Narrative in the construction of social and political identity

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Let me begin[1] by proposing a working definition of the terms I will be using here—“narrative” or “story” (for my purposes, the two are synonymous). Much of it is borrowed from Labov (1972a) and Schiffrin (1994). A narrative is a linked series of utterances constructed by one person or several persons acting together, consisting of five main parts (not all of which need be explicitly present)—usually in the following order: abstract, orientation, complications, evaluation, coda—told in a linear order, and having a point that is recognizable by participants (e.g., persuasion, entertainment, uplift, or education).

In many fields within the humanities and social sciences, “narrative” has been a very productive area of interest for the past decade or two. While the study of narrative has been around for a very long time, especially in the realm of literary analysis, the proliferation of areas of study in which the idea of narrativity has been fruitful is relatively recent. Some of these fields are discourse analysis, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics; psychology (cognitive psychology and psychotherapy and, within the latter, psychoanalysis); the law; literary theory; history; and anthropology. To support such breadth of interest, the notion of narrative must be rich indeed.

Perspectives on Narrative Analysis

Narratives can be examined from more than one perspective. Labov (1972b) was the first to suggest a *structural* analysis of narrative, analogous to the structural analysis of sentences pioneered by Chomsky within the theoretical framework of transformational generative grammar. In work in this genre, the analyst must discover the necessary components of the sample under investigation, the order in which they occur, and the constraints on co-occurrence of the items in the sample; the analyst determines how changes in the order of components affect the meaning of the whole. To use Schiffrin’s (1994: 284) summary:

> Narratives have a linear structure in which different sections present different kinds of information.… Narratives are opened by an abstract…[followed by] orientation clauses.… The main part of the narrative is comprised of complicating action clauses.…

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> Evaluation pervades the narrative…. Finally, the story is closed by a coda.

As transformational grammar allows for the inclusion of ungrammatical sentences among the data, as a way of determining the limits on the applicability of syntactic rules, structural analyses of narrative must include the consideration of aberrant examples, in which elements may occur in a different order from that given above, or one or more of them is missing or not what it purports to be. One might treat certain kinds of detective stories or postmodern fiction as aberrant examples capable of being "parsed" by sophisticated readers. Evaluations are not fixed, but may shift: "Good guys" and "bad guys," "right" and "wrong," "now" and "then" may switch places with each other. The plot may unfold in nonlinear order, with flashbacks and interpolations or actions interpreted and then reinterpreted by successive narrators. Yet just as a fluent speaker with sufficient linguistic and conversational contextualization can make sense of aberrant sentences (which might be unintelligible in isolation), with sufficient "contextualization" in the form of prior experience with the literary genre (or the individual telling the story: "Max always starts his stories in the middle"), a reader or hearer can salvage an otherwise uninterpretable narrative. This structural treatment of narratives offers us a deep understanding of narrativity and allows us to examine the similarities and differences between stories and other kinds of connected discourse, as well as similarities and differences between oral and written, spontaneous and constructed, and other narrative types. It also implicitly makes the important point that narratives are products of a linguistic grammar and work by principles that are basically similar to those of sentences or other more self-evidently "linguistic" units: Narrative structures are rule governed and predictable.

One should be wary, however, of pushing the sentence-narrative analogy too far. Sentences, in an autonomous-syntax framework such as transformational generative grammar, are strictly formal entities. The understanding of narrative entails a significant functional aspect. That is, within autonomous-syntax theories, sentences can be considered fully analyzed (i.e., understood) in *purely* structural terms: word-order, word-choice, co-occurrence and distribution constraints.[2] But even if it were possible to define narratives in structural terms, doing so would not tell us all we needed to know to understand why the object of our investigation can be called a "narrative" or whether that example is prototypical, atypical but interpretable as narrative, or altogether anomalous. The full analysis or understanding of a narrative must include a functional component: Why did the teller tell this story, in this form, under these real-world conditions, to this audience? What were the social and cognitive aims of the speech event? Who tells what stories to whom?

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Narrative as Culture-Creating

Just as purely linguistic grammar forms a significant part of our cultural knowledge, so the shared rules of storytelling bind a culture together. Two hundred years ago, the ability to tell, and understand, a fairy tale identified people to themselves and each other as members of a culture. This form of knowledge may be less critical for us today; many of us may not recognize fairy-tale motifs (unless we have been exposed to their Disney versions), and still less are we expected to know how to tell them. Yet a legitimate twenty-first century American is expected to have the same kind of active and passive familiarity with sitcom characters and plot lines. Woe betide the contemporary party guest (outside of rarefied academic circles) who is not conversant with the doings on the current episode of "Friends"! Stories about the real world—we call them *news*—have a similar function. Sharing opinions of the *dramatis personae* in the news and evaluations of their actions makes a group cohesive. On the other hand, discovering that a supposedly shared tale has different endings, or different moral evaluations, for subgroups other than one's own can engender suspicion, bewilderment, anger, and fear. People lose their sense of cohesion; *we* don't know who "we" are any more.

News Stories as Narratives

Most narratives that have been studied have the prototypical form of stories told by one person to one or a group of people, with a specific and explicit structure. While some stories are passed from one teller to another—typically changing in the process—usually the telling of a story has been studied as a unique event.

In this age of mass electronic media, however, news stories are not typically constructed in this way. We can think of a host of contemporary stories that Americans (and, often, people all over the world) share.[3] These stories have the general form of typical individually constructed narratives, but while the basic characters and events may be consistent among tellers, other parts of the narrative—details, interpretations, evaluations—may differ strikingly. Such stories involve a diverse set of active and passive participants in a wide variety of media: television and radio news programs and magazine shows; newspaper news stories, opinion pieces, and gossip columns; radio call-in shows. From those options, each of us, in turn, constructs our own story that we trade with friends, cutting and pasting, and our remade narratives then circulate back into the public domain, perhaps via the Internet, to the electronic media, from where… (and so on).

Because these stories are constructed both formally and informally, explicitly and implicitly, responsibly and irresponsibly, it is impossible to assign to them a specific form or format. As individuals and as a culture, however, we still can recognize the story and its details in all of its forms, long after the events themselves have occurred. Suppose you encounter the following list:

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- Judge Ito
- “If it doesn’t fit, you must acquit”
- Slow-speed car chase
- Kato the Akita
- Ron and Nicole

You immediately will be able to provide not only the name of the only narrative of which all of these elements are parts,[4] but also—even years later—the “plot” of the story. And the fact that you can do so, and that everyone expects that you can do so, brings us together as Americans of the early twenty-first century, as much as we may differ in other ways (and as much as the specifics of our individual narratives may differ).

Two Examples

But here I am less interested in examining how shared narrative creates cohesion than in how its absence brings about the opposite: What happens when narrative-based cohesion based on participants’ assumptions of shared narrative is cast into doubt? I use two stories that attracted great attention during the 1990s: the O.J. Simpson story and the story of the relationship between Bill and Hillary Clinton. They are different kinds of stories: One is predominantly social, the other mainly political, though neither is exclusively one or the other. One has a precipitating action that can be located at a moment in time, the other continued, shifting and changing, for eight years. The two stories share certain traits; perhaps the most striking is that both move somewhat uneasily in the shadow area between hard “news” and soft “gossip”—an ambiguity that only intensifies their irresistibility for us all—and both have well outlasted the normal limits of the American attention span.

Most stories retain interest for only a few news cycles. Even the 2000 election—beyond doubt a story of high drama and importance—faded away almost as soon as the Supreme Court announced its decision. By contrast, the O.J. Simpson saga continued to attract public and private attention well beyond the conclusion of his civil trial in late 1996. Even after leaving office, the Clintons (unlike most former presidential couples) are fodder for both the front page and the gossip column. Stories like these that last are marked and require explanation. They pass what I have called (Lakoff 2000) the Undue Attention Test.

Like any compelling group narrative, both of these stories call their culture’s important beliefs into question: the role of celebrity and money in the administration of justice; racial tension in America; the meaning of marriage; the roles of the sexes; the corruption that seems to come inevitably with power. On one level (deplored by the intelligentsia) these stories are tawdry dirt about sex, lies, violence, or infidelity; on another, they are veritable morality stories about how human beings should not be but are—and therefore about sex, lies, violence, and

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infidelity. These stories are not the ephemera or effluvia of our trivial dailiness, even as they are; stories like these, with their unusual staying power, define us and change us as individuals and as a society.

Public stories like these have a major effect on the group as a whole (although individuals transmit them and individuals interpret them). But their function is related to that of the stories that individuals tell themselves (in the same semi-coherent way), which work in similar fashion to create or destroy an individual's sense of identity and self-cohesion. Psychotherapists have for many years been using the analysis of patients' or clients' narratives to explain the distress that brings them into therapy.

Dysfunctional Private and Public Narratives

Classical Freudian psychoanalysts saw psychic unhappiness—what they called "neurosis"—as the result of disturbed communication between an individual's conscious and unconscious mind. Family and couples therapy has traditionally attributed similar distress to poor communication between or among individuals in a family. Both methodologies locate the distress at the level of the speech act, in units not much larger than sentences; to take the stereotypical case, "I want to kill my father and marry my mother." With an intuitive therapist, this sort of interpretation can often be effective. After an initial period of optimism in the first half of the twentieth century, however, analyses lengthened and frequently got stuck. Analysts and other psychotherapists therefore began to concentrate less on the obvious, often florid, symptoms that corresponded to speech acts and to focus instead on the symptoms that were bringing more and more of their clients into therapy in the late twentieth century: feelings of *anomie*, pointlessness, and emptiness. As narratology was becoming a focal point in many academic disciplines in the late 1970s and early 1980s, therapists borrowed those ideas in order to consider *the story* as an aspect of psychic structure that, if deformed, could lead to the kinds of symptoms that brought their clients to them. These symptoms were experienced as *bad stories* rather than *infelicitous speech acts*: They rambled, events in them were disordered, there were gaps in them, they eluded understanding; they were incoherent and noncohesive. Analysts such as Roy Schafer (1992) and Donald Spence (1982) suggested that the basic etiology of neurosis had not changed since Freud's time: a psychically traumatic event suffered in childhood. For Schafer and Spence, however, the route by which traumatic events precipitated psychological distress was that, because they were intolerable to contemplate, they forced a reorganization of the sufferer's narrative. To avoid confronting, recognizing, or reexperiencing the trauma, the individual remakes the narrative in distorted form, with events omitted, reordered, or changed in relationship to others or otherwise rendered unrecognizable. While this process allows individuals to function more or less well, it leaves their story incoherent—which in turn creates a sense of unreality, nonexistence, and meaninglessness, since personal narratives tell us who we are, link us to reality, and give meaning to our lives (see Aftel 1996).

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The analyst's job becomes less that of making unilateral interpretations than of collaborating with the patient to re-create—or even create in the first place—a cohesive narrative the patient can live with and through.

Societies experience analogous traumas when their stories become incoherent or noncohesive. There are signs that this is happening to us now. Social critics speak derogatorily, and nostalgically, about the fall of our public and private discourse from some putative standard in a hypothetical Golden Age. But I think these complaints are analogous to those of prescriptive grammarians who agonize over the use of "hopefully" as a speech act adverb or "like" as a discourse marker. If we understand why our culture is changing and how these changes are connected to current shifts in the kinds of narratives we produce and who is allowed to produce them, we may get through this period of uncomfortable flux with a bit more grace.

The O.J. and Clinton Narratives as Aporias

Consider a set of possible stories about the O.J. Simpson episode. Choose the version you prefer:

(1) O.J. Simpson killed Nicole Simpson and Ron Goldman. He was tried in a spectacular, televised trial that, because of defense manipulation, prosecutorial incompetence, judicial malfeasance, and the antiwhite bias of the jury, resulted in a "not guilty" verdict.

(2) O.J. Simpson was accused of the murders of Nicole Simpson and Ron Goldman. The evidence presented was convoluted and, for a nonscientifically specialized jury, hard to follow but quite probably involved one or more frame-ups by the police. But thanks to the investigative efforts and rhetorical skill of Simpson's "dream team" and the jury's courage in rejecting the verdict clearly desired by the majority community, a "not guilty" verdict was returned.

The first scenario represents the predominant postverdict narrative of the white community; the second, the predominant version of the black community. Both take unambiguous positions on the facts of the case and the role of the jury. Arguably the much-noted postverdict distress of the white community was due as much to their anguish and perplexity at the ability of the minority community to reject the majority's narrative (version 1) as to the verdict itself.

These stories create what postmodernists call an *aporia*: a break in the cohesion in the text, an impossibility of reconciliation of the two offers of meaning into one cohesive whole shared by all members of the community. This impossibility itself suggests a serious problem with using the word "community" to

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describe Americans as a group: The aporia tells us that "community" does not exist between whites—the majority group and the tellers of story (1)—and blacks, the minority and tellers of story (2).

A similar analysis is possible for another set of apparently unreconcilable stories:

(3) Bill and Hillary Clinton are sincere liberals whose dedication to the rights of minorities and women incurred the wrath of conservatives. As a result during their residence in the White House they were subjected to an unending series of inquisitions and persecutions, misreadings and character-assassinations, for alleged actions that were either fictional or trivial. This is the only way to understand (a) the impeachment, (b) the outcome of the presidential election of 2000, and (c) the outcry over presidential pardons, misappropriations of White House furniture, and so forth after Bill Clinton left office.

(4) Bill and Hillary Clinton are irresponsible political and social radicals who have committed blatant criminal acts and escaped due punishment by luck, charisma, or deceptiveness. Only the dogged efforts of people committed to traditional values and virtue in high places kept them in line even as far as they were kept in line and led to the events that culminated in (a), (b), and (c) above. The ultimate downfall of the Clintons is both richly deserved and utterly necessary as a moral lesson for the country, and the Republican victory in 2000 was both fair and a necessary corrective.

These narratives too are clear-cut, direct, and unambiguous. In these respects, each is satisfying to those who tell it, and both have been told, endlessly, since the early 1990s. For both the O.J. and the Clinton cases, though, the simple and satisfying narratives fail to account for the fact that these stories just won't go away. O.J. makes headlines if he does anything noticeable even many years after the crime. The same people who have complained for years about "Clinton fatigue" now fan the flames of new Clinton scandals, reportedly to the distress of the Bush administration. Clinton fatigue has to compete with, and take a back seat to, the need for a conclusion: a need, as with the O.J. story, for a narrative with no ambiguity, with tidy ends, that we can all agree on (in terms of what happened and what it means). For both of these stories—one "about" race, one "about" gender, the two explosive issues America currently can't deal with—there is no such calm end in sight, so the stories must continually be told and retold, retooled and recycled. Without a compromise, fighting over narrative rights and with them social and political clout must go on (see Lakoff 2000).

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In both stories, attempts fail in a major function: to mark and create group cohesion—to define the "we" who agree on "our" story. In this way, they resemble the unsatisfactory, distorted stories that bring people into psychotherapy or force them to repeat and rework those stories endlessly, never quite getting their stories, or themselves, into coherent shape. In the individual cases, background presuppositions are intolerable and therefore discarded, leading to problems with framing and cohesion. In the group cases, subgroups are unable to agree on the frames and presuppositions to be used in constructing the stories. What is "justice"? What is "decency"? What is sex, and what, if anything, does "is" mean? Who among us has the right and the ability to frame these questions and provide the answers to them? As long as we cannot agree on these presuppositions, it is unlikely that we can achieve a single, coherent, narrative for such cases that all of us can agree on.

So we cannot agree on our most important stories because we disagree (often without acknowledging it) on

(a) the presuppositions and frames underlying and giving meaning to the stories (what "justice" is and how it is properly dispensed)

(b) the characterizations of the actors in the stories and assessments of their motives (the characters of the President and First Lady)

(c) the determination of what the stories "mean," why we tell them, and what the "morals" may be for all of us

(d) perhaps most significant, the allocation of the right to determine (a)–(c): who, if anyone, controls the rights to make the interpretations of events that underlie "our" narratives.

I have mentioned two types of narrative competition: within individuals and between groups. But since groups are made up of individuals, and group values contribute to individuals' sense of themselves and their worth, the two are not separable. If implicit agreement on shared narratives underlies that aspect of our self-definition that can be stated as, "I am an American," and "I am an American" is part of an individual's identity, then group incoherence is apt to affect individual feelings of status and belonging. So it is not surprising that when social forces create disruptions in public agreement over group narrative, therapists regard narrative incohesion as a common basis of individual psychic distress.

That confusion necessarily creates in the society experiencing it—or the individuals who compose that society—a sense of chaos, distress, and *anomie*. If our stories tell us who we are, individually and socially, then if we can't make stories that work for all of us, it becomes harder to assume identity of interests, shared language, or mutual trust.

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Gregory Bateson (1972) discusses what happens when conflicting stories cannot be resolved—in his examples, within an individual. He speaks of this situation as one of "schismogenesis"—literally, the production of schizophrenia or a severe breakdown of communication between the affected individual and his or her society. An individual faced with an unresolvably paradoxical message is put into a double bind. According to Bateson, the only way out of the double bind, and communicative breakdown, is moving the discussion to a higher level—to another frame that incorporates both conflicting narratives and perceives each as rational and meaningful in its context.

In that spirit, (5) can be understood as a higher-level substitute for (1) and (2):

> (5) O.J. Simpson was accused of the murders of Nicole Simpson and Ron Goldman. The evidence was ambiguous and complex, and the defense used both of those characteristics to suggest, to a majority-black jury, the possibility of reasonable doubt. Moreover, evidence in the form of Mark Fuhrman's use of racist epithets suggested a pattern of racism in the Los Angeles Police Department. And a majority of the mostly black jury had themselves encountered evidence of police racism. On the basis of these claims and experiences, and encouraged by head defense attorney Johnnie Cochran's closing statement, the jury reframed the question before it from, "Did O.J. Simpson commit the murders?" to "Can a black person, such as O.J., receive justice in an American courtroom?" Their "not guilty" verdict was intended as a negative answer to that question.

Narrative (5) is a compromise—an ambiguous and complicated statement that attempts to view the outcome of the case from several perspectives at once, offering an answer (not necessarily the only one) to the question: Why did the black community see things so differently from the white majority? Therefore, it is a different kind of narrative—perhaps a metanarrative, attempting to explain the existence of the other narratives and the impossibility of resolving the story within either of them. If a society can accept such a metanarrative, it might escape the perils of schismogenesis. To date, by all the evidence, we have not done so.

Racial divides are not the only ones along which schismogenesis can occur. Splits along lines of gender and political affiliation are involved in the competition over the Clinton narratives. Again, it is possible to substitute a metanarrative, (6), for the unresolvably paradoxical (3)–(4).

> (6) Bill and Hillary Clinton are ambiguous, together and singly. They are politically liberal, but conservative; socially radical, but traditional; smart, but stupid; sincere, but corrupt; dedicated to

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> helping the less fortunate, but blindly ambitious for themselves; sexually ambiguous, together and singly, experimenting with gender roles in ways that make even some progressives uncomfortable, constituting a veritable referendum on postmodernism. Both the adulation and the hostility directed toward them are extreme, and both emotions can be understood as emanating from what the Clintons stand for or seem to stand for, or from what observers read into their reported actions, based on conflicts in these observers' own lives and psyches much more than anything the Clintons themselves have actually accomplished.

What if we, as a society, find it impossible to move above the schismatic narratives we have created? Bateson suggests that when this is the case for individuals, they literally go mad: They become schizophrenic. It is of course true that the psychiatric understanding of the etiology of schizophrenia has deepened—or rather changed radically—since Bateson did his original work in the 1940s and 1950s (*Steps to an Ecology of Mind* is a reprint of many of his papers). Researchers are now overwhelmingly likely to see this disease as the result of physical processes in the brain, rather than communicative anomalies in the mind. And while there is some justification for referring to current American societal behavior as "crazy," "schizophrenic," or "out of control," at least the first two should be taken figuratively. But even metaphorical schismogenesis can have literal effects.

Narrative Competition as Agonistic

For several years there has been a great deal of concern expressed by the punditry about a breakdown in American public civility. Different terms are used to describe this phenomenon: "coarsening," "incivility," "agonism" (Tannen 1998). All of these terms presuppose that discussants come together with no trust in a middle ground, no hope of finding a common language or common cause, no desire to compromise. Some of the complaints sound like mere whining over the fact that people other than white middle-class males are increasingly being allowed an active role in framing public discourse—and that these interlopers bring new perspectives and new public styles into the mix, illegitimate precisely because they are nontraditional. Yet even liberals—who might be expected to applaud such changes—express distress, and certainly it is impossible to ignore the fact that the public airwaves have become, often, very unpleasant places in which to spend any time.

I wonder if the breakdown of our former expectation (whether that expectation was accurate or not) of consistent and coherent shared group narrative is a contributory cause of the malaise many Americans feel is infecting the public discourse. If we suspect—as we have suspected for at least the past decade—that as

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individuals and as a group we don't tell the same stories and don't perceive important events similarly, then we have to fear that no one we speak to is likely to hear what we have to say as we intended it to be understood—unless we punch it up, or yell, or overenunciate just as we have always done with foreigners in the futile hope that by so doing, we can get them to understand us across a language barrier. Of course, it doesn't work with foreigners; it only makes them mad, and their inability, or unwillingness, to understand despite our exertions makes us mad back. So we shout louder. So they get more insulted.

As Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967)—disciples of Bateson—note, when communication breaks down, couples or families move in the direction of "complementary schismogenesis": the tendency for each member to exacerbate the very traits of his or her own communicative style that created the difficulties in the first place. Those ways are comfortable because they are old, and when we are in distress, we reach for what is tried and true and comfortable. The discourse gets louder as each side fights to protect its own turf. The two sides grow at once more distinct and more desperate to merge—each on its own terms.

Conclusion

If narratives are one way we can reach out of our separate selves and construct ourselves as a group, then the failure of that language to bridge those boundaries any more could be a significant contributing cause to the increase in incivility. We can understand our increasingly obvious explicit inability to agree on narratives as a sign of social change—not necessarily, as is often argued, for the worse. If the dominant group can understand that its narratives will no longer automatically be privileged as *the* narratives that everyone must accept, and if all groups can contemplate narratives composed at the meta-level, the newly-explicit complexity[5] of American discourse will have a positive effect.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Dean James Alatis and Professor Deborah Tannen for organizing the conference at which the original version of this essay was presented. As in previous years, GURT 2001 served as a reminder to all of us of the importance and centrality of sociolinguistics. As Labov remarked many years ago, the field might be better off if what we call "sociolinguistics" were recognized as, in fact, the central concern of the field, under the name of "linguistics," and if what is commonly referred to as "core linguistics," on the other hand, had been given a hyphenated or complex name like "autonomo-linguistics." So let us think of this and the other chapters in this volume as contributions to "linguistics" proper.
2. Whether those criteria really do allow for a full understanding of sentences—or whether the autonomous "sentence" is merely a fictitious convenience—is a question that cannot be exam-

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ined within a theory of autonomous syntax and one that is thankfully beyond the scope of the present discussion.

3. For instance, in May 1996 I spent a few weeks giving lectures at several universities in Sweden and Finland. I was surprised at the great interest and thorough knowledge the Swedes in my audience had of American current events and the actors in them. Americans, on the other hand, typically have only the most superficial knowledge (at best) of current events in other countries.
4. In case I'm wrong about this premise, it's the O.J. Simpson story.
5. Of course, I am not suggesting here that American society is only now achieving complexity. We have been a complex society from the beginning. For most of our history, however, groups other than the politically dominant one might tell their stories privately, among themselves, but those stories could not compete in the public marketplace of ideas; one thing that made the "dominant" culture dominant was its ability to put its narratives out as the *only* ones available for "everyone." What has been happening, extraordinarily, since the 1960s is the opening of narrative competition to groups formerly out of the running—which, as I have suggested, creates confusion and fears of malaise and agonism but in the long run permits meaning-making for many people who formerly played no role in it.

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