

Narrative factor in the Russia-Ukraine war

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Introduction

There is a famous saying: the first casualty in war is the truth. At this particular moment in history, this saying is more accurate than ever. The main battlefield of war in the 21st century is not on land, but in people's hearts. Perhaps, the human heart has always been the main battlefield, but now this is no longer a theoretical issue, but a fact of cruel reality. Since modern technology has developed to the point where information can be transmitted instantaneously, propaganda has become a useful tool for constructing an interpretation of reality which favors one's objectives. With the continuous improvement of the speed and methods of transmitting information, even battles in the most remote regions can be observed in real time. Everyone understands that controlling the narrative is the key factor that can determine the war outcome. Traditional propaganda has thus become the main way to fight information warfare, and the so-called narrative warfare has become the center of information warfare. What is narrative? Narrative, as the name suggests, means telling a story. But what does it mean to tell stories in politics? What kind of story to tell? To answer this question, we have to begin with discussion of epistemology. Although on first sight it appears to be irrelevant, it actually plays a key role in understanding the concept of narrative.

Historical background

Epistemology is one of the three main areas of Western philosophy. The other two are ontology and methodology. In short, ontology answers the question "what is the basic unit of analysis?", epistemology answers the question "what is knowledge and how to acquire it?", and methodology answers the question "what means do you have to use in order to acquire reliable knowledge?". Among these three, epistemological issues are the most important. Before starting any research, we must first make sure that the research object can be known, otherwise research and science would be impossible to talk about. This problem is not as simple as some people might think. Some might say: don't we just know the world through our five senses and thinking ability? The external world exists objectively. Information from the external world is received by us through its stimulation of neural receptors in our eyes, ears, mouth, nose, and tongue. The receptors then transmit the signal to the brain, and the brain then synthesizes all the signals into a single whole to construct a representation of the external world. In the 17th and 18th centuries, this view was the basis of a very influential theory of knowledge called empiricism. Empiricists denied that we can acquire knowledge about the world by the means other than through five senses (or as they preferred to call it, experience). But later this theory came under serious suspicion. For example, fundamental particles like electrons and protons is something that we cannot perceive directly, and that the knowledge about them can only be acquired through indirect means (mathematical models, experiments, etc.). However, no serious scientist would deny the existence of electrons and protons, because our theories based on the existence of such particles have been remarkably successful.

Another school of thought that first began to challenge empiricists was called rationalism. Rationalists believed that we can obtain at least partial knowledge about the external world through

logical reasoning. According to rationalists, the world exhibits an order that obeys certain laws, which in turn can be expressed mathematically. Because mathematics does not need to rely on external information (i.e. experience), it is purely a priori, and since human beings have the ability to grasp mathematics, they can obtain at least some prior knowledge about the world through mathematics. Rationalists, however, ran into a problem: any prior knowledge obtained through reason and mathematics, in order for it to be useful, has to be tested, that is, verified experimentally. In other words, knowledge that is really useful to people is still inseparable from experience and some kind of interaction with the world.

It was Kant who revolutionized epistemology. He is famous for making the so-called "Copernican Revolution" in Western philosophy. In a word, he shifted the focus of epistemology from the outside to the inside, that is, from the outside world to one's own cognitive abilities and conditions of cognition. In short, rather than studying how the external world constructs our experience, Kant believed that it is better to study how our innate cognitive abilities make this experience possible, that is, what are the objective conditions of cognition. Kant believed that it is not the external world that, by stimulating our sense organs, transmits to us the information about itself, but that we "impose" on the external world the principles of cognition that are inherent in our minds. In other words, we are not passive recipients of the outside world, but rather active creators of the outside world. That is, instead of receiving objective information from the outside world, we shape that information ourselves according to our innate cognitive principles. This somehow means that the external world is not objective, but subjective. Kant was not an idealist. He did not believe that the external world exists in our minds and has no objective basis, but he believed that we cannot escape the shackles of innate cognitive principles, that is, we cannot adopt the so-called "spectator's point of view" and perceive the world objectively. Kant tried to use the theory he created to prove why three laws of Newton's physics were necessary. In his view, Newton's three laws take root in the fundamental conditions of cognition, so they form a part of the cognitive framework humans impose on the world. What's more, the laws of physics that we can observe and test are not only necessary, but also known a priori. As a result, Kant asserted that Newtonian physics was absolute. Einstein's theory of relativity proved Kant wrong about the absoluteness of Newtonian physics. But the theory of relativity does not deny everything about Kant's theory.

In a nutshell, the main lesson of Kant's theory of knowledge is that there are no so-called purely objective facts, and the facts we accept exist in a complex context where history, culture, language, and other factors intertwine. Thus, our understanding of the facts is decisively affected by the above factors. History, culture, and language shape our conceptual system, and facts are always "filtered" by this conceptual system. That is to say, we are not directly accepting the facts. There is a medium between us and the facts and we cannot get rid of it. For this reason, two people will interpret the one and the same fact quite differently. For example, traditional conservatives and socialists have two contradictory interpretations of the fact that inequality has existed in virtually every society. Socialists would say that it is the source of human misery and thus this problem has to be dealt with accordingly. Conservatives, on the other hand, would say that this very fact proves that the disparity between the rich and the poor is natural and constitutes one of the universal laws of human existence. Thus, rather than to be dealt with, it should be properly respected.

The importance of narrative

How do epistemology in general and Kant's theoretical insights in particular relate to the

question of narrative?

It has been a long-held view in psychology that narrative is fundamental for human beings' comprehension of the world. To make sense of the world around us, we must create a narrative framework through which we can interpret it. In order to do this, the facts and events are woven into a (preferably) coherent story. The story then provides a framework through which it is possible to conceptualize the world and give meaning to it. What is more, people construct stories not only about the world (the external), but also about themselves (the internal). The story about oneself, where the past, the present and (possibly) the future of the Self is written into a coherent whole, creates an illusion of the consistent Self that, in turn, gives us the feeling of the "I".

So, what is the lesson of all of this? First, we interpret the same set of facts differently, that is, tell ourselves different stories. However, if the problem was limited only to differences in interpretation, it would be actually relatively easy to properly mediate the resulting contradictions. For example, through mutual understanding, the distance between different ideas or the distance between different interpretations could be gradually narrowed. But the problem is not that simple. There are various conflicts of interest among different interest groups in politics. Pursuing the maximization of self-interest often requires manufacturing and consolidation of public opinion so that on the hand it is favorable to a particular interest group, and, on the other, is unfavorable to its opponents. To this end, competing interest groups make up a narrative (story) that is biased toward one side and spread this story through various media. In the process of constructing a narrative, interest groups filter a large number of facts, and select the facts that can prove themselves right and the other party wrong. If the facts are not in their favor, interest groups can even use modern technology to fabricate "fake news" and spread it as though it was true. This complicates the whole situation and makes it harder for an average person to discover the truth. The current narrative battle between fossil fuel companies and green energy companies is a good example. Because the results of climate science research are clearly unfavorable to fossil fuel companies, they have long launched an attack on climate science and made up a narrative that reads as follows: ecologists are so opposed to fossil fuels because they are sponsored by the "green" lobbyists. Thus, they constantly pay lip service to green energy, and suppress "independent" scholars who challenge them. Their real concern is not ecology but money, that is why they smear fossil fuel companies. This is a narrative, and fossil fuel companies spread this narrative by sponsoring think tanks, radio stations, TV channels, and other media.

This phenomenon extends to international relations and is amplified to a much greater extent. Countries, akin to the above-mentioned interest groups, also try their best to construct their own narratives, and then use their own media to spread them. The international political arena can be referred to as a "narrative battlefield". The famous American scholar and anti-war activist Noam Chomsky and his research partner Edward Herman once wrote a book called "Manufacturing Consent". The two scholars analyzed how the American media did propaganda during the Cold War and proposed an influential propaganda model. They say that information goes through several levels of filtering before being reported, and that in the end the media "feeds" the public "purified" information. Some of the "filters" are as follows: information must not harm the interests of media owners; information must not harm the interests of media sponsors; information must not come from sources arbitrarily identified as "unreliable" by the media; information should go through an ideology test to make sure it accords with the picture of the world held by the powerful.

What does all this mean? This means that there are several additional mediums between us and

facts in addition to the original medium of inherent conditions of human cognition, which widens the original distance between us and external facts. Because these media are not as natural and necessary as conditions of cognition, but entirely artificial, they are based on human interests rather than facts themselves or human cognitive features. Unfortunately, precisely because these media are based on human interests, they serve as a means of manipulating public opinion. Shaping public opinion that is beneficial to oneself is the ultimate goal of narrative construction. This is why controlling the flow of information and being able to construct a dominant narrative is so important to countries.

Narrative and the Russia-Ukraine war

Analyzing the current Russia's war against Ukraine through narrative can give us important insights about how the West and Russia conceptualize the war, i.e. how they write it into the story about themselves, and draw our attention to a potential huge role that narratives play in international politics.

I propose to analyze Western and Russian narrative along the two axes: horizontal and vertical. Horizontal axis represents the "filters" that shape the narrative. Vertical axis represents the turning points in history of Russia's relations with the West that influenced the direction of the narrative toward greater animosity. The "filters" are:

1. Geopolitical: competition between Russia and the West for the political influence over the countries of the former Soviet Union
2. Economic interests: competition for the market of the countries of Eastern Europe and economic benefits that could be derived from their joining either the economic union with the West or with Russia
3. System of values: increasing discrepancies between Western (democracy, human rights) and Russian (conservatism, "statism", internal stability) values.

The turning points that changed the nature of the narrative include:

1. 1999: the first round of NATO expansion and the war against Yugoslavia
2. 2003: US invasion of Iraq and one of the first color revolutions on the post-Soviet space – the "Rose revolution" in Georgia; Russia's "authoritarian" turn
3. 2004: the second round of NATO expansion and the "Orange revolution" in Ukraine
4. 2008: Russo-Georgian war
5. 2010-2011: the Arab Spring and the subsequent bombings of Libya by NATO
6. 2012: Civil War in Syria and Putin's return to Kremlin
7. 2014: Coup/revolution in Ukraine and the subsequent crisis

Russia's interpretation of its relations with the West and the construction of narrative goes as follows: despite Soviet Union's collapse and Russia's desire to join the West, Western countries, although acting as though they supported Russia's efforts, in fact used its weakness and internal distress to consolidate their power, further weaken it to the point where it could not resist Western hegemony, and possibly to destroy it by encouraging separatism. The proof of the true intent of Western conduct is the expansion of NATO at the time when Russia did not present any threat to the West and even wanted to become its member. By fostering color revolutions in various countries of the post-Soviet space and welcoming anti-Russian governments that took power as a result, by further expanding NATO and its military infrastructure close to the Russia's borders, the West denied Russia any legitimate security concerns. Later, by attempting to break economic relations of

the post-Soviet countries with Russia and integrating them into the Western economic order, the West also showed its disregard for Russia's economic interests. Moreover, the West in the face of its leader – the US – overwhelmed by its own power adopted a thoroughly cynical foreign policy: on the one hand insisting on the so-called “rules-based international order”, and on the other allowing itself to break these rules whenever wanted while denying others the right to do the same. American illegal invasions of such countries like Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Syria only proves the point. The last straw came when the West inspired a coup in Ukraine and began to pour in advanced weapons systems. Russia had to act in order to guarantee its security.

The West's narrative goes as follows: after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia made a promising first step toward democratization and westernization. It accepted the values of liberal democracy and capitalist system and launched domestic reforms. The West did not perceive Russia as a threat, instead it supported Russia in its most vulnerable moment in history. The idea behind NATO expansion was to create a system of common European security and to promote democracy. Although Russia was not invited, but it should not have worried about it, because the alliance ultimately served a purpose of stabilizing the continent, and not to threaten Russia in any way. The things began to change with the accession of Vladimir Putin to power. Despite his commitment to the Western values during his first years of presidency, somewhere around 2003 there appeared first signs of his growing authoritarianism. In 2007 Putin gave his famous speech at the Munich Security Conference, where he challenged the primacy of the US. The first serious blow to Russia's democratic reforms and its commitment to peace happened in 2008 when Russia attacked Georgia and recognized to parts of Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) as independent countries. But there was still a chance for Russia to democratize and maintain its ties with the West. However, when in 2012 Putin began his third term as president, having changed the Constitution with the help of the then president Medvedev, it became clear that nothing had left from Russia's democratic commitments and Russia's turn to authoritarianism had been completed. Russia began to pursue an increasingly aggressive foreign policy, with the goal to reestablish in some form the former Soviet Union. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was the decisive proof of it. In order to contain an increasingly revisionist Russia, and to secure the rules-based international order, the West began to offer its assistance to the countries of the post-Soviet space, including Ukraine, in their quest for self-defense.

Conclusion

Narratives play a crucial role in international relations. Through narratives nations and leaders comprehend reality. Narratives also play an important role in states' attempts to promote their national interests. In order to make sense of political events we have to learn how the involved actors interpret these events, and what their goals are. My personal belief is that there is a growing need in constructing a common narrative for the whole mankind. As utopian and naïve the idea might seem, it can potentially become one of the guiding principles of international politics that can promote peace and stability in the world.