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Narratives, Emotions, and the Contestations of the Liberal Order

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JELENA CUPAć, MAY 16 2019

Contesters of the liberal order are on the rise. Populists in established democracies, authoritarian leaders, conservative NGOs, right-wing transnational movements, and religious fundamentalist groups all rail against what they see as the elitist, cosmopolitan, progressive, and exploitative foundations of the global liberal script. While many of these contesters are not new to the domestic and international scene, this is the first time since the early 1990s that they are gaining broader popular support. Given this reality, International Relations (IR) scholars are increasingly turning their attention to the questions of how and why this global trend came about. So far, they have mostly singled out the features, failures, and deficiencies of the liberal order as their explanatory variables. Many thus argue that the liberal order is being contested because of the system-wide inequalities and corresponding grievances it produces (See e.g., Eichengreen, 2018; Gilens and Page, 2014; Manow, 2018; Mouffe, 2018). A growing number of scholars also argue that the backlash is caused by the rising authority and intrusiveness of international institutions, which are, in their essence, non-democratic, technocratic, and tend to harbor a strong liberal bias in their ideological and policy orientation (See e.g., Colgan and Keohane, 2017; Mead, 2017; Posner, 2017).

But do features, failures, and deficiencies of the liberal order exert causal power in a direct way as most of these scholars suggest? I argue they do not. To be causal, social processes and their features need to rest on an accepted interpretation. They need to be narrated as good or bad, as just or unjust. I, therefore, propose that the contesters of the liberal order are not on the rise because of the direct influence of some innate features, failures, and deficiencies of the liberal order, but because they have found a way of advancing a credible narrative that portrays this order as the main source of people's grievances.

It should be fairly obvious that narratives about social orders, rather than some objective features of those orders, play a central role in the rise of contesters. If this was not the case, most social orders would tend towards equilibrium: flawed and failing orders would trigger dissatisfaction, and this dissatisfaction would lead to order adjustment. Yet this rarely happens. Instead, many flawed orders persist, and good orders often collapse easily. This happens because narratives about social orders are ethically flexible: what some perceive as a bad order can persuasively be narrated as a good order, and vice versa. The pivotal question then is what determines the success of a particular social narrative.

Emotions might be a key piece in this puzzle. Emotions make narratives meaningful. A narrative cannot just be heard; it has to be felt in order to resonate with its audience, and only when this resonance is achieved can a narrative become socially consequential (Solomon, 2017). However, a narrative's success does not only depend on the narrative's emotional underpinnings, it also hinges on the credibility of a narrator. An audience reacts differently to a narrator they trust than to a narrator they do not trust, even if they are telling the same story.

In the remainder of this article, I develop these points further and I suggest how they can help us better understand the current rise of the liberal order contesters. In the first section, I deal with narratives and their emotional underpinnings. My main concern there is the consequentiality and resonance of narratives, phenomena that I suggest depend on a narrative's emotional range, its relationship with the truth, and its emotive power relative to competing narratives. In the second section, I take up the issue of the credibility of narrators. There, I am particularly concerned

with hypocrisy and lying, moral failings proponents and opponents of the liberal order are accused of regularly.

How Narratives and Emotions Shape the Contestation of the Liberal Order?

A good case for demonstrating that it is narratives about orders rather than orders themselves that drive the rise of contesters is migration. Migration is one of the main topics populists, authoritarian leaders, and right-wing movements evoke when railing against the liberal order. Conflicts, poverty, and climate change are forcing more and more people to leave their homes and to settle in wealthier and more peaceful societies. However, this large-scale movement of people does not speak for itself and hence cannot be causal in any deterministic manner. It needs a narrative to give it meaning, and at least two such narratives are possible: the *humanitarian narrative* and the *dangerous alien narrative*. Those who use the humanitarian narrative portray migrants as people in search of a better life and argue for policies that would provide them with such opportunities. Those who use the dangerous alien narrative portray them as foreigners who increase crime rates, take jobs from domestic workers, and threaten local cultures. Their preferred policies include closing borders and building walls. If two radically different narratives can be proposed about migration, then the rise of one of its narrators will not be due to migration itself but to the persuasiveness of their narrative.

This is not to say that social reality outside of narratives is unimportant. It creates opportunity structures, but it is social narratives that shape the perception of social reality and thus its course. Jerome Bruner, an American cognitive psychologist, argued that narratives are indifferent to extralinguistic reality because there are no structural differences between fictional and factual narratives (Bruner, 1990: 44). A narrative's persuasiveness and power are thus determined situationally through meaning negotiation, rather than through its one-to-one correspondence with reality. As Barbara Czarniawska argues: 'This is a true story' and 'This never happened' are two ways of determining the genre of a narrative, but the genre does not determine whether a narrative is found persuasive or not (Czarniawska, 2004: 9).

But if a narrative's truthfulness cannot explain its persuasiveness and social resonance, what can? Emotions, I argue, might be a good place to look for an answer. Historically, emotions have not been taken seriously in IR. In the past decade, however, this has started to change. Emotions are now a steadily growing subfield in the study of world politics yielding many interesting insights.[1] Some of these insights concern the relationship between emotions and language.[2] For example, Ty Solomon has turned to emotions to account for the power of language to produce social relations, identities, and meanings (Solomon, 2017). Drawing on Ernesto Laclau, Solomon observes that this productive power of language cannot come from its mere utterances as utterances alone cannot explain why some discourses resonate with audiences and others do not. However, emotions can. To adopt a certain narrative as credible, it is not enough for the members of an audience to hear it; they must experience it as well. The humanitarian narrative about migrants thus invests heavily in invoking empathy, while the dangerous alien narrative rests mostly on fear. The more successful a narrative is in evoking particular emotions, the more likely it is to appear credible and true. As Jonatan Mercer observes, 'feeling is believing because people use emotions as evidence' (Mercer, 2010: 1).

It should, however, be emphasized that a narrative's success does not depend on just one emotion. It also has to do with the emotional range of a narrative; that is, with the overall number and type of emotions it can express and provoke. Logic suggests that the greater emotional range a narrative has the greater its potential to resonate with an audience. In other words, a vast emotional range means that a narrator has resources to construct various constellations of meanings capable of capturing people's imagination. The global acceptance and historical persistence of religious narratives might be a case of this hypothesis as these narratives rest on a plethora of emotions: fear, love, respect, shame, guilt, and many more.

The success of contesters of the liberal order might also rest on the rich emotional range of their narratives. After all, fear is not the only emotion they mobilize. By portraying domestic and international elites as greedy and hypocritical, they foster distrust; by depicting international institutions as intrusive actors that encroach on state sovereignty and the democratic will of the people, they have encouraged anger; by blaming economic inequalities on unregulated globalization, they provoke a strong sense of injustice.

What is the source of this broad emotional range of the contesters' narratives? A communitarian belief is one possible answer. The proponents of these narratives might view the liberal order as unsustainable and unjust not only in its current incarnation but by default. However, one more answer comes to mind: these narratives' flexible relationship with the truth. Their proponents seem to be fully aware that it is not correspondence with reality that renders narratives socially influential, but their ability to arouse emotions and imbue reality with easily graspable meanings. We are increasingly said to be living in a post-truth age. For example, in less than two years of his presidency, Donald Trump has made over six thousand false or misleading claims. Similarly, newspaper articles are being published daily pointing to all the deceptive assertions that prompted many British people to vote to leave the European Union (EU).

On their part, liberal order proponents struggle to (re)establish their order's value through narrative. While they too are no strangers to making false claims in their bid for political power, liberalism's ideological foundations place limitations on how far they can diverge from reality and what emotional range they can exploit. After all, liberalism stems from the Enlightenment and its belief that human knowledge, as well as governance systems, should be grounded in factual knowledge and rationality. Interestingly, statistics seems to back up the case for liberalism both domestically and internationally. Over the past twenty-five years, general developments in world society have been positive: interstate wars have been few, poverty rates in the Global South have been reduced with the substantial increase in growth rates, unemployment rates in the consolidated economies have been modest, and the Human Development Index levels have improved significantly. However, proponents of the liberal order have largely failed to embed these statistics in an emotionally credible, coherent, and resonating story.

They are also facing another challenge. Even when they succeed in projecting an emotionally rich narrative, such as in the case of migration, counter-narratives seem to be getting the upper hand. This tells us that the success of a narrative does not only depend on its absolute characteristics (relationship with the truth and emotional range) but is also a relative category. This would explain why, despite its modest emotional range judged in absolute terms, liberalism won against oppressive regimes of the 20th century. Set against such regimes, the value of individual lives, rights, and freedoms could simply be felt stronger than today.

Nowadays, we might be looking at a different emotional balance the between the liberal script and its counter-narratives. As I remarked earlier in the case of migration, the cosmopolitan sense of empathy is set against the communitarian sense of fear. To understand how audiences will react to being exposed to these two narratives at the same time, it is instructive to look at emotions research in psychology and neuroscience. This research suggests that fear has an evolutionary advantage over empathy and is thus likely to resonate more strongly with targeted people (E.g., Niehoff, 1999; in IR see Crawford, 2000; Crawford, 2014). Put simply, we tend to prioritize our own survival over the survival of others. Behavioral economics, another strand of literature that is becoming increasingly influential in IR,[3] might also help us understand how different messages about the same issue resonate with people. For example, prospect theory suggests that greater emotional resonance is achieved when the issue is framed in terms of losses than in terms of gains.This insight could assist us in understanding the appeal of narratives that have the fear of loss of sovereignty, national identity, and local culture as their central themes.

In this section, I argued that it is not social orders but narratives giving meaning to those orders that are socially consequential when it comes to bringing authors of those narratives to prominence. Additionally, I suggested that the success of a narrative depends on its emotional underpinnings, emotional range, relationship with the truth, and its comparability with alternatives. Nevertheless, I do not believe that everything is about the quality of a narrative — it is also about the perception of the credibility of a narrator.

The Credibility of a Narrator

For a long time, psychologists have been aware of the phenomena known as the 'halo effect.' Edward L. Thorndike described the effect as our tendency to form an overall judgement about a person based on the knowledge of a few traits about that person (Thorndike, 1920). For example, if we like or are attracted to someone, we are also likely to find that person more charitable than a person we dislike (Kahneman, 2011: 82-85). As this example shows, the halo effect works in both positive and negative directions. While no research that I am aware of examines the halo effect's

influence on the relationship between the perception of the narrator's credibility and the credibility of their narrative, a hypothesis can nevertheless be suggested: distrust in a narrator is likely to foster distrust in their narrative, and vice versa.

One of the most significant achievements of the liberal order contesters is their successful narration of liberal elites as dishonest, fraudulent, and hypocritical. The liberal order was supposed to be premised on the clear division of public responsibilities from personal interests, a division ensured institutionally by the separation of powers and objective media. Yet the public is increasingly convinced that liberal elites exploit their power and authority for private gains, without regard for ordinary people. Moreover, they are increasingly convinced that liberal elites embodied in politicians, business, media, law, and even academia act in unison. This creates a perception that public life is fraudulent through and through, and that liberals are hypocrites.

And there are few things that arouse feelings as strongly as hypocrisy. Once exposed, hypocrites provoke anger and are no longer trusted. Their narratives lose credibility, as do orders that those narratives serve to justify. One thing warrants emphasis here. Liberal elites' hypocrisy is not just a narrative fiction their opponents crafted. In the past decade, we witnessed numerous leaks pointing to the duplicity of political and business elites: the 2010 WikiLeaks disclosure of military logs and confidential diplomatic cables relating to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the 2008 LIBOR fixing scandal, the 2013 Edward Snowden's exposure of the global surveillance programs, the 2015 Panama Papers and the 2017 Paradise Papers revealing millions of documents relating to offshore investments of the elites, the 2017 #MeToo movement, to name a few. These leaks contributed significantly to the claim about liberal elites' self-serving nature.

Yet, as I indicated earlier, contesters of the liberal order are also no strangers to moral transgressions. Their narratives are full of lies and deceptions. The question is why, among certain publics, these have little effect on discrediting them as narrators. Oliver Hahl, Minjae Kim, and Ezra W. Zuckerman Sivan offer an interesting argument (Hahl et al., 2018). They differentiate between 'special access lies' and 'common knowledge lies.' Special access lies are false statements about facts to which the speaker has a special access. The authors cite Bill Clinton's infamous false claim that he 'did not have sexual relations with that woman' as an example. By contrast, common knowledge lies are assertions about facts to which the speaker has no special access, such as Donald Trump's claim that he had the biggest electoral college win since Ronald Reagan or Boris Johnson's claim that the UK was giving £350 million a week to the EU. The main difference between the speakers of these two types of lies is that, unlike the tellers of 'special access lies', the tellers of 'common knowledge lies' do not pretend to be bound by the norm of truth telling. In other words, they are not hypocrites. And what is most interesting, when compared against hypocrites, liars might even appear seductively authentic to the audience. Donald Trump and Nigel Farage may thus have a reputation for lying but not for hiding things. This, strangely as it may be, can grant them credibility.[4]

Conclusion

IR scholars attribute the current rise of populism, authoritarianism, religious fundamentalism, and right-wing activism mostly to the features, failures, and deficiencies of the liberal order. In contrast to them, I proposed that this rise is, first and foremost, a result of these actors succeeding in advancing a credible narrative that portrays the liberal order as the main source of people's grievances. But there is more to the choice between these two explanations than mere academic search for an answer to a puzzle. The choice also entails a responsibility to avoid unwitting justification of the liberal order contenders, which, in value terms, are often seen as dangerous. Let me use an example from the recent past to clarify this.

Slobodan Milošević, a president of Serbia and Yugoslavia in the 1990s, was a populist, a demagogue, and a nationalist. To preserve power, he relied on a narrative very similar to the one the contesters of the liberal order across the world offer today. He argued that both he and his nationalist policies were needed given constant violations of Serbia's sovereignty by Western elites and their institutions. He also argued that unregulated marketization of the country would result in exploitation and 'transition losers.' Despite both foreign intrusions and 'transition losers' being real, few Serbian scholars saw them as 'causes' of Milošević's rise and rule. Rather, they attributed them to the fear he was able to produce by offering a simplistic narrative about the 'external enemies' of

Serbian society (See e.g., Djilas, 1992; Djukic and Dubinsky, 2001). In other words, they made sure not to confuse Milošević's justifications for true social causes.

This seems not to be the case with IR scholars exploring current contestations of the liberal script. The causes of contestation they single out (winners and losers of globalization, hypocritical liberal elites, technocracy, IOs intrusion, etc.) very much resemble the justifications that can be found in contesters' narratives. This overlap, I argue, might amount to scholars giving credence to the contesters' claims and thus unwittingly justifying their rise. I thus invite scholars to look at narratives not only because it might be a fruitful new avenue for exploring current developments in world politics,[5] but because it might make them mindful of the nature of their own narratives.

Notes

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[1] For a good overview of this literature see Bleiker R and Hutchison E. (2014) Forum: Emotions and World Politics. *International Theory* 6: 490-594.

[2] See the symposium Koschut S, Hall TH, Wolf R, et al. (2017) Discourse and Emotions in International Relations. *International Studies Review* 19: 481-508.

[3] See Hafner-Burton EM, Haggard S, Lake DA, et al. (2017) The Behavioral Revolution and International Relations. *International Organization* 71: S1-S31. Also, see other articles in this special issue of International Organization.

[4] For a similar point see William Davies, "Why We Stopped Trusting Elites" in The Guardian (29 November 2018). Accessible hear: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/nov/29/why-we-stopped-trusting-elites-the-new-populism (accessed 26 February 2019).

[5] Some scholars are already taking this rout. See Homolar A and Scholz R. (2019) The Power of Trump-Speak: Populist Crisis Narratives and Ontological Security. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*: 1-21. (Online: https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1575796)

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