

Historical narrative and the construction of identity in international Relations Studies

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Abstract: *With the rise of narrative turn in international relations studies, historical narrative has become an important direction of this research agenda. This paper reviews the research agenda of historical narrative and identity construction in international relations, and comments on the future development of this research agenda.*

Keywords: *Historical narrative, Identity Construction, Narrative turn, international linguistic constructivism*

1. Introduction

In the context of the current "narrative turn" in philosophy and social sciences, autobiographical narratives have become an important research topic in social science research. In sociology, Anthony Giddens was the first to introduce the concept of autobiographical narrative, which he considered as the narrative of the self, that is, a reflective understanding of self-identity by virtue of the stories that concern the individual and others. Thus, personal identity is not found in actions or in the reactions of others, but is developed in the maintenance of a particular narrative process. Such a narrative manifests itself in the continuous incorporation of events that occur in the external world into an ongoing "story" about the self.

2. Autobiographical Narratives in International Relations

In international relations, autobiographical narratives have a richer content. On the one hand, Brent J. Steele, inspired by Giddens' ideas, sees autobiographical narratives as an effective way for states to maintain their self-identity or ontological security and to construct the legitimacy of their actions. In this way, for Steele, a nation's understanding and description of the self constitutes the nation's autobiographical narrative. In international relations, states tend to legitimize their own actions even if these actions sometimes jeopardize established international norms. In order to gain legitimacy, most of the time states talk about their actions in a context based on their self-identity, because it is only through the narration of events that they can give them a corresponding meaning and maintain a sense of self. To do so, actors must create a meaning for the action they want to unfold as a way to logically fit their own identity. This means that in order for an actor to conform a policy to its own identity, it must justify it by explaining or arguing for it. Thus, Steele sees a country's autobiographical narrative as a "performative language" that is illocutionary act. In this way, autobiographical narratives are able to determine the scope and meaning of actors' actions. Steele points out that when we study autobiographical narratives of the state, we need to focus on four interconnected factors: 1) the actor's own understanding of the causes or drivers of an event, 2) what these events mean for the actor's own identity, 3) how these events are important to an actor's relevant interests, and 4) what policies the actor uses to pursue these interests. If Steele emphasizes the domestic significance of national autobiographical narratives and their stability, Will K Delehanty places more emphasis on the role of the public sphere of the international community of autobiographical narratives and its unstable aspects. Delehanty argues that while autobiographical narratives can maintain a stable sense of self, they are not indestructible, but rather the autobiographical narratives of actors are fragile and can face challenges from other alternative narratives or counter-narratives. The challenge is not entirely meaningless, as counter-narratives on the one hand challenge the autobiographical narrative as the primary narrative, and on the other hand counter-narratives are part of the construction of self-identity as the internal other. In this way, Delehanty argues from the feminism of international relations theory that the autobiographical narratives of the state are always "gendered

masculine" in terms of the relationship between feminism and the power of the state, such as the pursuit of power, the pursuit of the military, the preference for force, and so on. But the formation of a masculine autobiographical narrative of the state requires an internal other, a feminist counter-narrative. For the state, the feminist counter-narrative as a counter-narrative emphasizes peace, cooperation, and diplomacy, so that the feminist counter-narrative consistently challenges the dominant masculine narrative, which in turn makes the state more cautious about using force or waging war, thus contributing to world peace and stability. Therefore, Delehanty's main contribution is to place autobiographical narratives in the perspective of feminist international relations theory, highlighting the unstable character of autobiographical narratives and arguing that feminist counter-narratives as internal others can challenge and disrupt dominant masculine autobiographical narratives, thus balancing and questioning the masculine coloration of state autobiographical narratives and making peace and cooperation in international relations possible.

On the other hand, autobiographical narratives in the study of international relations also have ontological implications, becoming the very source of the existence of the state. For this reason, Brunscott defines the autobiographical narrative of the state from a phenomenological perspective as a spatio-temporal structure, an ontological structure that constitutes the state as a group and allows for the meaningful unfolding of the state's actions in time and space. The autobiographical narrative at the temporal level consists of two aspects, namely, past time and future time. The narrative of past time manifests itself as the shaping of the collective memory by the state, while the narrative of future time manifests itself as the shaping and visionary narrative of the possible self by the state. Autobiographical narratives on the spatial level also include two aspects, namely Experienced Space and Envisioned Space. Narratives of experienced space shape the sense of home and define the boundaries of the nation, while narratives of envisioned space plan for the spatial changes and practices that will unfold. Brunscott thus argues that the autobiographical narrative of the nation satisfies the need for a sense of self-continuity, i.e., that the "self" as a being must have a stable and continuous past, present, and future. It is in this narrative of time and space that the state constructs its own existence and, in this sense, perceives and evaluates the external world and the other.

As we can see above, the current definition of the autobiographical narrative of the state is mainly explained from the sociological perspective of ontological security and the philosophical perspective of ontology, but there are some shortcomings in the definition and research of both perspectives. In terms of the ontological security perspective, even though Steele places autobiographical narratives closer to reality, his theory of ontological safety actually values identity and emotional factors rather than autobiographical narratives themselves. In terms of the existing research on ontological security, scholars have mostly focused on the point of entry where autobiographical narratives can maintain actors' own ontological security, either by emphasizing the effects of disrupting autobiographical narratives or by analyzing how actors' ontological security can be maintained through certain autobiographical narratives. In short, the study of autobiographical narratives from the perspective of ontological security does not emphasize autobiographical narratives per se, but keeps searching for an alternative concept to autobiographical narratives in order to pursue theoretical innovation, which in fact has deviated from the original purpose of Giddens' concept of autobiographical narratives.

Although the explanation from a philosophical ontology perspective puts more emphasis on the ontology significance of autobiographical narratives in constructing self-identity and existence, and returns to the true nature of Giddens' concept of autobiographical narratives, such an explanation lacks operationalization of the application of the concept, and the definition cannot explain how the state constructs its identity through autobiographical narratives, how to assess the process of such construction, and how it affects the relationship between the self and the other. It does not explain well.

The narrative of the state is not just a simple description of its own historical memory, space, and time, but should also reveal the way in which the story is constructed, for whom it is constructed, and for what purpose, etc. Therefore, combining existing research on autobiographical narratives and the research questions in this paper, this paper argues that autobiographical narratives are a way of being in which a country constructs and stabilizes its national identity and interests by selectively narrating its history and collective memory to audiences based on its own current purposes and interests, based on established historical narratives and identities. Such a definition highlights the main role of autobiographical narratives as the main way of constructing and stabilizing self-identity on the one hand, and the ontological significance of the existence of the self on the other, while also revealing the operational aspects of the narrator of the story, the purpose and manner of its narration. For this reason, based on this definition, this paper argues that the autobiographical narrative of the state contains three dimensions, namely historical narratives (established historical memory narratives and identities),

political elites (domestic narrators), and history education (ways of story construction: narrating the history and collective memory of the country to the audience). This paper will focus on the agenda and role of historical narratives in the study of international relations.

3. Historical Narrative and Identity Construction

In the autobiographical narratives of the nation, historical narratives as narrative material are the main source of national identity narratives and the main component of ethnic identity. By history and history of a nation, we mean stories about the origins of an established social collective or ethnic group that are considered realistic, genuine, and significant. The historical narrative of the nation refers to a simplified, dramatized story of the nation's past, but also of the nation's position in the world, a story that explains the meaning of the present by reconstructing the past. Historical narrative encompasses not only the state's history of warfare, but also social character, traditional practices, sovereign spaces, and social practices that can define the state's self-identity, involving the state's past, present, and future as well as the state's historical sovereign space. Current research considers four main types of historical narratives of the state, namely history of Ethnogenesis, history of Bulwark Against the Other, Victimization history or Martyrium history, and history of Renewal. History of ethnic origin is history about the origins of ethnic groups, including history of homeland, roots, lineage, nationhood, sovereign territory, and ancient deeds, through which ethnic groups establish and perceive where they come from, the extent of their territory, and the related perception of exclusivity. In addition, ethnic founding history often carry with them a sense of ethnic superiority, i.e., moments of national glory and the emergence of various heroic figures. The history of defense is mainly due to the fact that the community itself often feels on the periphery of a larger and more advanced cultural entity and is threatened by other cultures at the same time, so the community has always wanted to integrate its own cultural entity into a more powerful or advanced cultural unit, such as the integration into a larger Christian culture, the Eastern European countries seeking to join the European Union, etc. The victim history deals with the historical experience of victimhood or failure of the community, in which the community is represented as a target of constant persecution and discrimination, and most of the time the persecutor is one of the "neighbors" of the community. In addition, the history also deals with the history of harm, exploitation, aggression, and marginalization of the group by the hegemonic, hostile, and expansionist external other. The history of renewal is primarily concerned with how communities deal with their past history. For example, the belief that "the current situation is so muddy that it must be purified to create a better world" is manifested in acts of change by military or revolutionary forces against intolerable the other. Or, because one group cannot forget past hurts, they show a kind of revenge against the other group and do not accept any apology from the other. The four types of history usually alternate in national historical narratives over time and in response to various factors, but the fact is that these historical narratives are difficult to stop or replace, and once generated, these narratives become part of the nation-state or community itself.

In anthropology, scholars usually consider history of myth to be fictional things and discourses, some kind of disease in language, a dark side imposed by language on the mind. However, the fact is that anthropologists, in their studies of the human world, usually begin by studying the culture, customs and myth of an ethnic group, and through these perceive and understand the origins and historical constructs of that group. This is why anthropology has a dilemma with the concept of history of myth, which on the one hand questions the scientific validity of history, but on the other hand focuses on history as one of the sources of research, which in fact proves the importance of history in our study of the identity of an ethnic group or nation. History is a naturalization of the world, a kind of origin of the world, which constitutes the basic values and presuppositions of human beings.

The role of historical narrative is mainly at the level of the existence and identity of the group. Historical narrative is a fundamental part of a nation or group, a major feature of ethnic identity and a major influence on nationalist politics, a response to group attitudes and preferences, and a more lasting influence on group attitudes and preferences than material factors. For the group, historical narrative is a tool of cultural reproduction, a set of beliefs, often presented in the form of a group narrative about itself, and in so doing creates a cognitive and intellectual monopoly on worldview and world order. The history-forming monopoly of knowledge and cognition is the primary construct that allows a group to exist as a group. Members of a group may be aware that the historical narrative they accept are not very rigorous and true, but historical narrative are not historical truths as studied by historians, so narrative rigor and truthfulness do not affect its status among group members; what matters most to historical narrative is its content rather than historical truth. Therefore, historical narrative is one of the key tools of group cultural production, the main way of storing and standardizing group information. Through historical narrative, group members are able to recognize each other as communities that share common beliefs

and live in the same conceptual world, and thus historical narratives are also a major factor in defining the boundaries between the self and the other group.

Historical narratives are related to and distinct from similar concepts such as collective memory, symbols and rituals. While Collective Memory is the historical memory of a group, which is the psychological dimension of the group, historical narrative has not only the aspect of historical memory but is also the material embodiment of historical symbols, and therefore historical narrative has a wider scope and encompasses a wider range of meanings than collective memory. Moreover, when we study the construction and governance of national identity, the fragmented nature of memory, if interpreted only from the perspective of collective memory, may make the basis of research on an unstable and incoherent foundation, while historical narratives are coherent and stable, providing a more basic and stable source for the study of national identity construction and governance. In terms of symbols and rituals, historical narratives depend on the symbols and rituals of narratives. Symbols are the foundation upon which historical narratives are built, while rituals are the acceptance and worship of symbols, as well as the outward actuation and expression of historical narratives. However, rituals and symbols are not history; only the narrated, encoded rituals and symbols are historical narratives. Therefore, it can be said that historical narratives are the best form of studying national or ethnic identity.

Historical narratives are not only a source of meaning for the existence of a nation or community, but more importantly, historical narratives as a "major story" are also an important factor in distinguishing our group from others and influencing the relationship between our group and others. On the one hand, historical narratives have an assimilative effect, allowing two different ethnic or national groups to become one group through historical narratives, usually the more backward and history impoverished group upgrading itself by giving up its culture, language, and historical narratives and thus integrating into the other, more advanced and superior group. On the other hand, historical narratives have a divisive effect, as a group tends to identify more and more with its own history and demonize the other in order to strengthen its own identity. The result can make cross-group communication and identification very difficult. How do these two roles of historical narratives translate, i.e., when do they tend to assimilate and when do they tend to divide? In fact, as analyzed above, the content of the historical narrative is the main factor determining its status and role. Accordingly, this research argues that the image and role of the other in domestic historical narratives is an important factor that influences the relationship between the group of self and the Other. In the process of assimilation, if the Other is presented in negative roles and images in the historical narratives of the group of self, then even if the group of self is a backward cultural group, it will be reluctant to integrate into the Other for the sake of maintaining national self-esteem and strengthening its own identity, and if it does, the process will be slow and difficult. In fact, the negative image and role of the Other in the historical narrative of the self is mostly due to the historical non-recognition of the Self by the Other. On the contrary, on the other hand, the process of identity evolution is more likely to be achieved if the historical narratives of the self have more commonality with the historical narratives of the Other, since the historical narratives are the main factor influencing the self's perception of the external world, and therefore the self's identity evolution and positive integration into the Other is more likely to be achieved.

Therefore, this paper leads to the following hypothesis: at the abstract level, the less the narration of domestic historical dialect is associated with important others, the more the evolution of identity is inclined to the status of identity separation. Correspondingly, the more the domestic historical narratives are associated with important others, the more the evolution of identity is inclined to the status of identity aggregation. It is important to note that the association of domestic historical narratives with significant others actually encompasses two levels: the number of commonalities in historical narratives, such as religious beliefs, ethnic origins, etc., and the number of recognitions of the content of self-historical narratives by others, especially those involving significant national interests, such as sovereignty narratives. Moreover, at the level of abstraction analyzed in this paper, i.e., historical narratives, which are inherently natural and uncontested, they have no concrete and identifiable author, no original text, and thus domestic historical narratives provide the original narrative material and source of legitimacy for the ensuing narrative manipulation by political elites, thus transforming the original autobiographical narratives of the state into narrative forms with an ideological dimension.

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Author contributions

G.H. was the sole author of this article

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