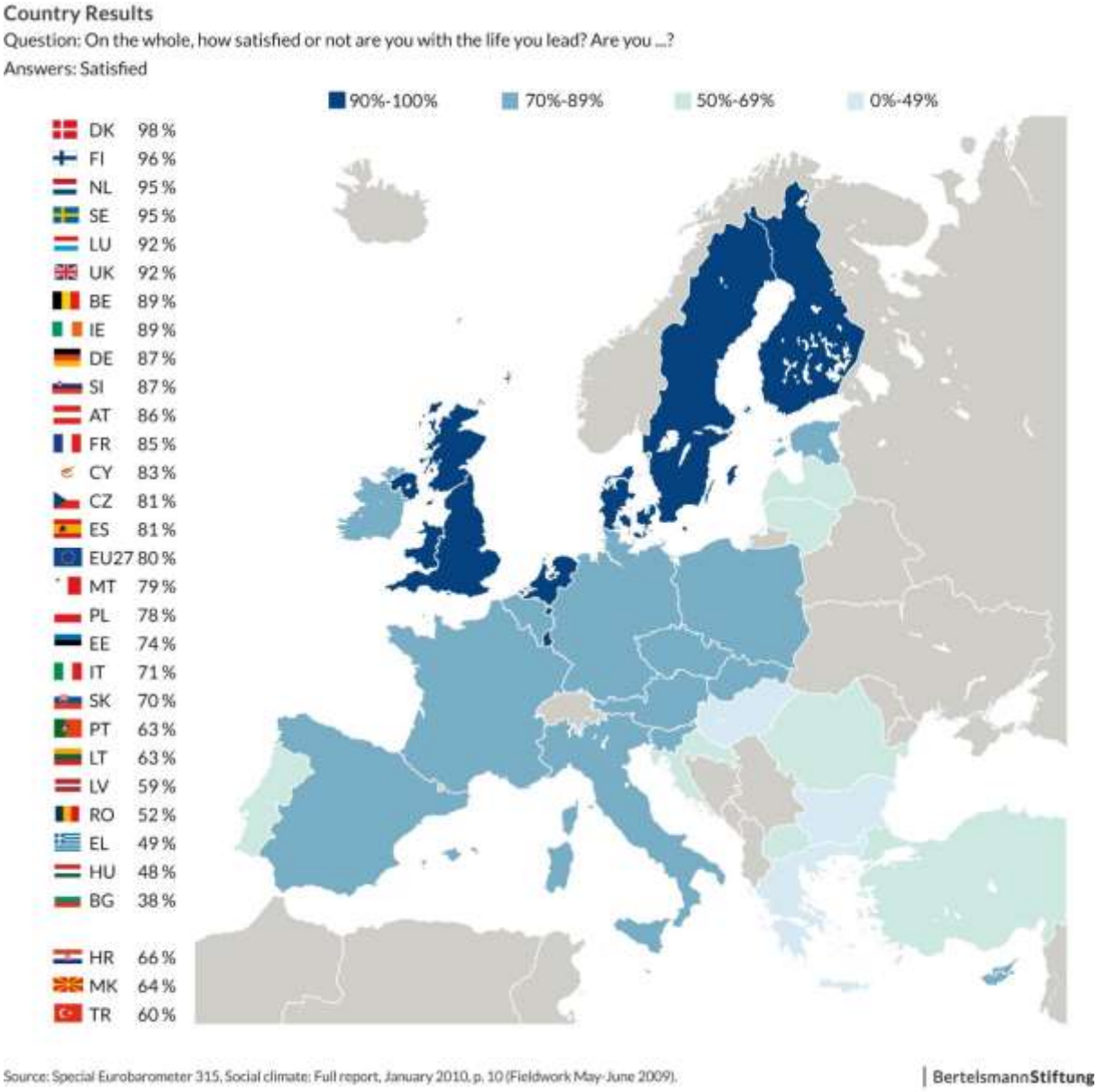
2 https://www.weforum.org/press/2017/01/in-times-of-uncertainty-positive-narratives-offer-hope-to-the-economically-displaced/.

3 The focus of Robert Shiller's presidential address to the American Economic society, "Narrative Economics," American Economic Review, 107/4, 2017, 967–1004.

4 Bénabou, Roland. Groupthink: Collective Delusions in Organization and Markets. Review of Economic Studies, 80/2, 2013, 429–62.

increasing levels of satisfaction (this seems to have been a general trend in northern Europe, but not on the southern and eastern periphery).

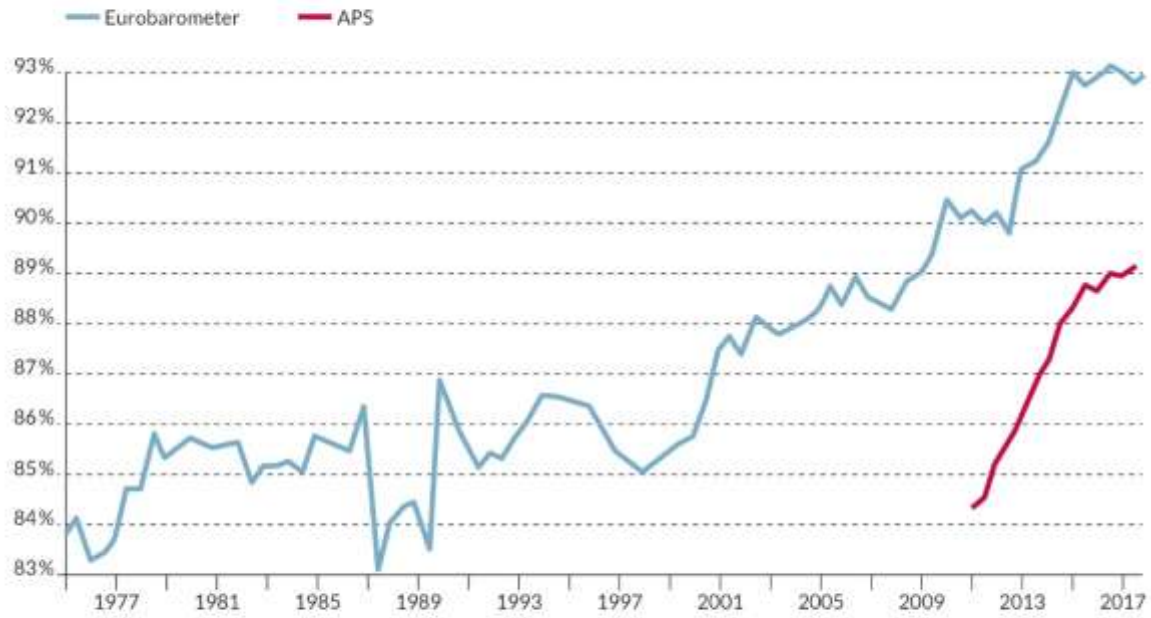


Brexit is thus hard to explain. Some think it is a reaction to globalization, and that the Brexit vote is tied to a China import shock. Some explain it in terms of a reaction against immigration. Some hold it is a consequence of the austerity policy pursued by the British government since 2010. Some explain it as the outcome of the manipulation of social media and networks, perhaps or probably by a sinister foreign power. (Indeed, there has been no public inquiry into the financing of the Brexit campaign, into the source of the funds that a not very rich businessman, Arron Banks, poured into the Leave campaign.) All these explanations have some plausibility, but they cannot account for the emotional force of the movement to sever Britain's links with Europe. Narratives kicked in.

Satisfaction with Life

The share of people who are satisfied with their life has grown consistently for two decades.

Proportion who say they are 'fairly satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their life on the whole: UK.



Notes: The blue line shows a five-year moving average of the proportion of responses to a question about life satisfaction on a four-point scale. The orange line shows the proportion of people reporting life satisfaction of 6 or more out of 10 in the APS.

Source: George Bangham, Happy now? Lessons for economic policy makers from a focus on subjective well-being, Resolution Foundation, February 2019, p. 36. https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2019/02/Happy-now-report.pdf.

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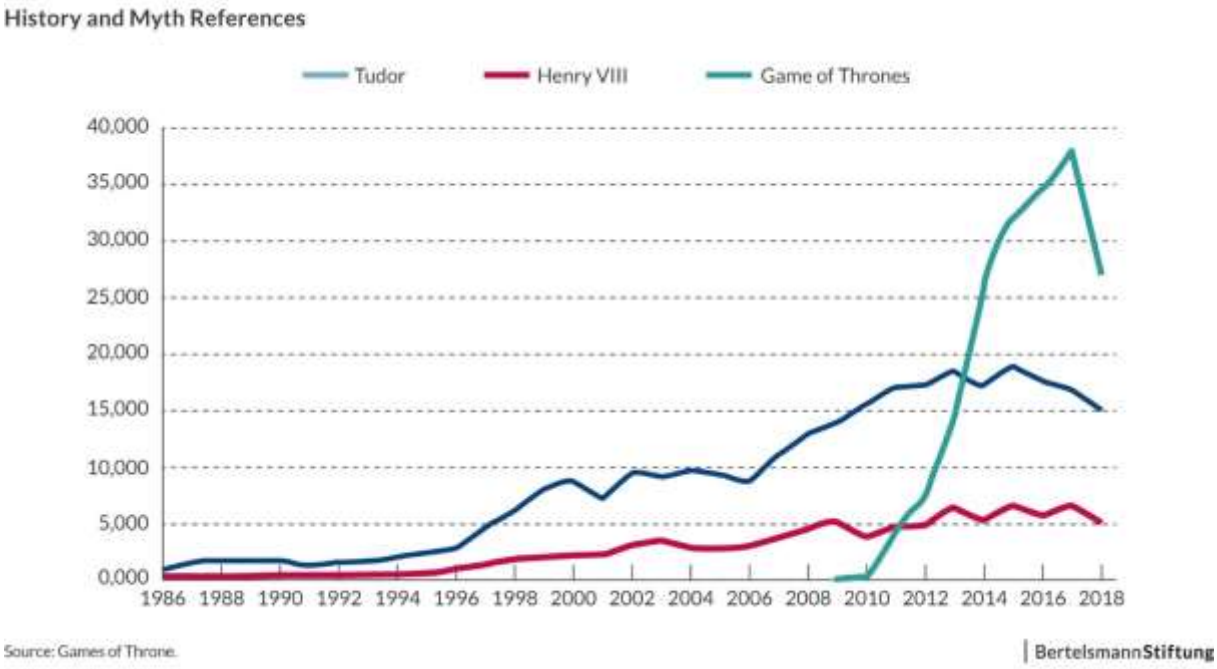
The first is the passion for English history, especially for the story of the Tudors. That obsession is hardwired into the English consciousness because it has shaped the English language itself: Shakespeare and the English bible translation created the modern language with a set of views about England's role in the world embedded in it.

It's obviously not that anyone thinks that life was actually better under the Tudors. Almost every experience was more uncomfortable – even for the very rich – and often acutely and dangerously so. Attempts to put people back into a historical setting rapidly produce the realization that it is simple everyday features that are the most difficult to do without. For instance, the most common complaint of those who volunteer for long-term experiments in historical living is the absence of shampoo. They might not worry so much about the absence of antibiotics because in the case of serious illness they are simply taken out of their historical recreation.

So why the fascination? There is obviously plenty of drama in the Tudor era, especially about the two monarchs who really molded the English national pageant, Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth. Their lives are, in the first place, intense family dramas. Henry VIII's increasingly urgent need to produce a male heir in order to ensure political stability led to the six wives. His daughter Elizabeth needed to escape an impossible commitment in marriage, because that would bring diplomatic ties that would alienate the parties not chosen. The result was a bewildering swirl of rumors and scandals. These are compelling narratives, just as human interest. Modern people appear to find voyeurism about the love lives of Anne Boleyn and Elizabeth compulsively appealing.

The Tudor family dramas have another deeper appeal: they constituted the occasion when England defined itself against Europe. Above all, the famous preamble to the 1532 Act of Appeals, limiting judicial authority outside the Kingdom (because the King did not trust the Pope to annul the marriage to Catherine of Aragon), began with the first declaration of a modern notion of sovereignty.



The preamble to the statute makes its points by referring to history: "Where by divers sundry old authentic histories and chronicles, it is manifestly declared and expressed that this realm of England is an Empire, and so hath been accepted in the world, governed by one Supreme Head and King having the dignity and royal estate of the imperial Crown of the same, unto whom a body politic compact of all sorts and degrees of people divided in terms and by names of Spirituality and Temporalty, be bounden and owe to bear next to God a natural and humble obedience: he being also institute and furnished, by the goodness and sufferance of Almighty God, with plenary, whole, and entire power, pre-eminence, authority." Here was a use of history, the "divers sundry old authentic" narratives, to enforce a new politics. So this was the age when people turned to narrative.

The last years of Elizabeth's reign then produced its own obsession with history, in which history plays – above all Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* and William Shakespeare's *Richard II* – were used as a way of intervening in the factional struggles of the court, and justifying the removal of rulers who broke conventions. The torments and rebellions of Elizabeth's favorites, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, and then Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, were seen through a retrospective lens. And, of course, that story has come to us today, via Friedrich Schiller and then nineteenth century Italian opera (notably Donizetti), to Margot Robbie's reenactment on film of Queen Elizabeth. The greatest actress of every generation simply has to play Elizabeth: from Sarah Bernhardt in 1912, through Flora Robson, Bette Davis, Jean Simmons, Judy Dench, Glenda Jackson, Helen Mirren, Cate Blanchett, etc., etc. Thus, modern Britons live in a Tudor imaginative world.

The second driver of modern British politics is a revived passion for *made-up* narrative. In particular one work of fiction has become a mirror to the zero-sum politics of the modern world. A remarkable feature of both Brexit and the Trump experiment in the United States, which treated Brexit as an experimental or trial run, is the degree of reference and allusion to the multi-season television series *Game of Thrones* (GOT). The fiction has its origins in Shakespeare's history plays on the rivalry of the houses of Lancaster and York, and in Maurice Druon's narrative cycle of medieval French kings, *Les rois maudits*. GOT has become the ubiquitous way of talking about politics around the world. At the 2018 World Bank and IMF meetings, Indonesia's President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) started with the announcement that everyone knows from GOT: "Winter Is Coming." One of the key drivers of Brexit in the UK, Michael Gove (once the Education Secretary, now the Environment Secretary) explained his deep addiction to the series – a passion that he shared with David Cameron. He

recorded a video in which he explained, “My favorite character in Game of Thrones is undoubtedly Tyrion Lannister. […] And you see there this misshapen dwarf, reviled throughout this life, thought in the eyes of some of his followers to be a toxic figure, can at last rally a small band of loyal followers.”[5] In this imagination, politics is both about sustained suspicion and continual conflict.

Donald Trump has his own GOT addiction. The dramatic image of challenge and struggle has become an integral part of his own visual self-presentation (see Figure “Tweet President Donald J Trump).

Tweet President Donald J. Trump

Source: @realDonaldTrump 06:57 AM - Apr. 18, 2019. | BertelsmannStiftung

The maker of GOT, HBO, complained about this abuse of its intellectual property, issuing a statement: “We were not aware of this messaging and would prefer our trademark not be misappropriated for political purposes.”[6]

These debates about stories and their use and abuse are not at all new. Narratives have constantly created a sort of echo chamber, in which strong emotions bounce around. That’s how English and British history have worked. Many of the developments of today in which history and historical myth becomes a template to shape contemporary reality look like a replay of the interwar era: an alarming point brilliantly conjured up by the German TV series *Babylon Berlin*. At that time, there was also a worry about living standards, and some people contrasted the decline and deterioration of incomes with the solid prosperity of the Kaiser’s Germany. But that was not the main focus of historicizing narratives. They went back farther into the past, and deeper into the psyche. It was the story of the Nibelungs (memorably depicted in cinema by Fritz Lang in silent movies in 1924). The stab in the back of Siegfried was used to depict Germany’s national humiliation as the outcome of an illegitimate act. Since the 1930s, a debate has raged about the extent to which Hitler was the consequence of the music and mythology of Richard Wagner. It’s clear that Wagner did not provide

5 Shipman, Tim. All Out War. London: Collins, 2016, p. 153.

6 https://variety.com/2018/politics/news/trump-game-of-thrones-poster-1203018462/.

specific content: what his music generated was feeling. The narration could be filled with all kinds of new content.

III Facts, Data and History

Is it possible that “facts” have the potential to disturb certainties about the “good old days” and are therefore refused and seen as means of “political manipulation”? Objectively, we are becoming richer, healthier (for the most part) and happier (again, for the most part). But also more anxious. It’s also easy to link narratives about personal situations and traumas with stories of national decline: hence the appeal of Make America Great Again. MAGA might even be a sort of therapy session. Income growth of the US population rose 58 percent between 1978 and 2015, but the bottom half fell by 1 percent. Is that slight decline really measurable or noticeable? But it has produced a powerful narrative about being left behind, and about the “forgotten man,” again a narrative from the 1930s.

Migration and the way it is debated offer a fine example of the problem. Migration concerns constitute narratives that fit easily into a framework of national myths – and then are very easily racialized and used as propaganda. If populism is about identifying only a part or a sub-section of the population as the “true people,” it depends on explaining why others are illegitimate intruders. Social science seems to have an answer. In the abstract, migration is good. An inflow of skilled people raises general skill levels and thus everyone’s prosperity. Low-skilled labor may undertake tasks for which it is impossible to recruit domestic workers. Emigration allows individuals to realize their potential, and generates flows of remittances to the home country. Everything in this world vision conjured up by social science is rosy. But then there are alternative visions: even highly paid professionals may see new and well-qualified immigrants as undesirable competition. Low-skilled workers worry about pressure on wage levels. Emigration societies think about brain drain. These arguments get power when they are presented in a world of examples and cases. There is a tendency to think of all people from one area as fundamentally similar. Thus, in 2015 in Germany, in the initial enthusiasm about a welcoming culture (*Willkommenskultur*), Syrian migrants were depicted as doctors, dentists and teachers. Then as Germans started to speak about a migration challenge, the migrants were reassessed and now visualized as poorly educated and mostly illiterate. And then, as the migration challenge morphed into a migration crisis, they were violent and disturbed individuals who would steal and harass and rape.

It is common to think that there is an easy answer to incendiary narrative: people who are worried about immigration should be informed that the share of the immigrant population (almost exactly 10 percent in both the EU and the US, as a matter of chance) is much less than they think. In the US, the average perceived share is 36 percent, in Italy 26 percent.[7] There is a similar persistent overestimation of the share of Muslim immigrants, as well as of the cost of immigration to the welfare state, and a parallel significant underestimation of the level of education of immigrants. Incorrect information is spawned by worry and fear, but better information (which is easily available) doesn’t seem to help the worried to feel more secure.

Misperceptions of this kind lead many liberals to see today’s political contestations as a struggle between irrational ideas and hard science. Economics warns of the harmful consequences of Brexit or trade wars or restrictions on migration, natural science tells us about the dangers of climate

[7] Alesina, Alberto, Armando Miano and Stefanie Stantcheva. Immigration and Redistribution. NBER Working Paper 24733, 2018.

change. But then all of the scientific argumentation and evidence can be effectively countered by cases and stories of the harm done by foreign competition or alien workers.

Again, this debate is not a new one. The contemporary turn to narrative is quite a break with almost a century over which policy makers tried to use social science to improve the world. Especially in the middle of the twentieth century, social science tried to evolve more and more compelling presentations and analyses of causes – creating brilliant simplifications. Addressing the fundamental causes – of poverty, of disease or of violence – would be the first and essential step to eliminating them, and thus correcting the problem.

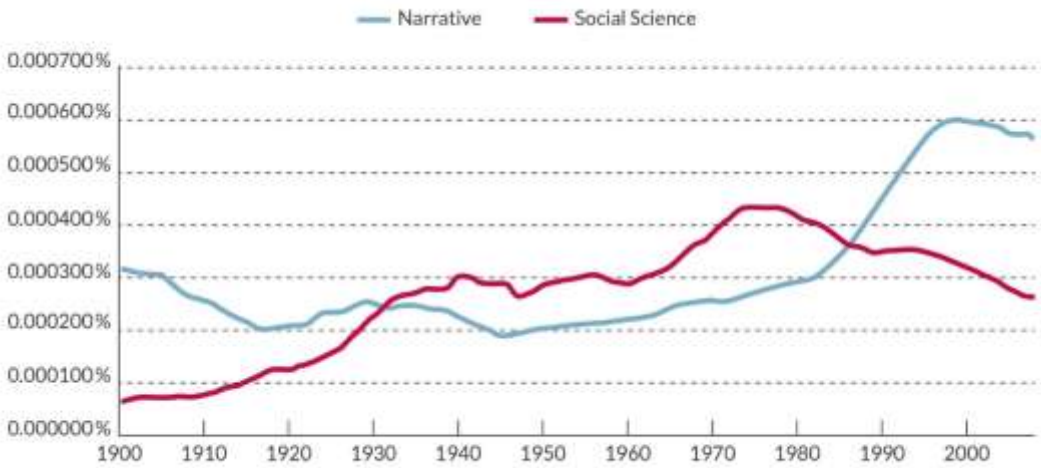
The most powerful version of the scientific approach was shaped since the 1930s by economists who used national income accounting to steer the management of the macroeconomy. The conceptual tools were provided by John Maynard Keynes, and the causal mechanism was inherently straightforward: underemployment and the waste of resources were caused by deficient demand. Another version of economic science linked monetary growth to inflation. Here again the causal mechanism was simple, and the solution obvious.

After the financial crisis of 2008, conventional economics looked like a failure. The Queen of England memorably asked British economists why they had failed to predict the crisis. The Brexit debate became an attack on experts and technocrats.

Maybe the crisis led to a call for a new social science expertise. Keynes' biographer Robert Skidelsky saw a "return of the master." But oddly, the movement for a new Keynesianism gained little traction, and instead the world embarked on a gigantic experiment in monetary easing. That move to monetary solutions was combined with a deep ambivalence towards fiscal deficits: on the one hand, they seemed to be producing unsustainably high levels of debt; on the other, it was easy to make the simple arithmetic calculation that if the easy-money world continued, anything was possible and anything could be financed.

The financial crisis had many causes and thus no obvious answer. It inspired a profound and challenging uncertainty. The only way to travel through the thicket of complexity was to tell a story. Over the past fifty years, we can see how the use of the word "narrative" increases (in the relative measure of the Google N-gram analysis of every printed book, in this case in the English language), while "social science" becomes less popular (see Figure "Frequency of Words".

Frequency of Words



Source: Google N-Gram Viewer Measurement of Frequency of Terms.

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The modern policy confusion recalls the experience of Soviet planners in the 1920s and 1930s. They were not supposed to take into account any interest rate, so there was no time preference and no reason why the most expensive project should not be the best. So railroads were given very wide curves, and engineers proposed multiple tunnels to take goods through mountains and avoid gradients. Anything became possible. But then the reality caught up, and the planners noted that projects were simply not being completed because they had been planned on such impossibly generous terms. At that point, the only way that they could justify themselves was by a simple and mendacious narrative of success.

Many people in consequence believe that 2008 discredited conventional economists and their economic advice. That judgment is over-stated: the problem of much of conventional economics was that it neglected money and finance; but the older economic models still have an enormous value in assessing the impact of policy. What was discredited was an approach that relied on rather short runs of data to formulate much larger calculations of probability and risk. The simple story about causation had broken down.

IV Dealing with Myths: Narratives about Narratives

Historians have set themselves up for their own pratfall when they construct their own narratives about narratives. Its signs are manifest in many countries, as people struggle over which narrative should win out. The combination of large-scale political and economic uncertainty in the aftermath of the global financial crisis with the return of narrative had an unfortunate consequence. It turned historians into pundits, and made the critics of conventional social science over-dependent on an approach that simply isolated random narratives. Many historians have turned themselves into providers of an expertise that is proving to be much more problematical than the simple policy prescriptions of pre- and post-crisis economists. A number of prominent British historians have played a devastating role in pushing Brexit, based on fallacious notions about the centrality of sovereignty to the British constitutional tradition. It is surely just as crazy and limiting to think about Brexit in terms of Henry VIII formulating doctrines of sovereignty in opposition to the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical courts subject to the authority of the Roman pontiff.

History is now biting back, in a nasty way. Reflecting on the legacy of the Great War has also been an occasion for reviving the mentalities of a hundred years ago, and not for warning about the dangers of conflict. Michael Gove as British Education Secretary launched a polemic against those historians who emphasized the futility of the war and called it a “just war” directed against the “ruthless social darwinism of the German elites.” This looks like a thinly veiled allusion to the power struggles of contemporary Europe. But 1914 is not the only possible or attractive point of comparison in interpreting the English past. After 2014, there came 2015, the two hundredth anniversary of the battle of Waterloo and the final defeat of Napoleon. Some British politicians go back to the Hundred Years War (1337 to 1453). The British conservative politician Enoch Powell used to explain that the European Common Market was nothing more than the revenge that the Germans and the French imposed for the defeats that Britain inflicted on them. The celebrations and commemorations were full of symbolism related to contemporary disputes.

On the other edge of the European continent, evocative historical dates are being used or abused in a similar way, to conjure up images of the enemy that resonate in contemporary political debates. A few years ago, a Russian film simply entitled *1612* evoked the Time of Troubles, when weak leadership meant that Russia was invaded and subverted by insidious Polish aristocrats and capitalists. The film’s director, Vladimir Khotinenko, said that his audience “didn't regard it as something that happened in ancient history but as a recent event. That they felt the link between

what happened four hundred years ago and today." As Russia struggles to bring Ukraine into its orbit, another ancient date looms large: 1709, when Tsar Peter the Great crushed the Swedish and Cossack armies at the battle of Poltava (in Ukraine). That battle was also the subject of another recent Russian film, *The Sovereign's Servant*. Russian television commentators describe the countries most engaged in supporting a western or European-oriented Ukraine as seeking revenge for Poltava: Sweden, but also Poland and Lithuania, which had been brought into the Swedish orbit. The western and eastern fringes of Europe obsess about dates that recall the struggles with the core of Europe: 1914, 1815, 1709, 1612, 1532, 1337.

By contrast, the European core is obsessed with overcoming or transcending history, with working out institutional mechanisms for overcoming the conflicts that scarred Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. Europe and the European idea are a method of escape from the pressures and constraints of the past: a sort of liberation.

Charles de Gaulle evolved a complicated metaphysics in order to explain his and his country's relationship with the problematic past. Every European country had been betrayed. "France suffered most because France was more betrayed than the others. That is why it is she who must make the gesture of pardon. […] It is only I who can reconcile France and Germany, because only I can raise Germany from her decadence."[8] Winston Churchill (a direct descendant of the victor of Blenheim) had a rather similar vision, in which he thought of a way of overcoming past divisions and nationalistic quarrels. After the Second World War, he explained that "this noble continent is the fountain of Christian faith and Christian ethics. If Europe were once united in the sharing of its common inheritance, there would be no limit to the happiness, to the prosperity and glory which its three or four hundred million people would enjoy."[9] De Gaulle and Churchill were master story tellers – that indeed was the key to their political success. De Gaulle started his memoirs with an evocation of France as "the princess in the fairy stories or the Madonna of the frescoes, bound for a destiny eminent and exceptional."[10] And Churchill – Isaiah Berlin rightly summed up his talent, his genius: the "single central, organizing principle of his moral and intellectual universe was an historical imagination so strong, so comprehensive, as to encase the whole of the present and the whole of the future in a framework of a rich and multi-coloured past."[11]

V What Is to Be Done?

We need to see how rich and multi-colored our past is. How it goes beyond nostalgia. The development of such a sensibility is only possible through dialogue in which there is a diversity of participants.

We should NOT press for public authority or government to lay down a line on how history should be interpreted. That is fatuous. The strategy always backfires. A now famous memorandum prepared for David Cameron's Conservative government laid down strict rules about the appropriate ways of conducting Remembrance Sunday: "We must ensure that our commemoration does not give any support to the myth that European integration was the result of the two World

8 Peyrefitte, Alain. C'était de Gaulle. Paris: Gallimard, 2002, p. 76-77.

9 Churchill, Winston. Speech delivered at the University of Zurich, 19 September 1946.

10 De Gaulle, Charles. The Complete War Memoirs of Charles De Gaulle. Carroll & Graf Publishers: New York City, 1998.

11 Clarke, Peter. Mr Churchill's Profession: Statesman, Orator, Writer. London: Bloombury, 2012, p. 249.

Wars."[12] "Myth" here is simply a way of dismissing one particular narrative about a complex story that the authority disagrees with.

The ultimate success of important stories is that they can be told in several ways. Take the Wagnerian Ring cycle. Some people saw it as providing a myth about the heroic warrior qualities needed to shape a German nation. Some people believed it was a tale about the necessity of socialist society that would overcome the laws of capitalism. Some thought of it as a drama of the individual psyche. All are plausible. What is not plausible is the telling of a story in one way.

We need a culture in which multiple and ambiguous narratives are presented. The first necessity is to find ways of breaking down the carapaces of internet "bubbles." Create more links. Randomize. Pre-modern societies had a notion of carnival and charivari (skimmington ride, *Katzenmusik*), when the existing order was stood on its head. What about a social media platform that randomizes interactions, and occasionally or regularly gives the opposite of what the user is seeking? Cafes and restaurants that seat strangers together? Parliaments with randomly selected individuals?

That new institutional setting might also find a way to promote respectful communication. The modern world needs anger management. The British Parliament, once the epitome of civilized debate, has become a forum for boorishness. Rage is the fuel of social disintegration, and it is weaponized by social media. In medieval theology, St. Bonaventure set against the vice of anger or wrath (*ira*) the virtue of science or knowledge (*sapientia*). That is one answer, but it may seem a dull one. Another possible candidate is humor as a way of binding strangers in a community of the imagination. A Talmudic tradition holds that a lesson taught with humor is remembered.

We need a culture in which the best weapon against one-sided myths is laughter and ridicule. The comedian Stewart Lee brilliantly took on the narrative of the then UKIP leader Paul Nuttall that immigration was damaging the UK, and that immigrants would be better staying at home and improving the societies from which they came. Lee's monologue thus started by complaining of the waves of Poles who come in to fix plumbing and other features that the British had broken and didn't know how to fix. Then Lee went back in time, and back and back. Before the Poles there were the Indians, reinventing British national cooking, and before that French Huguenots, with odd ideas about transubstantiation, and before that Anglo-Saxons, with ship burials, and the beaker folk, with drinking vessels, and the Neolithic people and pictograms, and fish crawling up on to land who should properly have stayed where they were, in the sea, and made the sea better.[13] We wail when we come into the world because we have lost security. We need to laugh in order to regain our souls.

Let's be clear. It's not a good idea to elect comedians as political leaders. Bepe Grillo has not solved any Italian problems. The German comedian Jan Böhmermann has helped to bring down the Austrian coalition government but is not an obvious replacement. Donald Trump is properly an entertainment figure and should not have been in politics: the only business that he really succeeded in, real estate, simply produced four bankruptcies. Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskiy is likely to be another national embarrassment. David Cameron's 2006 description of UKIP voters as "fruitcakes and loonies" looks more and more like an accurate description of the range of pro-Brexit candidates for the European Parliament. But it is a good idea to use all the weapons intelligence can muster against a pervasive anger that is making for collective stupidity. Instead of whipping up

[12] Wallace, Alberto. My Tory colleagues have actively whitewashed Remembrance Sunday to fuel their dreams of a hard Brexit. The Independent. November 3, 2017. See also Kevin O'Rourke. A Short History of Brexit. London: Penguin, 2019, p. 6.

[13] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zw9qN6_eXOg

passion, humor allows us a distanced vision in which we might become self-critical as we realize an underlying futility. An example of a trivial everyday implication: just put up many videos of road rage to let people see that they are being clowns and fools.

Finally, please notice what I have done in this essay. The organizers – the Bertelsmann Stiftung – asked me to tackle the question, “Has the quantity or quality of the urge to return to the ‘good old days’ actually changed in the last years? Why is that so?” According to my mandate, I should underpin the answer to this social science investigation through “the use of visual illustrations (graphs, flowcharts, maps).” What did I do instead? I started with the social science and then gave up and tried to tell a story – a convincing narrative.

VI References

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