The Discursive Effect of National Narratives: A Theoretical Framework

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Nations as storytellers

Humans are by nature story-tellers and story-interpreters. Stories are part and parcel of our social lives, whether as individuals or groups, filling our lives with information, interpretations, moral evaluations and ideas.

This paper offers a preliminary theoretical framework for the analysis of the effect of “national narratives” on political discourse in the domestic and international arenas. The paper starts with a discussion of the definition of political narrative, and then qualifies national narratives as a distinct genre of political discourse which is driven by the will to expand its influence on social discourse. Next, the paper focuses on the structure of national narratives. This section claims that dominant national narratives expand due to their unique structure which enables their multiplicity in the social arena. The structure of national narratives is analyzed in light of the fractal geometry and the dynamic of their changes considering the theory of chaotic systems. The idea is that a concise version of a national story (Shenhav, 2005a) is multiplied in variations across people, organizations and places, producing a structure of discourse that rests on self similarity. Based on examples from the Israeli case, the paper claims that the fractal geometrical structure plays an important role in spreading the core elements of national stories, while at the same time adapting them to dynamic environments. This framework can help us understand the dynamic of changes in national narratives, and their potential effect on national and international political discourse.
Narratives identity and the formation of political communities

Narratives have always drawn the attention of philosophers, thinkers and scholars in modern history. The role of narratives was central to Plato’s concerns on the potential danger of stories and myths in his Republic; it was part of Aristotle’s Poetics and Rhetoric; and it played an important role in Quintilian’s Institutio Oratoria. More recently, there has been increasing scholarly attention to the effect of narratives (e.g., Buthe 2002; Cornog 2004; Fischer 2003; Fisher 1985; Hajer 1995; Ish Shlom, 2010; Ku 1999; Linde 2001; McBeth et al. 2007; McGee and Nelson 1985; Patterson and Monroe 1998; Roe 1994, 1998; Yanow 2006) with a "growing belief that narrative represents a universal medium of human consciousness" (Lucaites and Condit 1985, 90).

Awareness of the uses of narrative in academia and in daily life is on the rise among social science scholars and humanities scholars working in the societal arena (Franzosi, 1998, 2004). Stemming from the basic understanding that human beings are essentially story-telling animals (MacIntyre, 1981) and that narratives “help us understand ourselves as political beings,” (Patterson and Monroe, 1998) this interest has led to the development of many methodological approaches to the study of narrative, under different definitions and widely differing understandings of the field (Bamberg, 2006).

By and large, as put forward by Fischer (2003), the narrative mode is not only understood as a basic form of communication, but also as a "mode of thoughts" that "furnishes communication with the particular details out of which social meaning is constructed."

Moreover, "it is through storytelling that people assesses social positions in their communities, understand the goals and values of different social groups, and internalize social conventions" (179). The presence of narratives in the political arena can, therefore,
have a dominant impact on the way people perceive their political reality. Hajer (1995), for example, sees narratives as "discursive cement" that keeps a discourse-coalition together (65). Fischer (2003) regards narrative as a distinct "cognitive scheme", which imposes "coherent interpretation on the whirl of events and actions that surrounds us"(163). Narratives, he asserts, place "social phenomena in the larger patterns that attribute social and political meaning to them" (179). This unique and distinct quality of the narrative form resides in the concept of 'narrative identity', developed by Ricoeur (1991). Narrative, according to this concept "provides the practical means" by which persons "can understand themselves as living through time, a human subject with a past, present, and future, made whole by the coherence of the narrative plot with a beginning, middle, and end" (Elliott, 2005, 125). Somers’ discussion of ontological narratives points to a similar idea when she refers to the need to recognize the place of ontological narratives in social life so as to explain issues such as “collective actions” and “group-formations” (Somers, 1994, p. 618). Obviously, identifying the connection between narrative and such a key issue in the study of politics as collective action and group formation makes a very strong claim about the place of narrative in the study of politics (Sheafer, Shenhav and Goldstein, 2011). The use of narratives in the political domain situates contemporary occurrences in a broad temporal context of collective experiences and bestows upon the individual a story of collective agency, as in “the Nation” or “our State”. Thus, narratives enfold present political events in a time frame which can exceed the current event, giving their audience a sense of familiarity and continuity with events that they personally could have never experienced (Shenhav, 2009).
Political narratives and national stories – A conceptual introduction:

There is ongoing scholarly interest in the proper way to define narratives (Franzosi, 2010, Shenhav, 2005b). While definitions vary, most scholars of narrative research agree on the element of time in the definition of narratives, but disagree on some of the additional elements. Some see narrative in a formalist structural way, settling with thin minimal criteria such as the representation of at least two events, while others add additional criteria to the definition, such as causality, non-random connections between events (Shenhav, 2005b).

The concept of political narratives is comprised of two complicated concepts, “politics” and “narrative.” Obviously the definition of political narratives rests upon the meaning given to each concept and upon the interaction between them (Shenhav, 2005b). The attempt to define political narrative can draw its main parameters from the scholarly discussion of how to define political discourse. Wilson (2001) suggests that the concept “discourse” may be regarded as “political,” either because of the thematic elements it addresses, or due to the context in which it arises. Following Wilson’s discussion concerning the definition of political discourse, there seems to be room to distinguish between formal and non-formal political discourse. Thus, formal political discourse can arise within political frameworks (parliamentary debate, cabinet discussion, public demonstrations, etc.), or alternatively, is created by political figures to achieve political goals. Non-formal political discourse, on the other hand, is concerned with political issues or relates to themes normally considered political, such as power relations, collective decisions and social conflicts. In fact, the definition of non-formal political discourse can be fairly broad. It can even widen the definition of political discourse to
include almost any kind of discourse (Shenhav, 2005b). All in all, political narratives can be either political in content or in context.

When it comes to the definition of narratives in the political domain, I shall adopt a minimal and structural definition, so as not to exclude, in advance, political narratives which do not comply with additional requirements such as causalities and closures. The main reason is that these additions are often the product of cultural conventions either in themselves or in the way they are operationalized. The wide expectation for causality in narratives (Shenhav, 2005b) makes a good example. First, one can raise the question of whether, when it comes to issues of identity, one must add causality as a kind of sign of approval at having a “proper” narrative. Second, one should raise the question of whether, when having criteria for causality in narratives, we do not project cultural conventions either on causalities or on the way they should be represented. The expectation for “closure” or a beginning-middle-end structure is yet another example.

When it comes to the political domain, no one quite knows what will happen in the end as a social event unfolds. In fact, confronting this expectation of closure is a crucial challenge for actors who wish to tell social stories and for social scientists who wish to define them, but this confrontation is occasionally done by avoiding the manifestation of “a closure”.

I therefore prefer a rather “thin,” technical and minimal definition of narratives, such as seeing narratives as the representation of real or fictive events and situations in a time sequence (Prince, 1982, p. 1; see also Prince, 1980, p. 50). According to Rimmon Kenan (2003, p.3) resting on Gennette (1972), there are three major aspects in narratives.
(a) story, that “designates the narrated events, abstracted from their disposition in the text and reconstructed in their chronological order, together with the participants in these events.” (b) text, which is the “spoken or written discourse which undertakes their telling.” The text is what we read or hear. The text is always filtered through a prism.

(c) narration, that is the act or process of production of the text. In the real world, there is an agent who is responsible for the production of the narrative. In the textual world, there is a narrator who is considered as “fictional” in literacy critiques, and we shall define him/her as representational. In the case of political narratives the narrator can be a wide variety of political actors, parties, governments, legislative branches or even states.

National narratives

National narratives can be defined as great or grand stories that nations tell about themselves. The question of who qualifies to speak on behalf of the nation and the more basic question of what is a nation is obviously beyond the scope of this paper. A reasonable operative approach to study national narratives is to focus on dominant national narratives, namely, those which are told by the dominant elite and officially approved by state documents. Thus, as an operative definition, we can apply the following criteria: national narratives are (a) about the nation; (b) told by official documents or representatives of the nation.

One can identify a wide variety of potential narrators of national narratives, be they leaders, journalists, intellectuals and activists. But when it comes to the political domain it usually happens that the speakers are collectives, such as parties, organizations and governments. These collective speakers tell stories on a daily basis, addressing a broad
variety of issues. In addition to these stories, states have ways of producing the common, dominant, sometimes even institutionalized ways of telling the story of the nation. This usually refers to the most basic question of who we are, where we came from, and where we are going.

Identifying national narratives

Even when we wish to locate our analysis on dominant narratives, we must keep in mind that there are no official banks where we can find them. However, there are some ‘national vitrines’ where states usually put their official stories for their own people and for other nations. These include preambles and introductions to constitutions, where, in many cases, the state presents national narratives, consisting of historical accounts and potential, usually desirable, futures. Declarations of independence and national anthems can also be considered potential sources for national narratives. Other possible discourse arenas for such narratives, still in the political realm, but perhaps with lower profiles, can be inaugural speeches, ceremonial texts and speeches during national days. In fact, since we are talking about ”large” stories or “the story of stories” (some might use the terms “meta-stories,” metanarratives, grand narratives or master narratives), it makes sense to extract major components of the stories from a variety of texts. Tracing the above definition of “story,” one can extract main events and characters out of a variety of texts so as to evaluate the basic components of national stories.
Collectivity and multiplicity: On the definitive elements of national narratives

National narratives are different from individual or poetic narratives, at least in two major aspects: The first regards the communication scheme relevant to national narratives, which consists of collective speakers and a collective audience. The second is that while poetic narratives usually strive for originality and uniqueness, national narratives strive for multiplicity. In other words, the core “desire” of national narratives is to be produced and reproduced. These two elements are closely connected, and mutually enforced. The narratives are reproduced by the collective, which is enforced as a collective by the use of narratives. This circulative condition sets a unique context for national narratives, which challenges, at least to some extent, traditional narratology, the field that was designed “to focus not on what narratively organized sign systems mean but on how they mean, and more specifically on how they mean as narratives” (Herman, 1999, 218). National stories are not about originality and are not necessary qualified by parameters of plots, drama or the functions known in life stories (e.g. Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Labov, 1972, 1997, 1999). The urge for reproduction that constitutes the logic of national narratives goes beyond the attempt to dominate the political discourse, but rather to be present in a broader category of social discourse encompassing various “social languages” (Gee, 1999, p. 20), such as in the discourse of education systems, courts, and universities.

Figure 1 demonstrates the above conceptual framework, showing the drive to expand beyond the formal boundaries of the political realm.
In fact, the driving power of national narratives does not stop by affecting different
“social languages” (Gee, 1999, p. 20), but also breaks the frame of the language and
dominates what Gee calls Discourses with capital D, which integrates “language, actions,
and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (Gee, 1999, p. 21).
In our case, one can see the effect of national narratives on a variety of characteristic
behavioral elements, on national rituals on memorial and independence days and even on
national costumes.

**National Narratives as Fractals**

Tracing back the two fundamental characters of national narratives – collectivity and
multiplicity – places the discussion of the structure of national narratives in the
framework of scholarly considerations of textual hierarchies. These became acute
following the emergence of deconstructive theories and methods, which raised the
question of whether texts can set up hierarchies. One of the most intriguing voices within
this debate has been put forward by Alexander Argyros, professor of literary studies, who
conceptualized narrative “as a hypothesis about the nature of an existing slice of reality or
about the potential consequences of certain variations on a model of the world” (Argyros,
Narratives, he asserted, “perform on an intersubjective cultural level what our central nervous system does at the level of the individual” (Argyros, 1992, p. 667-668). He claims that “[i]n both cases, models of reality are generated and compared with either other models or with incoming sensory data”. (Argyros, 1992, p. 668). His theoretical discussion of narratives and grand narratives, which unlike small narratives “tend to flow between the inaugurating moment and the telos of a larger entity such as a nation, humanity, the spirit, or the universe” (Argyros, 1992, p. 662), has important methodological implications. “Traditional narrative, and its most ambitious subset, grand narrative, can be understood in the light of chaos theory as an evolutionary adaptation which is able to tap the remarkable ability of chaotic systems to be simultaneously conservative and innovative in the difficult task of accumulating, storing, transmitting, and creating culture.” (p. 672). Pointing at the fractal shape of narratives which “display similar features at different scales” (p. 666), Argyros presents a new understanding of the analysis of national narratives or grand narratives.¹

**Multiplicity, collectivity and fractal geometry**

The following section attempts to go one step further in the above theoretical framework. In this section I shall try to adapt the fractal shape geometry to a qualitative-structural analysis of national narratives.

A fractal is “a mathematically conceived curve such that any small part of it, enlarged, has the same statistical character as the original” (Oxford English Dictionary). Borrowing Argyros claims that “in general, there is no clear demarcation between small and grand narrative, so it is most useful to consider them as asymptotic poles on a continuum”. (Argyros, 1992, p. 662).
the basic idea from the world of mathematics to the sphere of discourse, rests on the idea of self similarity, in which any part of the fractal is similar in shape to a given larger or smaller part. Although a fractal is a complicated shape, its generation is usually based on a rather simple equation. For example, the Mandelbrot set, the best known fractal, shows that infinite complexity can be described by simple rules. In the case of the Mandelbrot, this infinite fractal is based on the iteration of a rather simple formula (the following Mandelbrot set: \( Z = Z^2 + C \)).

Borrowing this idea from the world of mathematics to the worlds of discourse construction, what we should be looking for is a textual element equivalent to the formula. While it would be too naïve to search for rigid pattern for the construction of textual fractals, we can still borrow the logic behind this complexity as a potential model that explains the structure of narratives. In that case assuming that narratives are kinds of fractals or have fractal logic, we can search for elements which are multiplied time and again, and which create a set of meanings that generate the entire narrative or grand narrative. So how do we find these basic elements? Since this way of looking at narratives is only at its early stages, or to be more precise has not really started, we should either search for ways to “generate” narratives in laboratory conditions under these assumptions, or to search – post factum – for the “equations” that generated the narratives we know. This paper will attempt the latter. But how can we do that? The option which I shall present here traces back the basic definitive element of narratives – the element of time. If narratives are about characters acting in \textit{temporal dimensions}, we might search for those parts of narratives which to a certain extent generate the entire narrative. One possible way to do that rests on the idea of concise narratives (Shenhav,
Concise narratives are “segments (a few paragraphs) of a political text (e.g., a speech, an interview, a political discussion) that contain its entire chronological range. In other words, ‘concise narratives’ capture both the earliest and the latest periods mentioned by the speaker in approximately two to three paragraphs” (Shenhav, 2005, p. 316). Indeed, these parts of narratives have been found to carry crystallized versions of the entire narratives (Sehnhav, 2005). From a practical point of view, it is relatively easy to identify these sections in any given text. The following is a demonstration based on the case of the Israeli Declaration of Independence (1948). By and large, Israel makes an excellent case study for this demonstration as the attempt to present a “national story line” is very straightforward and easy to identify. It is, thus, a good place to start exploring the textual qualities of these points of gravity in national narratives. Figure 2 sketches temporal references of the declaration. The X-axis shows the paragraphs of the declaration while the Y axis represents five temporal categories: mythical/biblical past; exile and pre-state era; current time – the act of establishment of the state; future; far future. (For a similar coding strategy of temporal dimension in narratives see Shenhav, 2009.)
While the declaration as whole narrates the Israeli-Jewish story of the return to Zion, the sections where we have the entire temporal range in a single paragraph seem to point together at the more basic constitutive elements behind the document. The first section refers to the “setting” of the narrative:

ERETZ-ISRAEL [(Hebrew) - the Land of Israel, Palestine] was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they first attained statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books.²

This section shows that in addition to the temporal dimension that set up the basic criterion to identify the concise narrative, there is a very dominant spatial dimension.

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This should not come as a surprise when referring to national stories, but it might have important theoretical and methodological implications as we can see that the “formulas” behind national narratives are in fact what Bakhtin (1981) terms “chronotopes” (“time spaces”). Bakhtin, who discussed this concept in the context of literary criticism, defines the “chronotope” as the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84). In our case, we can move this definition to the political sphere, and refer to intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are politically expressed in the national narratives.

Moving forward to the second paragraph of the concise narrative might give more substance to the political dimension of the time-space relations.

WE APPEAL to the Jewish people throughout the Diaspora to rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel in the tasks of immigration and upbuilding and to stand by them in the great struggle for the realization of the age-old dream – the redemption of Israel.3

This paragraph that calls for all Jews to rally round the Jews of Eretz-Israel, provides a rather interesting way of phrasing the Zionist goals: the “redemption of Israel”. This is quite intriguing, as the concept of redemption is not very common in Israeli political discourse, and obviously not with the secular majority of the state who were the dominant sector responsible for this document. But if we stay consistent with the theoretical framework and the method suggested to identify the equivalence for the fractal “equation” – this demonstration might shed light not only on the explicit parameters of the national narratives but also on a more implicit level. If we take a look at both

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3 The Hebrew original version for the English translation “age-old dream” is שָׁמֵאַט הַדָּוִד [Shemayt ha-doroth], literally the aspiration of all generations. 
paragraphs we can see that the infrastructure of Jewish nationalism is not only based on the Bible, but also on the concept of redemption that had at least emerged from religious discourse. The concept of redemption is perhaps the third dimension one must integrate when searching for the basic elements of national fractals – in addition to time and space. That is the “political” dimension which is integrated in the time-space (or chronotop). If this analysis holds, we can understand that the story of the Jews as related in the declaration, from biblical times through the exile and the massacre of millions of Jews in Europe to international recognition of the declaration and future prospects, is totally a story of redemption.

In this sense, we might infer, at least from the above demonstration that a major element within the Jewish-Israeli national narrative rests on a multiplicity of the eternal urge for redemption. If, indeed, the temporal perspective is the right way to identify these formulas, even in these short textual units we can find some of the keys for the multiplicity of these national narratives. Thus, when it comes to the eternal perspective in the first paragraph, it is accorded to the Book of Books given by the Jews to the “world”. The Bible, in this sense, is recruited as a potential arena that can echo the national narrative of the Israeli Jews.

**Concluding Remarks: National Narratives and Interstate relations**

The fractal form of social narratives in which a concise version of the story is multiplied in variations within the whole narrative and across people, organizations and places, is a major instrument for safeguarding core national elements in a dynamic environment. It brings implicit and explicit characteristics of national narratives to echo in variations
throughout the political and perhaps also non-political arenas. The result is that narrative has a core of identity, on the one hand, and the flexibility to adapt to changes, on the other. Though the core of the narrative remains, there are variations across people and occasions. This structural discussion suggests that social narratives are not a simple aggregation, but rather the emergence of fractal-shaped narratives multiplied in certain variations.

There are at least two potential implications for the theoretical framework suggested here. The first is the potential changes in national narratives. Obviously, as discussed above, there is constant competition between different narratives within states. Consistent with the theoretical framework presented in this study, one can expect many “formulas” for a variety of national or other collective narratives in political and social discourse. By all means the versions that have been institutionalized enjoy a prior position compared to other competing narratives, but there may be occasions when they lose their dominance in the discourse. In such cases there may either be a problematic gap between narratives held by the people and those of the state institutions, or a change in state narratives. In my opinion, another potential change is more likely to take place. This is seemingly less revolutionary but in fact can bring dramatic changes without the revolution of adopting new grand narratives. We can assume the chronotop, with its temporal, special and political dimensions (that makes the “formulas” for national narratives) behave like chaotic systems. As explained by Bown (1995) they have three fundamental characteristics: (a) irregular periodicity, (b) sensitivity to initial conditions, and (c) a lack of predictability” (p. 10). The result of these three characteristic is a nonlinear and dynamic system that can be subjected to changes emerging within the system itself. The
model of “strange attractors”, namely, the epitome of contradiction, never repeating, yet always resembling, itself: infinitely recognizable, never predictable (Van Eenwyk, 1996: 333) is of extreme relevance for this type of change. According to this model, the system’s orientation toward a particular paradigm is based on countless different texts with a shared tendency to repeat, in variation, a significant event or series of events, and sometimes a causal chain as well. This repetition constitutes a paradigm that governs the shaping of different political narratives (Shenhav, 2006). Borrowing the term “strange attractor” can illuminate the mysterious dynamic of the process by which paradigms of political reality crystallize (Shenhav, 2006, p. 355). In fact, in an era of boosted exchanges of messages for example in new media, the expectation that old system will undergo nonlinear changes, within the same narrative resources, is on the rise.

When it comes to political narratives, the constant multiplicity might very easily create either new interpretations of the same political chronotops or new ways to actualize the same core identity. Going back to the Israeli case discussed above, the meaning of redemption can be understood in very different ways: ethnicity based, class based, cultural based, individually based, and more. Thus, changes do not necessarily mean alternation of core national values that have already multiplied for ages, but rather changes in their manifestation and interpretation.

The second potential implication is the international connection. In this case we can only raise the question of whether and how international discourse might be affected by the type of national narratives. For example, if political discourse replicates political chronotops, one might expect to have an effect to similarities and dissimilarities between the types of chronotops. Are there political chronotops that produce political discourses
that get along more easily with each other? Can we explain interstate discourse on the basis of these core discursive elements? Though the theoretical frameworks presented here anticipate such effects, this preliminary paper will not be able to address these important questions.
References


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