

Symbolic Violence and Post-election USA: A Parable

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, MAR 16 2017

The other day, I spent about a half-hour of class time explaining to my undergraduates Gramsci and Bourdieu on hegemonic culture and symbolic violence in the context of 1950s ethnic politics within the Jewish community in Israel. We were reading an autobiographical account of an Iraqi Jew who immigrated to Israel early in that decade as a 20-something adult and found his way into academic and policy debates for some decades thereafter: *Outsider in the Promised Land* by Nissim Rejwan. His account was a detailed and revealing look at a set of communities culturally and economically suppressed by another otherwise well-meaning community, entrenched as it was in its own cultural norms and assumptions about what were then called “Oriental” Jews, and what are now self-defined in Israel as “Mizrahi” (e.g., Middle Eastern) Jews. His book was a retrospective on his life-long battle to place Mizrahi Jews somewhere in the mainstream of Israeli society. He, and others, ultimately succeeded. But his story is gripping and eye-opening in relation to battles that confront many societies today (e.g., the place of racial and ethnic difference, religion vs. secularism in society and politics, etc.).

We talked as a class about the narrative power of being able to choose the terms of debate and discourse, which is significant to Gramsci’s account of cultural hegemony. For Gramsci, institutions such as government, media, and military can force such terms onto a population, affecting a society’s self-conception and the very development of a cultural discourse on a topic. For Bourdieu, to simplify, the power to direct or transform what we would now call narrative through the choice of terms of debate (e.g., literally, words), when used to distort or suppress, is called *symbolic violence*. We talked, for example, about the extent to which terms such as “Oriental” vs. “Mizrahi” carry whole sets of narrative assumptions that contribute to the development of (potentially hegemonic and/or, in some cases, symbolically violent) cultural norms on a topic. Rejwan assured us through many examples that “Oriental” Jews were treated – at least by some in power – as close to uncivilized, or even as pseudo-barbarians, coming, as they were, from the enlightened home-countries of the Talmud, silk-Damask, Egyptian cotton, the epic of Gilgamesh, and the Bible itself.

Nonetheless, European assumptions about people from the Middle East at the time carried even for Jewish immigrants from the Middle East in Israel and were particularly prescient when the encounter was between secular Europeans and Middle Easterners, who tended to be moderately religious. Moreover, when Middle Eastern Jews did practice religion, the religion that they practiced was a form of Orthodoxy, not the newer forms of Judaism practiced by some secularized and semi-secularized Europeans. The upshot was nothing short of tensions along religious-secular, traditional-modern, and Orthodox-reformist lines – not a small set of problems to work out in a new society and state. Debates and tensions also appeared at the ideological level between proponents of a Trotskyite vision of what I might call a radical on-going-revolutionary democracy (but, then, yes, I am a sort of Trotskyite Libertarian, so I may be biased) versus proponents of a more Leninist centralized command economy. There were other ideological debates as well, of course; however, various forms of socialism and sometimes communism were the most often debated at the time. (Neoliberalism was to *begin* to appear only several decades later.) To make a long story short, it is now a society that has somehow made sense of this extraordinary cultural, ethnic, religious, and ideological pluralism. These tensions, while still debated, are significantly diffused and less prescient today. So, how does this relate to the power of narrative and symbolic violence in the U.S. at the current moment?

Honestly, I think the short answer is: We’ve got it easy.

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On the other hand, we in the U.S. today – and perhaps increasingly with immigration in Europe, European countries may share this as well – have an extraordinary degree of diversity in our populations along cultural, ethnic, religious, and ideological lines. We can manage that diversity with narratives and terms of discourse (literally, words) that lead us to discontent and upheaval, or with narratives and terms of discourse that lead us to live-and-let-live forms of (united) pluralism. In making this suggestion, I am speaking most pointedly to U.S. society in choosing the ways that we engage in political debate, agreement, and disagreement. As my grandmother (and, I think, Samuel Huntington) would tell us, it is our institutions that matter in the long run. The details may feel so important at a given moment that they are worth warring over. They are not. It is our institutions that keep us whole – by which I mean, a United (rather than a divided set of) States.

My take-home message for my students was this: If you are going into work in government, military, or journalism – which many of them probably will – know that the power over narrative and choosing of terms of discourse (literally, words) that comes with those positions of power may have a tremendous impact on your society. Do not underestimate it. It can affect one's society for decades. In such positions of authority – small though they may seem at the time – we may lead our societies to great good, or we may lead them astray. With great power, then, comes great responsibility. Know the power that is inherent in choosing terms and narratives. Be aware of it, and seek to use it in ways that you will be able to be proud of for years to come.

About the author:

Dr. Patricia Sohn, Ph.D., is Visiting Faculty, Kathmandu University—Nepal Centre for Contemporary Studies (KU-NCCS), Hatiban, Lalitpur, Nepal. She is co-editor of *Beyond the Death of God: Religion in 21st Century International Politics* (University of Michigan Press 2022); and author of *Judicial Power and National Politics: Courts and Gender in the Religious-Secular Conflict in Israel* (SUNY Press, Second Edition, 2017).