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Molly Andrews

Excerpt

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I History, biography, and political narratives

The year is 1992. I am in East Berlin, in the living room of Wolfgang Templin, the man Erich Honecker, Secretary General of the East German Communist Party from 1971 to 1989, once identified as the ‘number one enemy of the state’. Three years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and life has changed considerably since that time for Templin, and for his country. In 1987 he, along with a handful of other leading anti-state activists, had been exiled from the country. He and his family ended up living in West Berlin. I ask Templin to tell me about his experience of the night of November 9, 1989.

He responds with great warmth: finally, after nearly two years away, he was allowed to ‘come home’. Fighting against the crowds pouring into the west, Templin made his way back into East Germany:

I immediately rang friends and said, if the Wall comes down, then my route back into the GDR [German Democratic Republic, or East Germany] is free, and I was ecstatic ... the fall of the Wall for me meant that I could go back into the GDR rather than get out of it. And purely physically I experienced this – everybody pushing past me in the opposite direction and me pushing against the stream the other way. I was overjoyed and it was in that mood that I re-entered the GDR ... Two, three weeks later ... my family moved back here.

Templin’s story is most compelling, for a number of different reasons. At one level, it is a simple tale of a family man who has finally been allowed to return to the land of his birth, a land that he loves and to which he has dedicated his life. He was forced to leave, and he is now allowed to return. He is ‘overjoyed’.

But there is much more to this story than Templin’s personal happiness: implicitly his account challenges the received wisdom of

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the meaning of the fall of the Berlin Wall. As Templin expands on his overpowering feelings of that night and the weeks that followed, I am forced to try to understand what lies beneath his reaction to these events. This requires contemplating a political framework which is significantly different from the one most often used to explain the radical changes of 1989. Why wasn't he dancing on the Wall, drinking champagne, with all the other revellers that fateful night? More challenging still, why, having managed to 'escape' from East Germany, did he move back, once circumstances made this possible? Templin's account raises these, and many more, questions.

For the last two decades, I have been talking with, and listening to, people like Wolfgang Templin, trying to understand the broader meaning of the stories they tell me about their lives. For I am convinced that there is a profound sense in which the personal is political, and the political is personal. It is through the minutiae of daily life that human beings access the political ripples, and tidal waves, of their times.

This book is about 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 world-views, 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? What is it that makes us interpret the events of our time in one way and not another? Who do we perceive ourselves as being in relation to those events? How actively are we engaged in trying to shape our political environment? What do we identify as being primary forces for change in our lives? To what group or groups do we feel we belong, and how, if at all, does this contribute to our understanding of the political universe?

I have been fascinated with these questions since I was a child. And perhaps it is not surprising that it is so, given my own background.

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I first came to political consciousness in the late 1960s, living in Washington, DC. The Watergate Affair which unfolded in the early 1970s was for me local news, and I was utterly transfixed by it. I personally knew the children of some of the key players in this national saga, and I was forever perplexed by how people who seemed good could do things which were so blatantly wrong. For me, it was a simple question with no obvious answer.

I have dedicated myself to exploring the relationship between the personal and the political since that time, in a variety of contexts. This book is about that ongoing investigation, and the places it has taken me. Chapter 2 examines the challenges I have confronted in conducting my research, and explores who I am in relation to the stories I have collected. Stories are never told in a vacuum, and nor do we as researchers simply tabulate information which we gather. Rather, we feed into the process at every level, and our subjectivity is always a part of that which we are documenting. How, then, do we train ourselves to really listen to the stories of others? In this chapter I also consider the relationships I have built with the people who have participated in my research, and how this impacts on the stories they have told me, and my understanding of these stories. I explore, too, what makes some stories more 'tell-able' than others, and question the extent to which it is ever possible to 'read' silence, or the 'not told'.

Each of the next four chapters has as its focus a case study. Chapter 3 discusses a study I conducted with fifteen British lifetime socialist activists who had been politically active for fifty years or longer, from the perspective of twenty years of hindsight. What is it that looking back over that project teaches me now about who I was then? How has this research continued to function in my life, after many of the original participants have died? And what remains with me from our conversations together, where I explored how they had sustained their commitment to work for social change throughout the course of their long lives?

Chapter 4 presents research I conducted in Colorado Springs, Colorado, during the Gulf War of 1992, interviewing anti-war

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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. What did this mean to them? What does this research mean to me now? This chapter examines the way in which national narratives of patriotism and belonging have evolved since the time I conducted my research, including an analysis of the impact of 9/11 on this discourse.

Chapter 5 focuses on the work I conducted in East Germany in 1992, immediately after 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. How did the hopes and dreams which motivated their underground anti-state activism in the years before 1989 compare to the reality in which they found themselves in the early 1990s? How did they make sense of the changes which had occurred? And how did these stories compare with the ones which saturated western media at that time?

Chapter 6 uses some of the testimonies presented before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to examine the role of national storytelling in the building of the new South Africa. What is the relationship between the tales of the 22,000 people who gave testimony to the TRC and the collective memory of that country? Who and what determines which stories ultimately become woven into the national narrative? Here, also, I discuss the ethical dilemmas faced by researchers who have as their focus traumatised societies to which they, themselves, do not belong.

Finally, chapter 7 makes comparisons across the four case studies, and offers some concluding comments.

The sequence of the chapters in this book mirrors the chronology of when I conducted the research which underpins them. I feel that this is important because, as I will discuss, the projects built upon each other in subtle but important ways; insights which came from earlier experiences were revisited, usually revised, and often endowed with new relevance. This book, then, provides an account

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not only of the particular case studies, but also of my own intellectual development.

OLD AND NEW STORIES

While I have written and published on each of the four case studies presented in this book, it is my hope that here I am able to offer a new way of looking at these projects, not only individually, but also in relation to each other. I have not tried to encapsulate arguments which I have made elsewhere, though I have indicated these in the references cited in the bibliography. Rather, it has been my intention to explore the new and unfolding meanings that I continue to find in each of these research endeavours.

Previously, I have argued that there is never in any research a final end-point from which one can decipher ultimate meaning (Andrews forthcoming). Rather, even data which appear to stay constant, such as transcripts, change their meaning over time, just as we ourselves come to see new and different aspects of our research. In this way, old stories actually become new stories; quite simply, over time we find new layers of meaning in them. It is not that this new perspective is more adequate than that which we previously held, but it is grounded in a different standpoint, the place from which we presently see the world.

This then is what these pages contain; an exploration of what it means to look back on work I have conducted over the past twenty years, and to take account of the ways in which altered circumstances in my life, combined with altered historical circumstances, have caused me to view things differently than I originally did. Revisiting the political stories I have researched in England, East Germany, the USA and South Africa has brought me to a new understanding of the changes, both within these countries and within myself. There are different, and sometimes overlapping, arguments which can be made for revisiting old data (Andrews forthcoming). While some of these focus on logistical and financial constraints, epistemologically the most powerful of these relates to altered personal and political

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changes. Writing this book has been an exercise in identifying those changes, and examining their implications for my research.

Revisiting my study on lifetime socialist activists has made me think about all that has changed since the time of the original research. Most of the people who participated in that study have now died, and my own life circumstances have altered considerably. Although I do have ongoing conversations with a small number of the original respondents, the 'new' conversations have mostly come from my re-reading of the transcripts of our interviews and of the many letters sent to me by these women and men. It is clear to me that there were certain stories which I was more receptive to hearing than others. It is only in retrospect, for instance, that I have come to view the accounts of their relationships with their mothers as representing a fundamental challenge to the dominant psychological paradigms which attribute much blame to inadequate mothering (Andrews 2004).

Many people have argued that the USA has been irrevocably changed since the events of September 11, 2001. But the interviews which I collected nearly a decade earlier, in the wake of the first Gulf War, suggest a more complex picture. The debates about what it means to be an American, and the ways which are considered to be appropriate for expressions of a sense of national belonging, have long occupied American political discourse (Huntingdon 2004; Lieven 2003). Still, it is difficult to look at these data and try to remember the world before 9/11. In this chapter, I review not only the data I collected in 1992, but also my own struggles to come to terms with my insider/outsider position *vis-à-vis* the land of my birth. As I have lived outside of the USA for fifteen of the last twenty years, even some people who are close to me have commented that I can'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 affected by those events? Here I explore the impact of my dual position of belonging and detachment on my research in the USA.

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In my work in East Germany, it is a different kind of transformation that strikes me. More than fifteen years after the opening of the Berlin Wall, I now look back with an altered perspective on the time in which I gathered my data, in 1992, when East German society was saturated with debate about how to deal with the past, of both individuals and of the country. I can see in the very design of the project a certain romanticism on my part, a disposition which undoubtedly led me to seek out the exceptional people who had tried to reform the East German state for many years prior to the momentous changes of 1989. Now, in the twenty-first century, there are some who are still trying to make sense of what the forty years of state socialism meant for those who lived under its dictates, but for most people, Germans and non-Germans alike, East Germany is a land of the past; many of the themes addressed in chapter 5, however, suggest its continued importance in the political imagination of the East German people. It is, then, the very dramatically changed circumstances of East Germany in the intervening fifteen years since the time of unification which beckons me to revisit the meanings of the data I collected during the special window of political transformation which immediately followed the opening of the Berlin Wall.

My re-examination of my work with transcripts of South Africa's TRC has been illuminating to me not so much because of the changes in South Africa – though, of course, there have been many – but rather because this journey led me to confront directly some very uncomfortable issues. Over the years I came to view the work that people like myself had been doing as essentially voyeuristic. Because of the open availability of the transcripts of the TRC – published in books and on DVDs, and available on-line – it has been tempting to regard these data as legitimate material for anyone wishing to access it. But working with this material, combined with several trips to South Africa, has caused me to view the situation differently. This chapter outlines a number of overarching themes which I have observed in the material I have read, but avoids citing passages from traumatic testimony of individuals, as I no longer feel comfortable about my role in

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replicating these accounts. This chapter represents my attempt to provide an analysis of the key narratives as I see them in the new South Africa, while extending more respect to the individuals who have suffered and continue to suffer there.

THE POWER OF POLITICAL NARRATIVES

Chilton and Schaffner (2002) identify two broad strands in their definition of politics:

On the one hand, politics is viewed as a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it ... On the other hand, politics is viewed as cooperation, as the practices and institutions a society has for resolving clashes of interest over money, power, liberty and the like. (2002: 4–5)

What is appealing about this definition is its attempt to bring together both the conflict and the cooperation which are an integral part of any society. In this book, I am interested not only in how people view struggles for power and attempts to resolve such struggles, but also in how they locate themselves within this process. When I use the term ‘political’, I am interested in small ‘p’ politics and its relationship to power: How do people understand the concept of power, who do they think has power, over whom, to do what? Is that power perceived as legitimate – and if so, from where does it derive its legitimacy? Finally, how do people place themselves within the political world that they identify? I am, then, interested in what kinds of stories people tell about how the world works, how they explain the engines of political change, and the role they see themselves, and those whom they regard as being part of their group, as playing in this ongoing struggle.

One of the key reasons I have been drawn to conduct research in England, the USA, East Germany, and South Africa, was my attraction to speaking with people as they lived through moments of acute political change. Talking to lifetime socialists in Britain during the height of Mrs Thatcher’s reign as prime minister, or to American

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anti-war activists who were willing to risk their physical safety as they protested the US military engagement in the Gulf War, or to East Germans in the wake of losing their country, or reading the transcripts of South Africans who had testified before the TRC – in each of these settings I was motivated to examine how politicised individuals understood the tumultuous political times in which they were living. What was the wider story which they built around the immediate headlines of their day? Where exactly did they locate themselves in these political narratives?

Yuval-Davis (2006: 201) argues that ‘Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)’. 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’ (2006: 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 USA), 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); this book provides insight into this insider/outsider struggle in four different geographic locations.

The last decade has witnessed an extraordinary explosion of interest in ‘the biographical turn’ (Bornat, Chamberlayne, and Wengraf 2000: 1), a complete paradigm shift which ‘affects not only the orientations of a range of disciplines, but their interrelations

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with each other' (2000: 1). Part of this biographical turn has been the growth of the interest in, and proliferation of, narrative research, stretching across a vast array of academic disciplines. Narrative research generally, and personal narratives in particular, have been used as an analytic tool for trying to understand wider social phenomena. Stories and storytelling are no longer the province of the playroom, but rather are increasingly regarded as an important arena for serious scholarly investigation.

As noted by Bornat, Chamberlayne, and Wengraf (2000), an important component of this paradigm shift has been a movement towards an increased awareness of the potential of cross-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary research. This is perhaps one of the key reasons I have been drawn to narrative research, as it is sufficiently broad and flexible enough to be able to accommodate the interests represented by my undergraduate degree in political science and my PhD in psychology. What I was really interested in was neither the one discipline nor the other, but rather the shared ground between them. The more my education progressed, the more confident I became that the best way to explore this fertile ground was to listen to stories that people tell about their lives, as these personal stories know no disciplinary boundaries.

Over the past few years, there has been a growing volume of work on political narratives. Dienstag's work on the role of narrative and memory in political theory emphasises the importance of debates over the meaning of history, arguing that 'Human beings fight over history because they conceive their pasts to be an essential part of who they are. And they are right' (1997: 206). The research I conducted in East Germany, for instance, can be seen as an attempt to uncover a different framework of meaning of the events of 1989 from the triumphalist interpretation which was so dominant in the West.

Beginning with Aristotle's *Poetics*, narrative has generally been taken to indicate a temporal sequencing of events, which includes a beginning, middle, and an end (Dienstag 1997: 18). Considerations of