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***Problems of biography and history:
Dynamics of individual and collective political narratives***

This chapter explores the relationship between the stories people tell about their lives, and the political frameworks which form the context for those stories. When we relate stories of our lives, we implicitly communicate to others something of our political worldviews, our *Weltanschauung*. But why are some stories selected and others ignored? Facts do not speak for themselves. We choose certain facts, and hope that they will speak for us, through us. But what do we think we will achieve by telling our stories in the way that we do, to the people we do?

Much of my discussion will be based on data collected in four different research projects: the first was a study I conducted with fifteen British lifetime socialist activists who had been politically active for fifty years or longer; the second data set involves research I conducted in Colorado Springs, Colorado, during the Gulf War of 1992, interviewing anti-war activists. I was fascinated by the American flag they sometimes waved at their 24/7 vigil which they held in the midst of winter in the Rocky Mountains, and I interviewed a number of them about the meaning of this flag at their vigil. The third project was one I carried out in the former East Germany, in 1992, immediately following the opening of the Stasi files. At that time I spoke with forty people who had been leaders in the 'bloodless revolution' of 1989, curious to know what sense they made of the transformation of their country. The fourth project involved close reading of the transcripts of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), in which I examined what influences made certain kinds of stories more 'tell-able' than others. In each of these four projects, I have been interested in the relationship between history and biography, and the dynamic interplay between micro and macro political narratives.

Yuval-Davis (2006) argues that "Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)" (p. 201). But identity is something which is

always in transition “always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong. This duality is often reflected in narratives of identity” (p. 201). These narratives of identity are thus always political, even when they are also personal, as they reflect the positionality of the speaker. Accordingly, the politics of belonging has been described by John Crowley as ‘the dirty work of boundary maintenance’ (cited in Yuval-Davis 2006:203), separating the world population into ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Yuval-Davis 2006:203). Each of the four case studies involves some kind of search for political belonging, be it the struggle of connected critics whose dissent stems from a sense of attachment to their still existing country (as in England and the United States), or in the context of their country which is no longer (as in East Germany), or the willingness of citizens to recount their tales of suffering in order to help rebuild their broken nation (as in South Africa). The question of who belongs and who does not – or the politics of belonging - “has come to occupy the heart of the political agenda almost everywhere on the globe” (Yuval-Davis 2006:212).

The political identity of an individual is inextricably tied to the narratives which are culturally available to that person. Political identities are “always, everywhere relational and collective” (Tilly 2002: 61); even when they are articulated by individuals, they are always socially embedded. As Rice argues, “The story of an individual life – and the coherence of individual identity – depends, for its very intelligibility, on the stories of collective identity that constitute a culture. ... cultures and societies organize individual identity” (2002: 80). Polletta (2002) echoes this, arguing that even in individual storytelling, “plots are derived from a cultural stock of plots” (p. 34). Exactly how one positions oneself in relation to dominant cultural narratives may vary from person to person, but all of us create our narratives from the ‘toolkit’ which is culturally available to us (Bruner 1987:15)

This chapter is organised around three themes which have appeared in each of the research projects described above. First, I begin by exploring the case studies as morality plays, marked by unambiguous plot and caricatures. What is obscured by such a stark construction? Second, I consider the importance of boundaries to political narratives. If one regards these cases as stories, or even as parts of stories or even collections of stories, then where do they begin and where do they end? Some of the cases discussed in these pages depend upon a construction of definitive beginnings and endings, memory fault lines which definitely separate the past and present. Precise moments of beginning and ending lend clarity to

storylines, but do they assist us in our attempt to arrive at a deeper understanding of the historical moments in which we live? Third, I explore the ways in which each of the four case studies deals implicitly with how individuals frame their identity in relation to the nation-state. How is this identity project negotiated and sustained in these different contexts? Based on these case studies, is there anything which one can say more generally about the relationship between nation-building and the process by which individuals and groups create and sustain meaning in their lives? How are individual and collective political narratives woven into the fabric of the nation?

Yearning for Morality Plays

There is something timeless, and deeply compelling about morality plays, which helps to explain why they have endured as a genre for over six hundred years. We are never in any doubt as to who is good, and who is bad, and what constitutes the conflict between these opposing forces, and how it should be resolved. The general format of morality plays, or ‘morall playes’ as they were known in Middle English, is a battle over the soul of ‘Humanum Genus’, generically translated as Humankind. The central character functions as a battleground between vice and virtue, and other key characters have names like Beauty, Kindred, Worldly Goods and Good Deeds, Lust-liking, Flesh and Pleasure, and Covetous[ness]. While morality plays have their origins in religious teaching, their potential as a medium for communicating historical events was not lost on playwrights in the Middle Ages, including Shakespeare. It is an art form which has not lost its appeal. Indeed, in the case studies discussed here, there is strong evidence to suggest that the morality play has re-emerged in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, no longer in the theatre (though productions of *Everyman*, for instance, are still performed) but rather in the realm of politics.

Nowhere is the application of the model of morality play more apposite than in the United States, particularly in the post 9/11 era. The language which has been employed throughout the presidency of George W. Bush is clearly intended to divide the world into heroes and villains. Following the attacks of September 11th, he stated unequivocally ‘either you are for us, or you are against us’. Four months later he delivered a State of the Union Address in which he began by saying that “the civilized world faces unprecedented dangers”. He reaffirms for the American people that “our cause is just”, but the enemy still lingers. Laying the groundwork for the military invasion that was already in preparation at that time, Bush

describes “states like Iraq” as constituting “an axis of evil”. While September 11th heralded a new type of war with a new type of enemy, Bush was supremely confident in his construction of the events at that time as being a conflict between the forces of good and evil. The enemy may hide in the caves of foreign lands, but ultimately they would be ‘smoked out’; they would be defeated.

But as is evident in the case study I carried out in Colorado Springs in the early 1990s, the absolute language of morality plays was not heralded in with the events of 9/11. Rather, the groundwork had already been laid by Bush Senior for the programme his son would later pursue with such rigor. Bush senior claimed for himself the special role of the protector of Old Glory. He was himself a man who clearly was driven by a vision of a world divided into good and evil. This stark categorization applied, also, to the domestic domain in which Americans were either good (meaning supportive of governmental policies at home and abroad) or bad (those who openly protested against such policies). It is this very questioning of the morality play plotline which motivated anti-war activists in Colorado Springs to display a flag at their anti-war vigil. This political strategy has a long history, and its effectiveness in silencing oppositional viewpoints is well-established. As Craige (1996) comments “This manoeuvre.... is as old as politics itself. It consists basically in the state leader’s identifying himself or herself with the state and identifying any opposition to his or her policies as opposition to the state, rendering personal political opponents apparent opponents of the state” (p. 108). It was a strategy that Bush would use throughout his presidency, and that his son, George W. would later come to use with particular effectiveness.

It was noticeable to me that when participants in my research on lifetime socialist activists spoke of the political causes to which they had dedicated their lives, their description of the inter-war years, the time during which most of them had become radicalized, was one in which the forces of good and evil were in direct combat. The impact of the Russian Revolution was felt around the world, and – before the abuses of communism became known – inspired many with a deep sense of hope for a world which had lost its bearings. Christopher Cornford’s comment that “everything seemed to add up and everything seemed to cut the same way” echoes the feelings of many of his generation who became politically engaged during the inter-war period.

But the certainty which had characterized the inter-war years for many of these respondents did not stay with them for the rest of their lives – although their general political commitment and engagement did. For instance, Christopher describes with real passion the attraction he and others felt towards the Communist Party in his youth:

You can see it, can't you, how unemployment, fascism, war preparations, political reaction... one knew that all the right wing conservatives were really anti-Semitic and pro-Hitler in their heart of hearts, and they really wanted Hitler to attack Russia... one saw in Russia this wonderful, creative, just, egalitarian society with infinite potential, and everything seemed to add up and everything seemed to cut the same way.

Later, however, he came to feel very limited by the inflexible dictates of the party, describing his experience of party membership in the 1930s as 'walking on one leg without using the other'. While Christopher would continue to regard his life as one which was dedicated to combating the wrongs of the world as he perceived them, the structure of the morality play, as it were, would become more flexible, less severe, enabling it to better accommodate the complexity of long-term commitment.

When I arrived in East Germany in 1992, it was a place in which villains and heroes loomed large, a place engulfed in a judgmental atmosphere in which so many were trying to carve new identities for the selves they had been under state socialism. Critical to thinking about what I was and was not told during my months in East Germany is the question of how others perceived me. Clearly, as people told me the stories of the lives they lived in East Germany, they were producing them not only in a particular historical context, but also telling them to a particular audience. Ostow states that "by early 1992, there was reason to suspect that citizens of the former German Democratic Republic had become the world's most interviewed population...Being interviewed played a part in the reconstruction of the self that informed every GDR citizen's *Wende* (or turnaround)" (1993:3-4). Some who I met felt, quite understandably, that researchers like me from the West had come to ask questions of others, without posing questions to ourselves. This was important feedback for me to take into consideration, and sometimes I knew all too well that I had fumbled despite my best intentions. But somehow, despite the imperfections of the research, we did manage to talk together, and I learned much in these conversations.

In the months and even years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, there was a widespread pressure to produce for oneself a new past, a story about who one had been before the *wende* which would be acceptable in the dramatically changed circumstances. Small acts of

resistance which had been performed under state socialism came to be celebrated by many as defining moments, the expression of an authentic self which had, by force of circumstances, kept a low profile. East German sociologist Marianne Schulz commented to me that all East Germans had come to identify themselves as both resistance fighters and victims. During this time, the language of victimhood became the common medium for discussing the forty years of the GDR. Even the well-publicised confrontations at symbolically pregnant sites such as Checkpoint Charlie were known as the *'Täter/Opfer'*, or victim/victimizer talks. In my forty interviews with East Germans, I asked them what they felt about this stark characterization: was it really as clear-cut as such terms imply, or were there shades of grey, did people shift in their positioning depending on the particular issue, time and space being discussed? I heard a wide range of responses to my question: clearly the applicability of the morality play analogy was imbued with powerful political implications.

Actress Ruth Reinecke summarizes this when she explains to me that “this relationship between victims and victimizers is used for ideological purposes... this is too little to reduce the whole thing to victims and victimizers”. Werner Fischer, long-time dissident and the person responsible for the disbanding of Stasi, expressed an ambivalent relationship to this binary construction, telling me that he refused to accept a polarization of victim and victimizer: “This divides the society of the former GDR into goodies and baddies, and that just won't work”. Fischer then proceeded to list a number of complicated scenarios in which the categories of victim and victimizer become rather confused. “I am not able to draw a very clear line” he told me.

Jens Reich, scientist and founding member of *Neues Forum*, also questioned the widespread use of these absolute categories, saying that despite the current binary construction between victims and victimizers, there was only a very small portion of society “who are in a deep sense really victims. Crushed, destroyed, physically or psychologically...”. He described these people: “They haven't a voice and still have no sufficient voice... but 99% of the population are neither real victims; they are perpetrators of misdeeds in the sense that they waited too long. I think everybody has this guilt, including myself”.

One of the participants in this research felt very differently, however. Wolfgang Ullmann, one of the key architects of the East German truth commission, the *Enquete Kommission Zur Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland*, was dismayed by

the tendency to blur what was for him a very clear distinction between “the spies... and the people who were spied on. I’m very sharply against any attempt to mingle up these groups”. Ullmann’s position contrasted with that of Reich; he did not feel that ‘everybody has guilt’ but rather, that it was important for the moral order of society that individuals be held accountable for their past actions and it was right that they are judged accordingly.

The viewpoint which Ullmann articulated to me is also that enshrined in the structure of the East German *Enquete Kommission*. The function of that commission was to ease the transition into reunification, and the means for doing this was to critically evaluate the forty years of the existence of the German Democratic Republic. Ullmann insisted on the morality play structure as its blunt clarity facilitated the political resolution at hand: those who had committed sins must be seen to have done so and punished accordingly.

In contrast to other truth commissions, such as that of South Africa, the *Enquete Kommission* was almost wholly unconcerned with personal testimony about the conditions of life under state socialism. Indeed, only 327 individuals were invited to give personal testimony, and most were the ‘unsung victims of SED rule’ (McAdams 2001:91). The first *Enquete Kommission* was followed by a second, established in May 1995. Here, the explicit purpose was to investigate, in the words of Rainer Eppelman, Chair of both the first and second commissions and himself a former dissident of East Germany, “the thousands of people... who did not permit themselves to succumb to the criminality or immorality... of the SED dictatorship, who complained, stood firm, and achieved some kind of protest” (as quoted in Yoder 1999: 73-74).

The two *Enquete Kommissions* thus identify two kinds of narratable pasts: that of the victims, and that of the unsung heroes. Most East Germans, however, were neither heroes nor victims, but rather did what they felt they needed to do in order to achieve a particular quality of life for themselves and their families.

The function and methodology of the East German truth commission was clearly different from that of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. 21,400 people gave testimony before the TRC (roughly .05 percent of the total population of 40 million). This level of public engagement in the process of national truth telling compares favourably with

East Germany, where 327 people of the population of 16 million gave testimony to the truth commission, or approximately .002 percent of the population (see Andrews 2003).

The *Enquete Kommission* was set up as a means for concluding the history of the country. Through documentation (759 academic papers, in addition to 148 research reports) it was established in order to produce ‘a judgement of Communism and its methods’ (Kamali 2001: 117). The TRC, in contrast, was established as a means for travelling from a traumatic past towards a future marked by reconciliation and unity. Here, the morality tale was of a very different nature – the villains were the rulers of the past, the heroes those of the present. Critically, the morality tale structure rests on clear temporal separation. Mark Osiel (1997) remarks on the propensity of truth commissions to function as morality plays, whereby forces of good and evil come into open conflict, and those who have inflicted harm must be held accountable for the suffering they have caused. The media fascination with the hearings of the TRC contributed to the impression of high drama between forces of good and evil.

Yet, Osiel also identifies the limitations in the morality play model. “...the weakness of the morality play as genre for social drama and mnemonic didactics is relatively clear. It lies in the polarity of the conclusion: the unequivocal triumph of the unflinchingly good over the unregenerately evil” (Osiel 1997: 286). Specifically, there is not room for the complexity of truth which can emerge in such settings. The observations of Janet Cherry, Researcher on the truth commission, lend credence to this statement:

All liberation struggles have their saints, their martyrs and their heroes – and the corresponding villains. It has been said that history is always written by the victors. Yet the writing of history such as it emerged in the TRC hearings can sometimes destroy this hagiography: the valiant youth who defied the police becomes merely a drunken thug; the brave freedom fighter is revealed as a traitor. The villain can even be revealed as a ‘decent man’ who had little room in which to move (Cherry 2000: 140-141).

Examples of this abound in the proceedings of the TRC. A contrast between the testimonies of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela and Eugene de Kock is instrumental here. For many years, Madikizela-Mandela had been held in great national and international esteem, not only as the spouse of her jailed husband, but as one who symbolized bravery in the face of great adversity, who had played a prominent role in the Women’s League of the ANC, and in the anti-apartheid struggle more generally. When her name became associated with the kidnapping, torture and murder of Stompie Seipei, and the severe mistreatment of several others, the news was received by the international community with shock. She as much as any other person living outside of prison had come to symbolize the anti-apartheid struggle. It was

unthinkable that such a character could fall so far. It was in this context that her testimony was delivered. Desmond Tutu, acting in his capacity not only as the Chairman of the TRC, but also as a long-standing personal friend and neighbour of the Mandela family, begged Madikizela-Mandela to apologize and to ask for forgiveness. This, she could not bring herself to do, other than to acknowledge “it is true. Things went horribly wrong” (Tutu 1999: 135). Her fate as the anti-heroine was forever sealed by this incomplete confession, which would be long remembered for what she did not, and perhaps could not bring, herself to say.

In contrast was the case of Eugene de Kock, known as ‘Prime Evil,’ commander of the South African death squads, a man who was personally responsible for the murder of thousands of black and white anti-apartheid activists. Despite the horror of the deeds he had done, his willingness to cooperate with the proceedings of the TRC went a very long way towards rehabilitating him in the eyes of the world. He knew what he had done, he accepted responsibility for these horrendous deeds, and he was deeply, deeply sorry for his actions. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a South African clinical psychologist who served on the Human Rights Violations Committee of the TRC, interviewed de Kock several times about his former activities. She describes her feelings towards him: “I felt nothing but pity, the kind one feels when a friend is in pain over an event that has deeply troubled him. [I wanted] to offer him some respite from the tortured emotions that seemed to be coursing through his brain and body” (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003:114-115). De Kock’s testimony became one of the most memorable exchanges in the entire proceedings of the TRC. Pearl Faku, the widow of one of the men murdered in the Motherwell bombing - for which de Kock was responsible – became the embodiment of forgiveness with her response to de Kock’s public and sincere apology: “I hope that when he sees our tears, he knows that they are not only tears for our husbands, but tears for him as well... I would like to hold him by the hand, and show him that there is a future, and that he can still change”. (Gobodo-Madikizela 2003: 94). The journey which de Kock appeared to have travelled, as well as the way in which his apology was received, created the possibility of his moral redemption. In these contrasting two stories, each very painful in its own way, one can see evidence for Cherry’s argument. That the ‘mother of the nation’ would one day be virtually disowned by the ANC, while the confirmed mass murderer moved the family of his victims to tears, reveals the limitations of the simple morality tale as a way of making sense of the truth commission hearings.

Cherry (2000) argues that most people are unable or unwilling to grapple with the nuances of truth or truths as they may emerge in truth commission hearings. People become invested in the positions which they occupy and in their associated perspectives on the trauma that has defined their lives. Shifting this narrative to one which allows for a more diffuse sharing of responsibility or culpability is something which may threaten the well-established identity they have created for themselves. As Michale Ignatieff comments “People ... do not easily or readily surrender the premises upon which their lives are based’ (cited in Adam and Adam 2000: 44).

Truth commissions such as that in South Africa may well confirm factual truths but they usually fail at establishing “a common interpretive truth. This moral truth of why something happened and who is responsible for it, is always heavily contested. Divided memories prevail because truth is tied to institutional and collective identity” (Adam and Adam in James and DeVijver: 44). The truth, then, of truth commissions lends itself more to factual than moral scrutiny, as the question of whose memory is to define the past continues to be a site of important historical contestation.

Thusfar, we have seen that each of the four case studies presented here contains at its centre the potential ingredients for a morality play. Yet, on closer scrutiny, this model is insufficiently complex to allow for the nuances of the tales which were presented. Each of these settings provides a backdrop for a conflict between opposing forces: Americans debating what it means to be a ‘good American’; the birth of communism and the international fight against fascism in England in the inter-war years; the spies and the spied upon in East Germany; and repentant murderers and hubristic anti-apartheid activists in South Africa. The metaphor of the morality play invites the listener into the story, but the moral boundaries of life as it is lived and recounted are rarely so definitively and immutably drawn.

Beginnings and Endings

In order for a story to function properly, it needs to have a beginning and an ending. Even young children know this, and one can sense their frustration if either of these are incomplete or not identifiable. However, from the perspective of the story’s author, which beginning to

begin with, and which ending to end with are dependent upon what tale one wishes to tell. This simple lesson lies at the heart of our exploration into political narratives.

Throughout the case studies presented in these pages, there have been examples where political events were presented as if they stood alone in time, with no antecedent and nothing to follow. While there is, of course, a temporal basis to all narratives – this is one of their defining features- real life narratives are unique in that they have no beginning and no ending, other than that which is artificially attributed to them. Here, as in fictional stories (of which personal narratives may be regarded as a close cousin) the choice of beginning and ending is a strategic one.

Much recent political discourse has been dominated by the language of endings. The argument put forward by Francis Fukuyama in his *The End of History* epitomized the modern tendency to regard the times in which we are living as definitive moments which are historically unprecedented. Not incidentally, titles of books in other fields mirror this tendency: *The End of Science* (Horgan, 1997); *The End of Nature* (McKibbin 2003); *The End of Faith* (Harris 2004), *The End of Certainty* (Prigogine 1997) even *The End of Time* (Thompson 1996). Each of these books was published in the years immediately preceding or following the millennium, and we could argue that such datelines might encourage intellectual explorations of this kind. However, I do not believe that their appearance can be attributed to this alone. Rather, these titles reveal an inclination to cast ourselves as living characters in stories which are approaching, or have arrived at, their final conclusion.

Dienstag comments on the dangers of constructing political narratives as entities with clear endings. While generally, narratives are sequentially constituted stories with beginnings, middles, and endings, applying a definitive ending to a political narrative effectively threatens the wider political sphere, which is defined by the ongoing mediation of competing claims.

A narrative that ends is without a future. However satisfying the tying up of all plotlines and the fade-to-black may be at the close of a film, in politics, the idea of a final end point can be a dangerous one. To imagine a political narrative that ends may be to imagine a too-perfect satisfaction with the present and therefore an end to politics as the realm of conflict, change, and growth (1997: 18-19).

The lifeblood of politics demands constant movement; the narrative must always be unfolding, a perpetual process of renegotiation, reconstruction, and retelling.

Usually these demarcations of endings follow times in which something is perceived to have been in abundance, be it ideology, or science, or religion, as the titles listed above indicate. One wonders if the current explosion of interest in narrative will be followed by a similar proclamation, announcing the end of stories. In some situations, this seems appropriate, when the story form cannot hold all that there is to communicate. For instance, in Henry Greenspan's very thoughtful work about Holocaust survivors, one of his interviewees comments that survivors 'make stories' out of what is 'not a story'. Greenspan then comments "But, along with their particular content, these stories are also stories about the death of stories, a death often re-created within them. And even that death is itself only the most provisional analogy for a vastly more encompassing end of creations". (Greenspan 1998:14-15). The phrase 'end of creations' carries within it not only the end of beginnings (creations), but by implication, the end of endings as well.

The political stories we construct about the times in which we live are replete not only with endings, but also (sometimes) beginnings. One of the real accomplishments of the Bush administration was to derail versions of the story of 9/11, which had such a broad narrative boundary. According to this version of events, the attacks had no provocation and belonged in no particular context. Rather, they were motivated by a desire to dismantle abstract principles: if Americans were being 'paid back' for anything, it was for our love of freedom and democracy. In this sense, the events of 9/11 were ahistorical; a narrative which is most hospitable to uncritical patriotism.

The official response to 9/11 by the American leadership was characterized by two key components: 1) a refusal to consider the grounds on which any resentment towards the United States might have been based; and 2) a celebration of America – its values, its way of life, the goodness of its people. The primary means through which this was achieved was in the construction of the events as a morality play, old fashioned style, in which there were clear goodies and baddies.

The search for the meaning behind the attacks September 11th was conducted almost wholly independently of any historical context which might have provided insight into the motivation of the terrorists for their actions. At the same time, however, collective historical memory played a significant role in the way that the attacks were psychologically processed by the American people. Even as the events were unfolding, the analogy was made between these

attacks and that on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. On September 11th, and in the months that followed, the historical memory of ‘the day of infamy’ as Franklin D. Roosevelt famously described it, was used as a vehicle for coming to terms with the injustice which had been perpetrated against an innocent people.

We have been told time and again that 9/11 changed everything. The discourse of a narrative rupture set in immediately after the attacks. Patricia Williams, for instance, writing only one week after the attacks, referred to the pre- 9/11 world as the “old world, in the other time zone” (2002: 145). Yet, listening to these interviews and watching the video of ‘One Hour for America’ eighteen months after the attacks made me realize that not everything really had changed. The data I collected for my project in Colorado Springs, nearly a decade earlier, served for me as a small reminder that the struggle over what it means to love one’s country was not so very new.

... as compelling as it is to focus on the rhetoric of disjuncture, the continuities between the nation before and after September 11 remain profound... the imagery of discontinuity implicit in claims such as ‘September 11 shattered the world we knew’ has a suspiciously functionalist character. Marking off a special time by suspending our sense of ordinary life, such declarations help bind us in a shared mission, forge an expansive sense of community... [but] such metaphors may not best illuminate empirical reality (Reider 2003: 263).

President George W. Bush clearly adopted this strategy, which is one of the reasons he was able to provide the ‘reasons’ for the attacks on the symbols of American life in the way in which he did. Bush did not regard the attacks as being a response to any prior activities of the United States, ‘blowback’ in the terminology of Chalmers Johnson (2000). Rather, the attacks came, like the planes themselves, out of the clear blue sky. The official reaction of the United States to the attacks was constructed around a very restricted narrative, one which did not allow for an acknowledgement of historical forces which contributed to the events of that day.

In contrast, I have been suggesting that all beginnings and endings of the political narratives which we recount and which we live are ones we select, and the choices we make are significant and strategic. Had George W. Bush, for instance, identified the causes of 9/11 not in the jealous disposition of others, but in events which had occurred in his own lifetime, his response, and that of the country, would have had to be different. Had the narrative opened with the activists who camped out in the cold winter of 1992 protesting U.S. involvement in the Gulf War, it would have been very difficult to construct the storyline of national greatness combined with innocence which became so prevalent in the post-9/11 era.

The East German study presents another example of the strategic demarcation of beginnings and endings in the transformation of the national narrative. Few dates in the twentieth century were as historically pregnant as that of November 9, 1989, the day the Berlin Wall was opened. For many around the world, this was regarded as a time of a great new beginning. Yet, for many with whom I spoke, this night marked the end of possibilities. Sebastian Pflugbeil, leading environmentalist and founding member of *Neues Forum*, a participant of Round Table talks, and member of the *Volkskammer*, told me:

I had the very same physical reaction [to hearing the news about the wall being open] as I had at the moment when I heard that the wall was being constructed in '61. I knew then immediately that...this would not end well... the entire citizens' movement collapsed from one day to the next.

Tarifa and Weinstein comment that “the revolutions of 1989-1990 have introduced a ‘new calendar’ in the lives of the central and eastern European nations” (1995/6:73).

This ‘new calendar’ above was assumed by many Western onlookers to represent a new freedom. They believed that citizens who had lived for so many years under the microscope of an authoritarian state, would embrace the opportunity to share thoughts and experiences which had been hitherto hidden from public view, epitomized by titles such as *A l'est la memoire retrouve* (Brossat et al 1990), whose cover is decorated with a photograph of a smashed statue of Lenin. Many researchers who gravitated towards Central and Eastern Europe at this time saw endless potential for the excavation of the previously silenced or repressed. In fact, the reality proved to be rather different. One speechlessness – that imposed by state censorship – was replaced with another, as only those (very few) individuals who had been active in the underground oppositional movement felt at liberty to talk freely about their former lives. Others, those who had led ordinary, non-heroic, mostly compliant lives felt that self-disclosure left them vulnerable to the judgmental gaze of the rest of the world.

East German author Christa Wolf describes the effect of these pressures on the self-narrations which followed in the wake of the political upheavals:

I have the impression that many former GDR citizens, experiencing a new alienation and finding that if they are candid with others their openness is used against them, are employing this experience as a pretext to avoid any critical self-questioning and are even revising their life histories. I am sometimes amazed to hear normal, well-adjusted acquaintances of mine reveal what brave resistance fighters they have been all along. I know how hard it is to work yourself out of feelings of injury, hurt, helpless rage, depression, and paralyzing guilt and soberly to confront the events or phases in your

life when you would prefer to have been braver, more intelligent, more honest (1997:301).

Wolf summarizes the chasm between the reality as she and others have experienced it, and the expectation by others of an enhanced new freedom. “I and many people I know do not at all have the feeling that we have ‘thrown the old baggage overboard and are standing at a new beginning’. Quite to the contrary, our baggage is getting heavier and we are prevented from making a new start” (Wolf 1997:119). The assumption of the liberating effects of the new beginning do not resonate with the accounts of many who have struggled with the challenging task of rewriting one’s identity.

Although the changes of 1989 may not have delivered the hoped-for new beginning to citizens of East Germany, the *Enquete Kommission*, as argued earlier in this chapter, did in fact mark an official ending. The 15,000 pages of testimony and expertise (McAdams 2001:90) which it collected simply functioned as a vehicle for concluding the affairs of a country which was no longer in existence, even at the time that the data were collected. The writing of the history of the 40 years of East Germany, which includes the work of its truth commission, is a clear example of Dienstag’s claim that a narrative with an ending has no future. And yet, the demise of the country has been accompanied by a resurgence of claiming East German identity. The political narrative of the state may have ended, but the same cannot be said for that of its people.

In South Africa, the memory fault lines were made explicit under the remit of the TRC: the history relevant to human rights abuses which would be reviewed began with the Sharpsville massacre of 1960, and concluded with the end of apartheid in 1994. While it is undeniable that during these thirty-four years, the practices of apartheid were particularly aggressive and authoritarian, characterized by a systematic violation of human rights, in fact the horrors of Sharpsville were but an extension of an already existing policy of abuse. As Colin Bundy, Vice Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersand, comments:

to treat this period as ‘the history with which we have to come to terms’ effectively frees us of the obligation to arrive at a similar reckoning with any other history. The high noon of human rights violations was preceded by a long dawn – a pre-history of dispossession, denial and subordination... What the TRC threatens to do is to uncouple these histories: to define three decades of the past in terms of perpetrators and victims and tightly defined categories of wrong, and to suggest that this is ‘the beast of the past’ (Bundy 2000: 17).

Bundy’s argument is very powerful. While it is necessary for truth commissions to identify specific time frames as the focus for their investigations (the *Enquete Kommission* in fact

covered the whole of the 40 years of the existence of the GDR), this logistical strategy should not be misinterpreted as a statement of historical discontinuity. For apartheid to be uprooted, not just legally but from the moral fibre of the society, the conditions under which it was created and allowed to flourish must be identified and addressed. The ‘beast of the past’ as Bundy calls it is not so readily contained.

One of the most crucial functions of South Africa’s truth commission was to create a decisive rupture with its traumatic past, and thus to christen the birth of the new South Africa. Clearly the demarcation of a ‘new beginning’ was imperative for the nation. In this sense, the function of South Africa’s truth commission was the reverse of that of East Germany. The *Enquete Kommission* had served to conclude the affairs of the former country, to try to make some sense of the forty years of state socialism; the TRC, in contrast, was created with the clear intention of building national unity and reconciliation between divided people and communities, to breathe new vitality into the country in order that it may process, and ultimately move beyond, its blood-drenched history. Paul Connerton remarks upon the importance for new regimes to distance themselves from that which preceded them:

A barrier is to be erected against future transgression. The present is to be separated from what preceded it by an act of unequivocal demarcation. The trial by fiat of a successor regime is like the construction of a wall, unmistakable and permanent, between the new beginnings and the old tyranny. To pass judgment on the practices of the old regime is the constitutive act of the new order (1989:7).

Truth commissions are very effective at erecting such a barrier; South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation, for all of its problems, is heralded across the globe as a symbol of the new ‘rainbow nation’, full of the hope that comes with new beginnings.

Individual Identities and Imagined Communities

Benedict Anderson, in his now classic *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983), defines a nation as “an imagined political community”. Yuval-Davis (2006) provides an important critique of this overly abstract national imagination, arguing instead for recognition of “active and situated imagination” (2006:203):

The different situated imaginations that construct ... national imagined communities with different boundaries depend on people’s social locations, people’s experiences and definitions of self, but probably even more important on their values. [This

involves]... deciding whether [others] stand inside or outside the imaginary boundary line of the nation and/or other communities of belonging, whether they are 'us' or 'them' (p. 203).

These questions are central to each of the case studies discussed in this chapter, as they explore how national identity is negotiated by individuals living through times of heightened political change. What does it mean to be an American, in a world dominated by one superpower? What does it mean to be English in the post-colonial world? What does it mean to be East German, when there is no longer an East Germany? Or South African, as this country tries to recreate itself as a nation, a unity which was never experienced by its disparate groups of people? How do these very different groups of people position themselves with regards to their country?

Here it is important to distinguish between the sense of a formal national identity, as it is promulgated by the state and enshrined in public institutions, and that which individuals experience more privately. The process by which a formal national identity becomes internalised, that is to say 'owned' by an individual in such a way that it becomes part of their self-definition, is complex. The collective identity of a nation state can be accessed through the stories it tells about its own history, symbolized for instance in its national monuments which indicate those people and events which are to be remembered and commemorated. What do these stories reflect about the nation? What and who are absent from these stories? Finally, how do individuals make sense of these stories in relation to their own lives, and to their own sense of self? Herbert Kelman describes national identity as something which

...typically contains within it beliefs and values pertaining to the meaning of human existence, the nature of social institutions, the conduct of human relationships, and the definition of the ideal personality. These are rooted in the group's historical experiences, and are reflected and elaborated in its documents, traditions, and institutional form (1997:172).

National identity, in its formal sense, is present from birth; we are, from the moment we enter this world, a member of a particular nation, and we ingest the norms of our community with our mother's milk. It is simply part of human life. However, as we develop cognitively and emotionally, we also develop the capacity to evaluate the communities into which we have been born. Here begins the journey by which we acquire, internally, our sense of who we in relation to the country of our birth. The process of early childhood socialization lays the groundwork for sympathetic reception to national myths, but as we mature, we must find a role for ourselves in the meaning of those stories.

Kelman (1997) argues that the incorporation of the national identity into a personal sense of self involves a combination of “knowledge, affect, and action” (p. 173). “If national identity is to become an integral part of an authentic personal identity,” he writes, Individuals must acquire some substantive knowledge of the historical and cultural context of its beliefs and values; they must see these beliefs and values as personally meaningful to them; and they must somehow translate into concrete practice in their daily lives (1997: 173). In addition, Kelman argues, incorporation of national identity into an integral sense of self requires a certain level of personal orientation towards the nation itself: How important is it for the individual to be a member of this particular nation? How strong is their sense of belonging? As Yuval-Davis comments “Belonging tends to be naturalized, and becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way. The politics of belonging comprises specific political projects...” (2006:196), a claim which has been illustrated throughout these pages.

The research projects which I carried out in the United States and East Germany grapple most directly with the questions of national identity raised here. In both cases, participants in my research were motivated in their actions by a sense of critical loyalty, which Staub (1997) describes as

commitment to the group’s ultimate welfare, and/or to universal human ideals and values, rather than to a policy or course of action adopted by the group at any particular time. It also means the willingness and capacity to deviate from – not support but resist and attempt to change – the current direction of one’s group... (p. 222)

This concept of critical loyalty allows for the possibility that individuals may perceive the basic values of the group (in this case, the nation) as ‘stand[ing] in conflict with current practice (p. 222). Staub argues that critical loyalty and critical consciousness do not jeopardize group membership, but rather lend it an increased legitimacy.

Michael Walzer (1987) has provided an important philosophical account of the role of the ‘connected social critic’, one who, by definition, feels herself to be an insider to the group s/he is criticising. The connected critic, Walzer writes

earns his authority, or fails to do so, by arguing with his fellows – who, angrily and insistently, sometimes at considerable personal risk... objects, protests, and remonstrates. This critic is one of us... Nor is he emotionally detached; he does not wish the natives well, he seeks the success of their common enterprise...(p. 39).

While Walzer makes a powerful and eloquent defence of the role of the critic, the emphasis he places on their 'common enterprise' risks homogenizing all critical politics. What exactly is that common enterprise, and to whom does it belong? Who is included in the construction of 'us' and who remains outside? For Walzer, the connected critics are constituted as a group, yet one can argue that those who occupy this marginal space might well be working towards a range of different political agendas, and this contested space between them is of vital importance. Still, with this caveat, Walzer's argument is philosophically and politically compelling. He describes social criticism as 'one of the more important by-products of... the activity of cultural elaboration and affirmation' (p.40). Social criticism is part of the life blood of a culture, and yet, as Walzer comments "... good social criticism is as rare as good poetry or good philosophy" (p. 48). Social critics care very much about the fate of the group they criticize; it is their group, and their fate, for which they are fighting. They belong to that which they criticize, and their criticisms are offered from this inside, albeit somewhat marginalized, position. Walzer argues against the radical detachment which is conventionally associated with role of the critic, insisting on the distinction between marginality and detachment, which, he says, are often confused.

In the United States, anti-war activists flew an American flag at the site of their vigil precisely because they regarded expression of dissent as not only a right, but a duty in a democratic society. As Bruce, one of the anti-war protesters in Colorado Springs, told me "If I didn't care, why would I even bother?". Bruce regarded his activism as a sign of his commitment to a larger good. One of the key national narratives of the United States is that it is a country which gave birth to itself when its civil liberties were jeopardized. Citizens of the United States who openly contest the policies of their government, thereby exercising their constitutional right to the freedom of speech, often believe they are motivated in their actions by a love for their country.

This position is for me, personally, one with which I have much sympathy. As I have lived outside of the United States for twenty of the last twenty-five years, even some people who are close to me have commented that I couldn't understand the US retreat into uncritical patriotism which marked the post 9/11 world, because I 'wasn't there'. Wasn't it equally possible, I wondered, that 'not being there' had allowed me to see both more and less than those whose lives were more immediately and directly effected by those events? I felt, and continue to feel, that my dual position of belonging and detachment gave me a particular

perspective on my research in the United States. The construction of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Americans, epitomized not only in the McCarthy era fifty years ago, but so dominant in our own times, is one which effectively silences potentially critical voices of the population, as individuals may become understandably concerned about the effect that their public expression of criticism may have on their personal and professional lives.

At the time that I conducted this research, I was concerned with documenting the position of the ‘connected critic’ within the context of the Persian Gulf crisis. Those who criticized our country, my country, did so from an ‘insider’ standpoint. Their critique of the military engagement, which was also my critique, came from a sense of belonging to that which was being criticized. The United States was, and is, mine and ours to criticize. This criticism may come from the margins, but the margins are still part of the whole. It is, however, the fragility of the marginal space that seems to have been most dramatically effected by the events of 9/11. Whereas in the past, the debate of who was and who was not be considered a ‘good American’ was open, and even contested; under the Bush administration in the post 9/11 era there was little space to tell stories in which these terms did not have absolute and incontrovertible definitions. The contours of ‘us’ and ‘them’ became so tightly drawn, the national narrative so restrictively controlled, that those connected critics, once securely attached to their positions on the margins, had to fight for survival. Walzer writes:

Social criticism is a social activity.... No doubt, societies do not criticise themselves; social critics are individuals, but they are also, most of the time, members, speaking in public to other members who join the speaking and whose speech constitutes a collective reflection upon the conditions of collective life (1987:35).

We need our connected critics to help provide us with alternative narratives – ‘a collective reflection upon the conditions of collective life’ - for comprehending the events of our age. One effect of Barack Obama becoming elected President - after eight long years in which America became a more polarized society than it has ever been in recent history - is a broadening of the narrative of what it means to be a good American and what duties and responsibilities are attached with being citizens of the sole superpower in the world (see Andrews, forthcoming).

The concept of critical loyalty also encapsulates the feelings of many East Germans with whom I spoke. One of the questions which I asked each of the participants in my research regarded the terminology they would use to describe themselves politically. While many researchers writing about political activists in East Germany refer to them as ‘the opposition’

in fact this is a term which was used only very guardedly by those with whom I spoke. Political activists in East Germany were unusual amongst Soviet Bloc dissidents, in that they perceived themselves as fighting for better socialism for many years after the Prague Spring, a date which elsewhere is associated with the demise of socialist idealism. In East Germany, however, this was not true. Standing at the podium at the famous demonstration of half a million people in Alexander Platz, East German author and internal critic Christoph Hein asked the crowds to “imagine a socialism where nobody ran away”.

Many people perceived their political positions as being critical of the system, but not in opposition to it. They wished to reform really existing socialism, but not to do away with it altogether. They believed that change could happen within their country, leaving the nation-state in action. On the very day that the wall was opened, leaders of the main opposition groups issued a public appeal called ‘For Our Country’ reflecting a fidelity to the principles of socialism: “We ask of you, remain in your homeland, stay here by us... Help us to construct a truly democratic socialism. It is no dream, if you work with us to prevent it from again being strangled at birth. We need you...” (Borneman 1991: 34-35). The activists who fought against the abuses of the state did not see themselves as trying to bring down the government, much less the state, but rather as citizens of East Germany, trying to build a better East Germany.

These activists in 1989 were following in the footsteps of the previous generation of critics, epitomized by Robert Havemann, a man who had spent time in a Nazi concentration camp with Erich Honecker but who later became one of the latter’s most pronounced critics. Havemann once described himself “not as one disappointed in the socialist idea but as its confirmed partisan” (Allen 1991: 62). He and others like him saw themselves as patriots, and wanted to defend their country against those who were running it. Those who chose to stay and fight for a better socialism in East Germany were not taking an option exercised by many of their compatriots, namely to leave. In 1989, 343,854 emigrants left for the West (Naimark 1992:86). Three days before the opening of the Berlin Wall, Bärbel Bohley described those who had stayed behind: “The consensus is: we want to stay here, we want reforms here, we don’t want to introduce capitalism” (East European Reporter Autumn 1989: 17). Werner Fischer summarizes his feelings towards the state:

... my roots were here [in the GDR], ... I had become firmly rooted to this soil, where was the friction that sparked controversy. I did not want to see the GDR disappear. This is how many opposition members express it today: ‘better to have stormy relationship than none at all’.

Here, I think it is important to emphasize that this sense of belonging was quite distinct from the official East German identity propagated by the state. Indeed, the project of national-identity-building was high on the agenda of the socialist state, and there were a wide variety of programmes – for instance the Free German Youth (FDY) and the Young Pioneers –in which individuals were virtually required to participate, whose explicit purpose was to instil and promote a very particular concept of the duties of citizenship amongst its populous. Perhaps because of this, rather than despite it, many East Germans appeared to have “a fundamental ambivalence towards the manifest successes and failures of the East German state” (Jarausch et al 1997: 41).

This, however, was distinct from the sense of an internalized national identity which was apparent in many of my interviews. Interestingly, an internalized East German identity has been allowed to flourish once it was cut adrift from the state’s imposition of practices intended to enhance national identity; thus East German identity has experienced a revitalization in the post-unification era (Andrews 2003; Yoder 1999). One of Yoder’s (1999) research participants describes what she means by ‘East German identity’: it means simply having had “a common history, experiences, life relationships, upbringing, schooling, work world... and these have formed people in a special way” (1999:135) and for another, it indicates “[e]xperience under the wall and a particular socialization pattern” (1999:136). Yoder states that “the most common identification may be summed up as ‘East Germans in a united Germany’” – an identity which some interviewees referred to as “the eastern biography” (Yoder 1999: 136). All with whom I spoke mentioned the impact of the citizen’s movement of 1989 on individuals’ experience of their national identity. Michael Passauer, East German pastor, described this to me:

In Autumn ‘89 ... the GDR citizen for the first time identified himself very closely (‘skinclose’) with the GDR.... ‘We are the people’. This we had for about half a year, and this we, I experienced. ... we had this strong self-confidence, we were able to break down totalitarian systems.

As Passauer spoke, one could feel his passion for, and his connection with the citizen’s movement. In this passage, his use of pronouns is revealing. He begins with the abstract “GDR citizen” and from there moves to “we”, then “I”, and then back to “we”. This shift in language can be read as an indicator of the strength of his own very personal engagement with the events he describes, both as an individual and as one who is consciously part of a larger collective.

One of the questions I asked in my interviews was “When you are asked where are you from, what do you say?” Most interview participants paused over their response, but eventually gave some form of the answer “the GDR” - in the present tense, with comments such as “throughout my life I will remain a citizen of the GDR”. The personal manifestation of East German national identity did not, then, disappear along with the state. Rather, the experiences of having lived in the GDR, this shared history with others, has been incorporated into the self as an enduring source of identity. Here the attachment is literally to an ‘imagined community’ as the country only continues to exist in history books and the memories of individuals.

The project of national identity building in the new South Africa was the context which motivated many to offer their testimony to the TRC. As Osiel (1997) comments:

When a society suffers trauma on a [large] scale, its members will often seek to reconstruct its institutions on the basis of a shared understanding of what went wrong. To that end, they conduct surveys, write monographs, compose memoirs, and draft legislation. But mostly, they tell stories. The ‘telling and retelling’ of a people’s central stories constitute its collective identity... (p. 76)

Many people felt it was their civic duty to relate the painful details of their personal suffering and loss, as a critical component of coming to terms with the past, and in so doing, creating possibilities for a different kind of future. The experience of testifying was, for many, so painful that their willingness to expose themselves, to relive their trauma, can be regarded as a personal sacrifice which they made as an offering to the birth of the nation, as they were told time and again that through the national endeavour of sharing of stories, they would travel, as a wounded but determined people, the long road to reconciliation. And the 22,000 South Africans who did testify in front of the TRC could see their accounts as pieces to be woven into a national narrative. The new collective identity which they helped to create was one which was built upon a fundamental premise of discontinuity with a past which is ‘not a past of pride, but of abuse’ (Wilson 1996: 18).

Customarily, national identities function as way of distinguishing one nation from all others. (The psychological construction of ‘us and them’ is, in fact, central to all identity formation; the term ‘self’ or ‘selves’ becomes meaningless in the absence of an ‘other’ or others.) However, unusually, “The most significant site of otherness for the new South Africa has not been other nations, it has been itself”(Wilson 1996:18). And one of the most effective means of creating that critical break with the past is through the mechanism of truth commissions. As Wilson comments, most people within the African National Congress, the leading political

party, felt that there was a direct correlation between truth-telling and nation-building: “Let’s have the truth and use the truth to build a nation” (1996:14). The fact that reconciliation has proven to be a far more elusive project than many had thought does not detract from the general argument that the desire to be part of the project of nation building was, for many, a vital motivation behind their willingness to publicly recount the trauma which they had endured.

Concluding thoughts

The stories which have filled these pages are clearly snapshots of particular historical moments, as recounted to me by people who lived through these times. Together, the four case studies cover some of the most critical political events of our times, including the attacks of 9/11, the collapse of state socialism in Eastern and Central Europe, and the rebuilding of South Africa in the post-apartheid era. The pictures presented here are both larger and smaller than the individuals who contributed to my research projects. They are smaller, because an interview is always and only situated in time. No longitudinal study can overcome the fact that, inevitably, it will always be limited in time, regardless of how extensive the period covered is. One who has been interviewed can always respond to the researcher that their project only portrays their feelings, insights, understandings, and misgivings of a particular day, or moment in their lives. (As researchers we must accept that sometimes our work does not even accomplish this). In this sense, the stories give us only partial insight into the lives of those with whom we have spoken.

At the same time, however, the stories collected here function as windows onto political movements and times which are not reducible to individual human beings. They derive their very meaning from being part of a larger whole, and without this dual perspective it is difficult if not impossible to access the meaning of what is being said. Although the focus in

my presentation of the four case studies has been on individual accounts of living through times of political turmoil and change, throughout my discussion I have emphasized the social character of these selves. As Tim Keegan comments: “in the narratives of ordinary people’s lives, we begin to see some of the major forces of history at work, large social forces that are arguably the real key to understanding the past”. (1988:168). We can only make sense of their words if we consider the conditions of their lives, who they are, when and where they are living, and what constitute the primary historical events - and the debates over the meaning of such events - of their times. As many have argued, we are never just individuals, and the research presented here offers evidence of the futility of compartmentalizing discussions about individuals and societies.

In *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills implores his reader to:

continually work out and revise your views of the problems of history, the problems of biography, and the problems of social structure in which biography and history intersect. Keep your eyes open to the varieties of individuality, and to the modes of epochal change (Mills 1959:225).

This has been my challenge in the preceding pages; that the stories presented here might help us to better understand the times in which we live, and at the same time that we may gain a deeper appreciation of individuals’ lives by exploring the broader social and political frameworks which lend them meaning. For it is, ultimately, the dynamic tension between biography and history which stimulates the heartbeat of political narratives.