



## **Identity, Narrative and Politics**

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Some discussions about narrative identity in contemporary theory suggest that narrative be used as a technique to challenge academic norms that require detachment (literally the removal of the self). Whitebrook argues that these claims do not contain a correspondingly sufficient acknowledgment of what exactly is involved in adopting narrative as a central term for political theory. The concern is to understand more fully what the implications of more frequent reference to narrative, the narrative self and narrative identity are for political theory. Whitebrook is aware of previous studies by Taylor (1989) on self and identity, MacIntyre (1985) on identity and narrative and Dienstag (1997) on narrative and political theory that focus upon specific aspects of narrative, identity and politics. She distinguishes her own approach as based upon a *particular* definition of identity as telling stories (narrative identity) with a focus upon the political implications of the public dimensions of story telling. Narrative identity is a collective act involving those who tell and those who listen, and in this sense, certain elements and characteristics of narrative have a direct bearing upon the political. What makes her work original is her focus upon the manner in which identity is fundamentally about the stories people tell others about themselves plus stories others tell about persons and/or stories others tell that include those persons. This involves a simultaneously twofold understanding of identity that is both what the self allows the world to see combined with what aspects of the self are recognized by the world. This suggests an understanding of the self that is social and ‘situated’ and that narratives of identity intertwine in complex interplays with wider stories that are ‘embedded’ in social and cultural settings.

Narrative identity is public and thus potentially political. Whitebrook does not engage in debates about the difference between politics and the political, referring more broadly to politics understood as speech, behaviour, public and collective actions. The meaning of politics throughout the study depends upon the context, either conventionally understood as institutions and activity related to political process, state and government or more broadly defined as action in the public sphere. Generally speaking, ‘the political’ refers to activity or the interpretation and analysis of it by political theory. Importantly, Whitebrook is not interested in the classic understanding of public/private but something more like the public/personal distinction that allows her to draw a



comparison between that which is common and general with something that is individual. 'The former is concerned with what the self tells the self together with what that self (is prepared to) confirm(s) of what others tell about it. Identity, on the other hand, requires recognition, from outside of the self, of the person' (pp. 153–154). This forms an essential element to Whitebrook's distinction between self (interior) and identity. The text explores the relationships between narratives, identity and politics, drawing upon interconnections that may be actual or potential in the interplays between narrative identity and politics with a view to developing these connections for the advantage of political theory.

Whitebrook recognizes that the two dominant conceptions of contemporary identity as either coming from ourselves or as socially situated are not mutually exclusive. She distinguishes identity *from the* self beyond current understandings by emphasizing its public manifestations that are subjective, intersubjective, social and political. Her focus is upon processes of identity formation, external identification and recognition as 'identity expresses something of one's self, does so for public consumption, and in so doing allows that that expression may need to be modified by the reactions of others' (p. 6). Individual identity is a complex interplay between psychological aspects of the interior self and the social positioning of the individual. Whitebrook seeks to extend beyond the deadlock of self/society identity issues to a conceptualisation that captures both at the same time. In her discussion of political identity, Whitebrook (who quotes from Habermas, 1994) places a great deal of stress on the importance of collective identity, arguing that there is always some collective element to political identity (p. 7). The interrelationality of narrative identity combined with an understanding of political identity as an aggregation, as well as practices of intertextuality and embeddedness, highlight the interconnectedness of stories and their relevance to moral and political 'collective identifications'. Acknowledging the drawbacks of dominant conceptions of political identity in terms of the political status of the individual or the person as a member of a political collectivity, Whitebrook engages with alternative and emergent conceptualizations of the political self. This is developed by an interplay with the key distinction between self-identity as constructed by the self and identity in a general sense, constituted by the way others make the self recognizable to the self and to others. In arguing that narrative can also be useful for political explanation and understanding, she also argues that they can be further illuminated by literary narratives, specifically novels.

Whitebrook certainly succeeds in her aim to move the under-theorization of narrative and narrative identity in political theory into political studies more generally. Paradoxically, even though she purposefully refuses to engage with debates about the differences in 'the political' and 'politics', her work is



saturated by the implications of leaving this ‘in the shadows’. Her fairly broad understanding of ‘the political’ as the activity of politics generally — state and government and action in the public sphere — adds to the conceptual confusion. While she claims to be interested in the public/personal (as opposed to public/private) nexus, what actually emerges is an interest in what might more properly be deemed the social/personal. It is at this level that Whitebrook engages with the activity of (sub)politics (in the social realm broadly defined) as opposed to developing ‘political’ theory specifically. This is further exacerbated by the elision of collective and political identity and the claim that there is always a collective aspect to political identity. Collectivity is a specifically social (ist) term that does not necessarily celebrate individualism for its members but rather often depends on a loss of awareness of individualism. In fact, the celebration of multiple singular individuals (who are all the same or have same nature as the term ‘collective’ often implies) can be decidedly anti-political and does nothing to further the importance of the specifically public dimension crucial to developing political theory. The emergence of the novel from the middle of the 18th and into the 19th century marked the rise of an ‘entirely social art form’ (Arendt, 1958, p. 39). Moreover, this ‘clearly anticipated’ (Arendt, 1961, p. 199) the parallel rise of the social sciences and psychology (both of which remained locked at the self/society nexus) at that time too. On some levels, then, Whitebrook’s re-conceptualization of self and identity is specifically social (a realm neither public or private) and makes a contribution to the politics of social theory rather than a development of political theory. Overall, this is a theoretically sumptuous work that makes an outstanding and original contribution to contemporary theorizations of self and identity.

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