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Full Impact?

Narrative Criminology and the (Potential) Effects of Narrative

Lois Presser: *Inside Story. How Narratives Drive Mass Harm*. Oakland: University of California Press 2018. 189 pp. EUR 27.37. ISBN 978-0-5202-9018-1

As Sveinung Sandberg and Thomas Ugelvik explain on the University of Oslo webpage for their Narrative Criminology Research Network (accessed December 2018):

Narrative criminology aims to explain crime and other harm as a function of stories that people tell about themselves in the world, as individuals and as groups. Narratives are understood to be essential for people's sense-making about their own lives. Narrative criminology is a theoretical and methodological framework based on the idea that stories are interesting as data in their own right. [...] The focus of narrative criminology is on understanding the nature of specific narratives surrounding actions that do or undo harm and their social consequences. Particular phenomena of interest include mass violence, indifference toward suffering, white-collar crime, environmental degradation, drug abuse, various drug wars, other wars, state surveillance, punishment, the development of law, psychiatric intervention, and whatever might be called deviance.

Lois Presser has been a true pioneer in this relatively new subfield of criminology. A Professor of Sociology at the University of Tennessee, she is the author of *Been a Heavy Life: Stories of Violent Men* (2008), in which she connects self-narratives of criminal offenders with larger narrative templates that legitimize violence, and of *Why We Harm* (2013), in which she continues her search for links between storied selves and harmful actions (here including rape, torture, and homicide) by zooming in on the reduction of victims to one-dimensional characters. She is also the co-editor (with Sandberg) of *Narrative Criminology: Understanding Stories of Crime* (2015), a rich foundational collection that takes a variety of approaches to explain why and how stories “animate and mobilize or curb harmdoing” (Presser / Sandberg 16).

Inside Story deepens Presser's project in that it tries to answer the question, “What accounts for the emotional grip of stories?” (vii) as they lead to or tolerate harm. While in the first two books the emphasis was largely on stories that offenders tell themselves, the new monograph expands the meaning of story to “tales people *hear* and tell” (1; my emphasis). Needless to say, the effect of stories on listeners or readers has been a research topic in many disciplines, and Presser's remarkable strength enables her to tackle “narrative sway” (2) in true interdisciplinary fashion, with the various fields often bolstering each other. For instance, both neuroscientists (such as Raymond Mar) and cultural narratologists (such as Arthur Frank and Patrick Colm Hogan) are brought in to

motivate the expansion just mentioned. The statement, “Neuroscientists observe that most of the same regions of the brain and mental processes are involved when we construct and when we absorb narratives” (4), is reinforced in the next paragraph by the suggestion that “when we inspire ourselves, the ultimate source of the inspiration is collective. The cultural resources we use for telling stories are the same ones we use for understanding stories” (4f.). It is always possible to reproach an interdisciplinary author for certain omissions that seem central to the study of the topic in one’s own discipline—I, for one, was looking in vain for Marie-Laure Ryan’s (1991) suggestions about the greater tellability of certain themes and plots. However, having co-authored an essay on narrative interest (Herman / Vervaeck 2009), I would like to underline that *Inside Story* not only constitutes an outstanding research effort but also offers resounding testimony to the value of interdisciplinarity in the study of narrative. This doesn’t mean, of course, that Presser wouldn’t be guided by a central framework. As a sociologist, she settles her discussion of stories as “tales people hear and tell” by relating that combination to the work of her in-group, narrative criminologists: “They either view narratives as suggesting how people should act or guiding action, *or* they view action as the performance of a particular self-narrative” (10). Other disciplines could therefore be suspected to contribute as long as they fit the research mold developed within the central discipline, but *Inside Story* is such a plentiful book that it overrides this kneejerk response.

Presser’s interdisciplinary approach is also broad, in the sense that it seeks to explain why and how stories “drive mass harm”, as her subtitle has it, by “teas[ing] out both the features that make stories *generally* impactful and those that make some stories more impactful than others” (19; my emphasis). By “impactful” she means “nurturing an emotional response” (19), specifying that this response does not have to be extreme. Presser prefaces her treatment of this central question with a chapter on “the discursive processes that drive mass harm” (20). These processes include yet are not limited to narrative, but a wealth of examples (from anti-abortion violence over atrocities against Native Americans to Islamist terrorism) leads to the conclusion that, of all discursive processes, stories are “uniquely effective vehicles for moral and thus emotional messaging” (24). Two more definitions help to stake out the book’s endeavor: “harm” is (un)intentional “trouble caused by another” (24), and mass harm means “masses harmed” (24) through “mass involvement” (24), which does not only imply large-scale perpetration but also a high amount of “standing-by” (25) or tolerance for the crimes being committed. As a narratologist I cannot vouch for the repute of this second definition in contemporary criminology – Presser herself calls it “a controversial move” (25) – but it appears logical in a study of the effect of narrative on harm. If certain narratives hold a great deal of their listeners / readers / users in a specific culture captive, then most probably only part of this group will actively take part in the harm that may come of these narratives. However, a high degree of captivation may well mean that those who are not actively taking part will not acutely condemn those who

do. For Presser, it seems, the passivity of the former listeners / readers / users does not exonerate them; on the contrary, they are also complicit, and perhaps – the book’s argument does not venture this far – even form part of the explanation for the actual advent of the harm.

Presser defines narrative as “a discursive form that meaningfully recounts some experience” (43). In her final chapter (139), she distinguishes between “bounded narratives” (specific texts) and “notional narratives” (which are like plot summaries and appear in different versions). This distinction does not affect the earlier argument, but Presser still suggests the study of notional narratives is more urgent because they are more “pervasive and impactful” (140). Narrative’s “regular features” (51) are temporality, causality, action, conflict, transformation, meaning (“A narrative is expected to make a point” [55]), situatedness (“Narratives are [...] tailored to the (e.g., institutional) circumstances of telling, particular interlocutors, and cultural contexts” [56]), and things unsaid. Presser considers this final feature “vital for narrative impact” (52). Taken together, these features allow for an explanation of what makes narrative uniquely powerful. Presser distinguishes three aspects. Narrative creates “an integrated common sense of action” (57) by linking persons, events, and experiences; it deals with “dynamic agency” (58); and it “creates a sense of action as ethical,” as Arthur Frank puts it (2010, 665). These three aspects obviously emphasize content over form, but I don’t think they will seem controversial to narratologists. In fact, the third aspect could have been underscored with the findings of (postclassical) narrative ethics (for an overview cf. Phelan 2014).

The problem with social research on narratives, Presser submits, is that it has never seriously looked into “how they raise the emotional temperature of actors and groups of actors” (60). The commonsense implication of this move for her central concern will be clear – narratives do not drive mass harm by engendering or furthering rational thoughts, but by moving their listeners / readers / users. This is such a strong opinion that it cries out for historical research. Is it really true that stories have never led to mass harm by appealing to the intellect? Presser avoids this question by collapsing the binary pair. Turning to specialists of emotion such as Nico Frijda and Richard Lazarus, she concludes that “[t]o feel happy, pleased, grief-stricken, angry, or disgusted is to have some *idea* that we are getting or preserving what we want. [...] To feel anxious is to *think* that we risk losing something of value” (63; my emphasis). In other words, emotions derive from cognition, they are based on knowledgeable evaluations of our well-being, our sense of identity and the goals these two projects entail. Importantly, the evaluations are always shaped by the specific cultural context in which they occur. Presser’s insistence on the situatedness of narrative and the cultural dimension of the evaluations that determine emotions seem to bode well for her analysis of the emotional response to narrative, but then her argument takes a totalizing turn.

Presser’s next move is to reconsider the three unique powers of narrative presented above in light of the emotion theories she has brought in. First, a

story aims for coherence of the kind we aim for through our emotions. Second, it is concerned with the relativity of the protagonist's control over his or her goals, so that "narratives that compel us capture something true about the continuous but unpredictable rhythms of our lives" (69). This volatility is a major source of emotions, but narrative endings add "a sense of satisfaction rather than excitement" (70). Third, just like emotions, narratives are "value-laden ways of understanding the world" (70; quoted from Nussbaum 2001, 88), which explains why they can appeal to us so strongly. While I do not wish to dispute their potential for emotional effects, it seems evident that narratives will not always have the full impact that Presser keeps assigning to them in this part of her discussion. Far from resisting her effort to develop a unified theory of narrative sway, I would argue it might be essential, perhaps especially from a sociological point of view, to consider context here as well – to ask e.g. why certain (groups of) people are moved and others aren't, how a specific situation of reading might reinforce emotion (perhaps even regardless of story content). I imagine Presser will not dispute the suggestion that (emotional) responses will not be homogeneous, but still, their heterogeneity seems paramount to a discussion of why and how narratives can induce (mass) harm. To use a famous example, if *Catcher in the Rye* seems to have played a role in the killing of John Lennon by Mark David Chapman, doesn't that mean Chapman should also be part of the investigation that tries to assess the novel's influence? Presser does point to Arthur Frank's concept of the narrative habitus (adapted from Pierre Bourdieu), but she neutralizes its capacity to integrate the essential element of heterogeneous response in a paragraph ending on the totalizing point that "certain stories move us because they call to mind past experience" (78).

In an effort to address form and determine what exactly constitutes the "figurative pull" (73-82) of narrative, Presser first lands on the notion of "gaps", "which demand that active conceptual connections be drawn, and which stimulate ingress of the stuff of memory" (74). "Gaps" of course evoke the work of Wolfgang Iser, who derived his notion of the *Leerstelle* in literary fiction from Roman Ingarden's *Unbestimmtheitsstelle* (1931). Presser does refer to Iser (1972; 1978) when talking about the reader as the co-producer of the meaning of the text, but she does not mention his role with reference to gaps as a central element of reader reception. For Presser, gaps more or less coincide with the "things unsaid" that constituted the last of the nine regular features of narrative listed earlier on.

Another form of indirectness that also plays a role in the summoning of emotional response is ambiguity. The abundance of gaps and ambiguity in narrative means that it "operates *through* suggestiveness" (81; emphasis in original), which (despite a reference to the work of Ross Chambers [1984]) will sound too general to contemporary literary scholars. Moving back to content, and inspired by the occasionally grandiose work of the anthropologist Ernest Becker (1973), Presser takes a further universalizing step by offering the notion of transcendence as the ultimate affecting element in a story. We are especially touched, she says, by narratives "whose uncertain outcomes are consequential

to who we are and which reach for unending significance. Such narratives connect to a barely recalled or even suppressed past with its primitive but commanding concerns of existential significance and power, and they counteract our universal dread of death and insignificance” (85). A tall order indeed for narratives, and surely one that remains to be borne out through careful work in social psychology.

Strangely, readers of *Inside Story* must at this point be convinced that narrative as Presser describes it is capable of driving mass harm, since the book provides no general description of the psychological and social mechanisms that are presumably involved. Instead, Presser in the rest of her book offers two very interesting case studies in order to show the range of emotional response as it connects with the perpetration and tolerance of harm. Concrete examples of this connection often seem to encourage readers to accept the general points made earlier in the book. The first of these two chapters is concerned with the underdog story, which “arouses us because it puts us in mind of a deep sense of vulnerability in the world only to assuage that sense through triumphant, transcendent action” (87). When suggesting that the central crisis in the underdog story may be impending rather than already the case, Presser points to Anders Breivik’s lament about the coming immigration crisis in Norway. When making the more general suggestion that underdog stories “encourage those who fight but struggle to persist” (91), she brings in one of Al Qaeda’s leaders, Abdallah Azzam, who in his book, *Join the Caravan*, insists on unequal strength in the Battle of Badr. When dealing with the fact that the underdog story “highlights the superiority of divine or moral capacities over the earthly kind” (92), she points to the Shiite master narrative of the Battle of Karbala. More generally, the intensity of feeling the underdog story may create derives from a variety of factors. The struggle at the heart of the plot is a fundamental conflict. The contrast between the good underdog and the evil enemy is stark. “The underdog story promises a vanquishing of vulnerability” (95). It also has the capacity to pull people together (as in the case of the American Dream), and it provides everlasting meaning and recognition.

In her next chapter, Presser turns to the other end of the response scale. She zooms in on an academic monograph, *A General Theory of Crime* (GT; 1990) by Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi, which she describes as a story (or a “theory-cum-story” [131]) “sponsor[ing] a web of penal harms” (104), including detention, solitary confinement, execution and the dissolution of families. While the authors of GT work with stark contrasts, they manage to avoid strong feelings on the part of their audience. Presser’s derogatory point in the chapter is that GT contributes to “a mood of satisfaction [presumably on the part of professionals and academics, L.H.], which in turn fosters broad backing for harm” (105). In GT, the offender is cast as the villain. His or her low self-control drives the offense, with opportunity lurking around every corner. Parents play an important ‘supporting’ role – if they do not supervise and punish deviant behavior by the age of eight, the individual in question is a lost cause.

GT reinforces its story of antisociality by remaining relatively silent about the policies that might prevent such an individual from becoming part of the penal system. GT also tells a second story – a self-narrative about the authors, which casts them as experts over and against most other criminologists. In Presser’s neat interpretation, the two stories of the book combine – the expertise of the two authors comes to stand in for the “civilized citizenry” (115), which, unlike the criminals, has been properly socialized in its youth. Since readers will sympathize with the brave struggle of the GT experts against their peers, they will also accept the reductive character structure of the antisociality story and thus buy into the system of penal harm it deems necessary.

Concluding her chapter on the underdog story by saying it nurtures feelings that “are potential mechanisms of mass harm and especially mass violence” (102), Presser adds in a telling footnote that “[u]nderdog stories can also arouse opposition to mass harm” (152). This is a rare moment of relativity in her discussions of narrative impact. While *Inside Story* successfully channels an entire research library on the persuasive powers of narrative and comes up with enticing suggestions about its influence, it does not attempt to explain the variety of effects specific bounded or notional (self-)narratives may have on their listeners / readers / users, and neither does it elucidate the varying degrees of emotional intensity a single narrative may result in. In order for these (in my view: essential) explanations to come about, postclassical narratologists may want to team up with social psychologists so as to devise (large-scale) empirical investigations of what narratives actually do. I see no other way of moving beyond conjecture, truly fascinating though it may be.

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