The Narrative Approach to Reagan’s Policymaking

There are countless forms of narrative in the world. First of all, there is a prodigious variety of genres, each of which branches out into a variety of media, as if all substances could be relied upon to accommodate man’s stories. Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, picture, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, pantomime, paintings (in Santa Ursula by Carpaccio, for instance), stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation. Moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups have their stories and very often those stories are enjoyed by men of different and even opposite cultural backgrounds; narrative remains largely unconcerned with good or bad literature. Like life itself, it is there, international, transhistorical, transcultural.

Roland Barthes

Barbara Czarniawska notes that there is a growing fascination among young scholars to proceed to do studies that merely show the presence of stories in their data. Czarniawska labels the resulting type of studies as “Look, Ma, there is a narrative!” Just pointing out that stories exist is not enough to produce an interesting study. The point should be what the consequences of storytelling are for those who tell them and for those who study them. When one chooses to study political narratives, one of the main points of emphasis should be the consequences for the citizens or other people whose lives are affected by the narrativized politics. In the case of Reagan’s political leadership one cannot help “finding narratives,” since it would actually be harder to point out parts where stories are not used.

J. Hanska, Reagan’s Mythical America
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This will not be merely an isolated chapter that focuses on the narrative theory or how it can be used as a method of political analysis. It will initiate the analysis of the stories Reagan told. With the use of numerous quotations from Reagan, I will not only justify the narrative approach but also analyze specific aspects of Reagan’s political storytelling and draw conclusions while presenting the reader with some essential elements of narratology. Alasdair MacIntyre claims that “man is in his actions and practices, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal.” In Reagan actions and fictions blend together to create the policy.

The proper name for the study of narratives is narratology, and as David Herman notes, the mere idea of narratology is a battlefield of two competing stories. One story claims that narratology is a dead science with its “forbidding terminology and mania for taxonomies.” The days of high structuralism have undoubtedly passed, and the research conducted in the structuralist tradition is bound for trouble, since that particular story has been developed to its ultimate and stories have been analyzed and classified to their most minuscule detail. The other competing story argues that narratology has merely entered a state of crisis, and recent research has focused on those areas that classical narratology chose to ignore or was not able to explore. These include, for example, types of narratives that were not earlier recognized as stories at all or the extratextual effects of narrative on its reader.

One must recognize the problems involved in using narratology as a paradigm for further research and broaden and diversify the conception of stories, and provide new ways to analyze both their structures and effects. Narratology has only moved with the times into another phase. This one may not be as enthusiastic and even as utopian as that of the semiological revolution of the 1960s but compensates by not even trying to aim for any kind of unified grand theory that would once and for all explain everything within every kind of narrative. Narratology has become a more open-ended project and focuses on the areas that have been overlooked by using a more multidisciplinary approach. When applied to politics more vigorously, narratology might broaden our scope of the entire concept. We tend to see politics as an altruistic system that functions rationally to make life better for each citizen. If we would gain more insight into the system by which stories operate in us and change our lives as political subjects, hitherto unforeseen vistas could open for us as the rationality of political decision making is questioned by the study of those narratives that are used to excite political passions and power plays. Stories play a