



Grossberg, L., 2022. "Stories in Unlivable Times."
communication +1, vol 9, iss 2,
DOI: 10.7275/35jp-tb46



Stories in Unlivable Times

Lawrence Grossberg, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, docrock@email.unc.edu

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together.

—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Or by allowing ourselves to be assigned to particular political camps and identities by the stories we choose or that choose us. Our inferno is constructed out of chaos, a desire for order, and a demand for perfection. Some people embrace the inferno, seeing chaos as a postmodern order; others struggle to survive it, and still others condemn it as they search for ways to escape or oppose it.¹

These are after all tumultuous times. There are always big and small crises—social, economic, political, and cultural, with different consequences for different populations. When multiple, concurrent crises become inescapably visible, the intensities of the threats can feel unprecedented (as it has in previous moments as well).

This is not the first time, even in my lifetime, that people believed they were facing unprecedented challenges, fighting battles that could change the face of the world.

This is not the first time that people thought the world was ending.

This is not the first time that culture has become the battleground. If you don't believe me, listen to the music of the past 60 years—and keep going back.

And I am by no means the first or only person to make these arguments. I do not claim originality, and many of my positions and arguments can be found, usually in fragments, all over the media landscape. My effort is only to assemble them and articulate them into a coherent if uneven narrative.

If we want to change the world, we have to start with how politics has been and is being waged and that means starting by trying to capture the tides of history. Since the mid-20th century, the left has had moments when it seems to have been the leading force of change, and it has had significant victories. However, despite significant setbacks, the general direction of change has been forged by the right. Conservative and reactionary coalitions have done a better job of analyzing the everyday and institutional contexts.

¹ This short essay is a piece of a larger project that continues my work on contemporary U.S. political culture. I have taken both ideas and words from Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Chris Lundberg, John Clarke, Meaghan Morris, Barbara Claypole White, and Zachariah Claypole White. I cannot thank them enough.

And that means examining the role of culture—in the form of stories—in the struggles over social reality and power. In a society reaching for democracy, it is not enough to force people to change their habits or (pretend to change) their thoughts. You have to win people to your side, wherever they may be at the moment. You have to change the stories, but that requires us to know how and why people feel included in some stories and excluded from others. And that means that culture, measuring the already available stories, recognizing the complexity of the landscapes of experiences and emotions, and validating specific experiences and feelings by reading them into stories (as I shall argue, of polarization) gives them new meaning, transforming how people live and feel about their conditions. We have to recognize that people live inside many stories (the voices in their head), many of which are incomplete and contradict each other.

Part of what makes humans distinct is culture, although other species may have something akin to culture, embodying in multiple media and forms the stories that organize and make sense of the actualities and possibilities of contemporary life. People need to believe that their place in the world, and how they live their lives, make sense. Stories tell us who and where we are, how we got here, what sorts of relations can or should exist among different groups; they tell us where we belong, how we feel, how the world is supposed to be, and how we can get there. They tell us how to live with differences; they simultaneously connect and disconnect people. They dictate the logics with which people calculate their choices. Stories are our imaginations made concrete and livable. They tell us what matters and what does not. They enable us, even direct us, to see and hear certain complications and contradictions while remaining blind and deaf to others. But stories take many forms; they are not only or always narratives with a beginning, middle and end. They can be images, symbols, materialities of all sorts.

Politics is not only the struggle to control populations, resources, and violence; it also seeks to control the possible stories. It struggles to make one story (or a set of stories, however inconsistent) dominant, to make it feel obvious, commonsensical, unquestionable, and something worth fighting for. Power seeks to control the stories we tell ourselves in order to establish systems of relations—linking particular material and social relations to meanings, feelings, identities, and political positions.

We tell stories and they are told to us all the time—often implicitly--in conversations, social interactions, and community organizing. But these stories are not invented in the individual telling; they are collective. They surround and enable such communications, shared in the various cultural institutions (religion, education, the arts) but most importantly, in the media, and this has become more and more unavoidable. Before the introduction of the telegraph, railroads, and especially radio,

the U.S. did not have much of a national culture. These new media enabled the production of such a national identity, and perhaps the multiplication and fragmentation of national media has contributed to our contemporary situation.

If you want to change the world, you have to change the stories. Too many people still believe that change comes only through an institutional change (elections, court decisions, legislation, or regulation) without offering stories that convince people of the value of specific changes. Or they mobilize people into new stories only for the sake of institutional change, and then the story ends. Change, especially democratic change, demands that one continually try to win “the hearts and minds” of people, including those with whom one disagrees.

An organic crisis (from Gramsci and Hall) is a moment (a conjuncture) in a society when there is a struggle to condense the multiple and dispersed crises into a singular meta-crisis as it were. In fact, it may feel that the many crises almost demand to be pieced together in an as yet undefined puzzle of a singular crisis, a mega-crisis. culture becomes particularly important. But that has to be narrated into existence and made intelligible to at least some sectors of the peoples. Thus, at such moments, power and politics become largely cultural. As the Breitbart website put it, politics is downstream from culture. The old stories—primarily of liberalism and communism—no longer work. We reach for other stories to define and respond to the crisis. Different stories offer different ways to make the crisis sensible, knowable, and livable. Different stories respond to the organic crisis differently: by doubling-down on common-sense opinions as if they were unquestionable, by tightening the constraints—often through violence—on the stories that can be told, or by seeking out new stories no matter how predictable or absurd.

How we experience, live, and feel about the world and our place in it depends in large measure on the stories we tell and that are told to us. Many of the most powerful stories today—whether addressing boomers or millennials—are apocalyptic, nihilistic, or survivalist. Many people are anxious as they try to hold back their panic over the dwindling possibilities for the future and the chaos of the present. We see ourselves, too often, in the dark stories that portend an unlivable future.

We cannot even know in advance or guarantee whether and how people will respond to different stories, or what their effects might be. Their outcomes are always, to varying degrees, unpredictable. People live stories with different mixes of optimism and pessimism, cynicism and despair, anxiety and commitment, depression and hope, fear and action, love, and anger. Stories can leave us cynical and stuck in passivity or empowered to act.

Given this uncertainty, I want to circumscribe my argument with four limits. First, it's not that stories—again, one way of talking about culture—are the only thing shaping the politics of our lives, or even that it is always the most important agency shaping our world. But they do matter. Power is not all about culture but it is inescapably about culture. At the same time, culture itself—the stories shaping our lived realities—do not exist in some autonomous imaginary or symbolic realm. They are inextricably linked to definite material—e.g., economic, historical, and technological—conditions. And those conditions help to define what kinds of stories are possible or impossible, how they can or cannot be distributed, to whom they can speak, etc.

Second, trying to understand the state of society, especially one in an organic crisis, is a paradoxical task. One has simultaneously to speak about the society as a totality or unity while recognizing that the unity is fractured by and composed out of its differences, its multiplicities and variations. It is what Stuart Hall called a “unity-in-difference” and I do not know if I am up to this effort; it is not something one can do alone. Some of the things I say we need to do are already being done by some, perhaps, many people all over the political spectrum. Many of the practices and attitudes I characterize as bad stories are tendencies rather than dominant realities, which cannot be generalized because they have very specific locations. I am trying to tell a story about some important practices and attitudes that define the political-cultural field of struggle, because they are the most visible and most powerful voices on the field of struggle. They may also be among the most extreme; I do not know that this is a necessary relation, but they do maintain a certain kind of cultural dominance.

Third, consequently, no story can ever make sense of everything; we are not looking for one answer to our problems; there are always multiple answers—many offer important insights but they are always incomplete. But we can seek stories that recognize the complexity—and even contradictoriness—of the social formation, and hence speak with humility rather than certainty, that are always open to challenge and question. But this has further—even intellectually radical—consequences. There is no universal story, not even a universal sense of what constitutes a story. The very concepts of unity and difference—and hence of the possibilities of “unity-in-difference”—are, in Althusser's terms, overdetermined, or in Stuart Hall's reading of Gramsci, they are always conjunctural—contextually specific, operating somewhere between specific events (like Trump's election in 2016) and abstract epochal tendencies (like capitalism, religion, or climate change). There cannot be universal, taken-for-granted assumptions about how stories are constructed, how new unities are made, or what will constitute a better story. My own story, about stories if you will, is both constructed out of and speaks most immediately to my own conjuncture.

But we cannot let this fall into relativism, for there are always relations between conjunctures, matters of what is new and what is old, and what is “the changing same.” Parochialism need not be the opposite of cosmopolitan; it can also be an opening onto the other, the known unknown and the unknowable unknown.

The stories we embrace (out of what is available) define the ways we respond to crises and challenges, although more often than not, it doesn't feel like we choose the stories as much as the stories choose us. In our desperation, we often forget that stories are fragile, imperfect, incomplete, bound to particular circumstances and contexts, to different times and places, to particular pre-conceptions and life-experiences. Too often, we reach for shortcuts to survival; we want lifelines, and that often leads us to embrace stories that are simply too simple, too sentimentally hopeful, or too terrifying. We tell stories of doom and apocalypse, although how and when the end will arrive varies a lot. And it does not help us to reproduce the common symptoms of severe anxiety, such as “awfulizing.”

We tell wildly optimistic stories about how science or capitalism will save us. We tell liberal stories about how we have to communicate, compromise, and move to the center, as if the center is always the best or most reasonable place. We tell more radical stories about evil and morality, about irrational nationalism, about totalizing visions of oppression. But in an organic crisis, it is not enough to tell the stories that make us comfortable, or scare us, the familiar stories that already live inside or on the edges of our minds, or extraordinary fantasies with no anchor in the present. For what we need from better stories is an understanding of the present, its advances and accomplishments, as well as its failures and barbarities; we need to where and how different peoples live within it. And we need to understand what Sartre called the “field of possible” for a more humane future. But most of all, what we need to figure out is how we—as a fractious and differentiated assemblage of peoples—can get from here to there.

There are too many bad stories out there. Bad stories are not simply the ones we do not like. Bad stories, for example, assume that everything is either the same old same old, or entirely new. They too often reject the lessons of the past or they repeat past strategies without questioning what has worked, what has not, and why. They assume everything is about the same thing (e.g., economics, or culture, or race and coloniality, or sex and gender), and that anything is, in the end, about only one thing (again, the same list). Bad stories claim to have the only viable answer: we lost because we did not organize locally, because we are fighting defensively, because we have put identity over economics or institutions, because we have failed to empower “the people,” because we have failed to see liberalism for what it is, because we have surrendered our moral compass to capitalism and/or cosmopolitanism, etc.

Bad stories generally do not understand how culture works, how the battles are fought, how stories are told and disseminated. They do not understand how stories are used and useful, how they can be and have been instrumentalized and institutionalized in the varying means of their production and distribution. If we want to tell or just recognize better stories, we have to learn to think differently, to think about stories differently. On what foundation might they be built, while recognizing that stories are neither universal nor simply local.

So how might one go about constructing a better story, one that does not blame people but rather opens possibilities for different peoples (including intellectuals and activists) to move from where they are? First, better stories accept that the relations and structures that comprise any society are neither purely accidental, nor were they ever guaranteed to be what they have become. Nothing—no relation, no outcome, no identity—is certain, natural, inevitable, without alternatives. Thus, these new ways of thinking will require the recognition that change is more than an outcome; it is an ongoing and continuous process.

Second, better stories embrace complexity, without making complexity itself into the magical answer to all disagreements, which ultimately undermines all stories. All stories simplify the complexities of the moment, but that need not lead us to the simplest stories. Society is complicated, involving competing and overlapping systems of relations, experiences, stories, and institutions. It is a unique and unstable mixture of the new and the old, sometimes remade to fit with the new. It is the ever-changing result of the intersection of long-term forces (like capitalism and religion), ongoing struggles for leadership and power, multiple stories and claims to truth (neither absolute, certain, nor universal), and a small dose of chance (maybe a pandemic?).

There is always more to tell; complexity demands that we constantly weigh the balance between complexity and political necessity and efficacy. It demands that we admit that we don't know everything and acknowledge that others may know things about which we are ignorant, and in ways that differ from our own. It points us to our own parochialism, no matter how sophisticated we think we are.

Third, better stories know that ideas and thinking matter. Ideas are not the same as beliefs and opinions; they arise from thinking and arguing with others, from questioning and re-assessing what can be taken for granted. It is not that opinions do not matter but, rather than being possessions, they are the precondition of thinking. Ideas demand that we take others' ideas seriously and embrace the possibility that we could be wrong. They do not lead to a purely objective, universal Truth but they are the foundations and the results of the efforts to gain better knowledge of the context,

of “what’s going on,” to measure the tides of change, and to imagine possible futures. They address questions of human nature, the nature of knowledge, the meanings and priorities of value, and particular claims about the social world. At each level, they are based on some calculus of evidence and some logic of dissensus that themselves have become a part of the culture wars. Thinking makes us, temporarily, strangers to ourselves; it forces us into “double consciousness” to see the world from different positions. And thinking never exists independently of emotions and feelings, desires and interests, passions and deeply held certainties that appear unquestionable to the person holding them.

Finally, better stories begin by understanding the constituencies that occupy different positions within the stories. They begin by discovering where people are. This is not merely a first step—something like a performance of trust—after which you can turn to “rational” arguments. You cannot argue about whether someone’s feelings are justified; you cannot simply call what they believe to be true “misinformation” without understanding the stories and why they work or don’t work. Better stories acknowledge the differences, even antagonisms, and accept that people can share common goals but disagree with the analysis of where we are and the strategies being used, or that they can share common strategies but not common goals. Those constructing the new stories need to understand what the stories in people’s heads mean to them and do for them.

Better stories have to understand what people feel and why. They have to accept that such feelings are real, and “reasonable” responses—to those who experience them. They have to understand others’ experiences and what they mean to them, without condemning people out of hand as stupid, or gullible, or evil. They have to include their own backstory: the beginning of any story is the end of a story that remains unspoken. They seek to tell us something about why people allow themselves to be spoken by particular stories, about why people may feel under- or misrepresented in the public culture. No doubt, a number of different groups feel that the state has failed them, and that they are constantly being screwed by economic, political, medical, educational, etc. institutions. They are not wrong, and they do not necessarily align with a particular politics. Consequently, better stories have to open up new spaces, invent new forms of communication, which allow arguments among the differences, within radical disagreements: passionately and intelligently. Such stories face antagonisms without being antagonistic.

I would propose one possible starting place: to interrogate where and how the battles are being fought, and the stakes within the larger field of political culture. At moments of an organic crisis, it may feel as if society is on the verge of collapse, as if it has gone mad or been turned upside down. Many taken-for-granted assumptions,

commonsense, and everyday habits, are disrupted, even overturned; and the institutions embodying such truths become suspect. Such moments of transition, when the old has not yet died and the new cannot yet be born, display many “morbid symptoms” (Gramsci). Perhaps the current crisis is made worse by the broad awareness of its existence, and the increasing ordinariness of frightening events and events that seem nothing short of insane, evil, or the result of deep flaws (e.g., genetic, socialization) in humans.

At such moments, it may feel almost impossible to create and effectively tell stories that proffer new “unities-in-difference,” that offer more convivial and democratic ways of living together. A big part of the problem lies in what has become the dominant, commonsensical story (or stories) about the political and cultural fields: the story that tells us, over and over, that the nation is radically polarized. Occasionally, we reach back to precedents: the Civil War, the Gilded Age, the 1960s, and then retell the same old stories as if they were natural and inevitable, whatever the consequences. With more than a hint of the melodrama that guarantees news’ headlines, society is divided in simple binary terms—them and us. The many differences amongst social groups and possible political constituencies are distributed and condensed into two starkly drawn camps. The many different and unevenly distributed positions on a range of issues are ignored—often around a shared symbolic story that allows each constituency to believe that its issue is the central one—creating a populist war between two illusorily homogeneous “camps.” Each side is assigned its own essential unity, necessary identities, and political choices. These populist stories of polarization set “the people,” those who have truly suffered the most, or those who truly understand the truth of the United States, against an equally imagined construction of the other as powerful and elite or as manipulated and ignorant. This makes contemporary politics into a struggle between good and evil, black and white, white supremacy and social justice, imperialist and colonized, male violence and women’s rights, the right to life and the right to choose, democracy and authoritarianism, faith and knowledge, commonsense and expertise, wealth and the 99%, elitism and anti-elitism, rural and urban, etc. I am not suggesting that such differences are not real; they are real insofar as they have real effects, but I am suggesting that the stories of polarization are bad stories, both intellectually and politically. They do not allow us to grapple with the complex relations and configurations operating; they do not the many struggles taking place within and between the camps; and they do not offer us a viable means to move forward.

Here is the challenge—for me, for the intellectual project of critique, and of cultural studies. Polarization is real but it is also constructed, a political strategy more than a fact. It is neither guaranteed as the inevitable and necessary reality, nor is it

accidental. It has real effects, whether intended or not, mostly overwhelming the capacity to articulate new unities-in-difference that might be able to change the tides of history. But the tides of history are neither global nor local; they are both and they are neither, and they are constantly affected by many things, including the stories that are being told and that we choose to tell. There are better stories to be told but they demand that the intuitional and cultural conditions for intellectual practice as convivial dissensus be re-animated and, perhaps, re-invented.