

Ingo Juchler

Political Narrations

Antigone, the Melian Dialogue,
Michael Kohlhaas, the Grand Inquisitor
and Ragtime

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Contents

1	The Narrative Approach to Civic Education	1
	References	5
2	Sophocles: <i>Antigone</i>	7
2.1	Introduction: Theater and Democracy in Athens	7
2.2	<i>Antigone</i> : The Action	9
2.3	Epistemological Skepticism and the Capacity for Judgment	12
2.4	Sovereign Authority and Resistance	18
2.5	<i>Raison d'état</i> : The National Interest	20
2.6	<i>Antigone</i> : Adaptations and Interdisciplinary Potential	25
2.6.1	Alfred Döblin: <i>November 1918: A German Revolution</i>	25
2.6.2	Jean Anouilh: <i>Antigone</i>	27
2.6.3	Rolf Hochhuth: <i>Die Berliner Antigone</i> (<i>Antigone in Berlin</i>)	29
	References	31
3	Thucydides: <i>The Melian Dialogue</i>	35
3.1	Introduction: The Mutual Interdependence of Democracy and Foreign Policy in Athens	35
3.2	<i>The Melian Dialogue</i> : The Action	37
3.3	Athens-Melos: The Lesson for Posterity	39
3.4	Might, Interests, and Right in International Relations	40
3.5	Contending Positions on Might and Right in Present-Day International Relations	44
3.5.1	The Iraq War of 2003	44
3.5.2	The International Criminal Court	49
3.5.3	Might and Right from the Perspective of German Foreign Policy	52
	References	54

4	Heinrich von Kleist: <i>Michael Kohlhaas</i>	57
4.1	Introduction: Kohlhaase/Kohlhaas—“At Once the Most Upright and Most Terrible of Human Beings”	57
4.2	<i>Michael Kohlhaas</i> : The Action	59
4.3	Legal Uncertainties and Epistemological Crisis	61
4.4	The Sense of Justice and the Quasi-religious Mission	65
4.5	Contract Theories and State Monopoly of Power	68
4.6	Political Reception History and the Right of Resistance	72
	References	77
5	Fyodor Dostoevsky: <i>The Grand Inquisitor</i>	79
5.1	Introduction: The New Religious Dynamic in World Politics	79
5.2	<i>The Grand Inquisitor</i> : The Action	81
5.3	Freedom Versus Equality?	82
5.4	Instrumentalized Religion Versus Freedom and Human Dignity	88
	References	94
6	E. L. Doctorow: <i>Ragtime</i>	97
6.1	Introduction: The USA in the 1910 Decade—White Complacency, Imperialism, and Racism	97
6.2	<i>Ragtime</i> : The Action	99
6.3	Racism and Imperialism	101
6.4	Racism and Violence	105
6.5	Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution	107
6.6	The Student Movement, Racism, and Violence	111
6.7	What Remains?	115
	References	118
	Index	121

Chapter 1

The Narrative Approach to Civic Education



Political issues have always been reflected in literature. This book's primary aims are to give insight into the political arguments and reflections to be found in narrative works and then consider in what ways they can contribute to deepening our political understanding. To that end, I present readings of Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, the *Melian Dialogue* of Thucydides, Heinrich von Kleist's story *Michael Kohlhaas*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's parable of the *The Grand Inquisitor*, and E. L. Doctorow's novel *Ragtime*; each reading focused on the text's political interest and also addressed interdisciplinary aspects of the narration concerned. The underlying aspiration is to serve civic education by using narrative literature as an introduction to the political dimension of life and a step toward a mature understanding of politics.

I shall proceed by analyzing the chosen works in detail, demonstrating their contemporary relevance and presenting them in a standard sequence. In each instance, an introduction sketching the historical context is followed by an outline of the action depicted and then by an analysis focused on the text's treatment of the political concepts of might and right—concepts that are not only of central importance in practical politics but perennially relevant. Sophocles' *Antigone* and Thucydides' *Melian Dialogue*, written at the apogee of Athenian democracy, allow insight into what might and right really meant at this period when democratic government was a brand-new concept; and in turn the exploration of Athenian democracy, with its clear modern relevance, stimulates and informs the study of present-day politics. Heinrich von Kleist's long-short story *Michael Kohlhaas* presents aspects still relevant today both of contract theory and of the human sense of justice; and these appear again, in a further updated guise, in E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*.

Fyodor Dostoevsky's parable of the *Grand Inquisitor* deals with the tension between equality and freedom and anticipates the currently acute problems arising from the instrumentalization of religion.

The studies presented together here are intended specifically as a contribution to the theory and practice of teaching civics. They naturally make no claim to offer a

comprehensive view of the political dimension of the narrations concerned nor to have done justice to other—and particularly the aesthetic—aspects of the works.

Hannah Arendt recognized the importance and educational potential of narrations in her study of the irrational links between racism, imperialism, and the genesis of totalitarian systems. Her analysis uses Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as its illustrative text:

There is no justification, either theoretical or political, for the racial delusion; so if one is to understand the sense of horror in which it originates, it is no use turning for enlightenment to either ethnologists, who by definition had to be exempt from that horror if they were to take up research in the first place, or to racial fanatics, who claim to be above such horror and thus unaffected, or even to those who in their rightful struggle against all racial notions of whatever kind understandably tend to dismiss these as devoid of any basis in real experience. Joseph Conrad's story *Heart of Darkness* certainly illuminates this experiential background more effectively than any of the relevant historical, political or ethnological scholarship (Arendt 2000, p. 407f.).

Narrations have the power to deepen political understanding impartially and enduringly. Literature introduces life in its wholeness, to which all things political belong:

Reading novels can be a viable *political* activity [...], a way of gaining political understanding in a civilized and pleasing setting: but expect to be startled, to be (fore)warned, but also to be offered help. [...] Literature has a special capacity for illustrating and illuminating 'lived reality.' It can help restore to political thought a more adequately complex view of human nature: to complicate (Whitebrook 1995, p. 2; original italics).

Stories have been told since before records began. For some time the preserve of literary theory, the narrative mode, was drawn into the analytical focus of the social sciences by the "narrative turn" of the early 1970s (cf. Czarniawska 2009, p. 1ff.; Copley 2014, p. 213). Over the next few decades, literature was featured as a serious topic in scholarly discourse in a wide range of disciplines including economics (cf. Watts 2007), history (cf. White 1989) and political science (cf. Zuckert 1981; Nussbaum 1995; Cowell-Meyers 2006; Hrezo and Parrish 2010).

Literary narrative theory engages with a wide range of texts beyond the explicitly epic genres of novel, short story, etc. with fictional narrator. Writing on historical theory, Hayden White argues:

It is because historical discourse utilizes structures of meaning-production found in their purest forms in literary fictions that modern literary theory, and especially those versions of it oriented towards tropological conceptions of language, discourse, and textuality, is immediately relevant to contemporary theory of historical writing. It bears directly on one of the most important debates in contemporary historical theory: that of the epistemic status of narrativity (White 1989, p. 36).

In the teaching of political science including civics, first steps have been taken to introduce the study of narrative (cf. Juchler 2012a). This approach responds to current discourse among educationalists on competence definition in civic education; enables a cross-disciplinary perspective to be maintained; enables experience of multiple significance, ambiguity, and contingency; enhances the capacity for political judgment; and has as its central aim the advancement of political understanding.

These educational aspects of the study of narrations in the civic education context are reviewed below.

Political content in narratives is often implicit and always interweaves with other strands in the complexity of human existence. This is why it makes sense to study narrations in civic education classes conducted on an interdisciplinary basis. The present canon of recognized school subjects has grown unsystematically over time and facilitates the institution's organization and structuring of instruction and new experience according to pre-existing categorization of knowledge. But this compartmentalization of school learning arbitrarily distances students from real-world processes—a loss very seldom made good within the school context, except through special programs such as cross-disciplinary project work. The rigid subdivision of teaching into discrete specializations makes it at least difficult and at worst impossible for students to acquire what Deichmann (2001, p. 8) calls a “holistic world view,” however educationally desirable that might be.

Cross-disciplinary classes in civics can deliver the subject-specific information in meaningful relation to content from other domains. The complex weave of political, historical, economic, juridical, religious, and other topics in narrations can readily be used in cross-disciplinary civics classes to encourage holistic learning and a correspondingly holistic grasp of life's political dimension. In this way students' reading of literature may come to constitute an “enrichment of the complexity of [their] worlds of experience” (Mieth 2007, p. 218), instigated and deepened in civics classes through the study of narrations with specific reference to their political content. This does not imply that the learners' motivation should be focused—as in reception of factual-informative texts—on political content alone. What an imaginative-creative text can offer is to introduce the students into an aesthetically generated world of experience—and knowledge—that they can apprehend holistically and from which they draw stimulus and prompts for follow-up sessions devoted to analysis, and class discussion, of subject-specific political aspects.

Works of imaginative literature often contain elements of multiple significance, mystery, ambiguity, and contingency. Narrations may challenge supposed certainties; cast doubt on cherished truisms, prejudices, and long-accepted value judgments; and undermine political convictions. In so doing they give their readers access to new dimensions of existence: “Literature focuses on the possible, inviting its readers to wonder about themselves. [...] Good literature is disturbing in a way that history and social science writing frequently are not” (Nussbaum 1995, p. 5).

The reading of narrations in a context of cross-disciplinary civic education enables students to experience the contingent nature of life lived in the real world, using follow-up class discussion to gain an understanding of contingency as such. They can thus become quicker to recognize and better able to understand the specific circumstances attaching to contingency in politics, as well as the implications of this phenomenon for the life of society. Having begun from experience by proxy, through the aesthetic medium, students can then be confronted with contingency as manifested in politics (cf. Shapiro and Bedi 2007) and continue by way of classwork analysis and consolidation to the point where they can “cope with contingency” (Sander 2009, p. 245): “In our day, ethnology, cinema, historiography

and television all contribute to enlarging our sense of the possibilities open to human beings. But the genre that helps us most to appreciate the diversity of human life and the contingency of our individual repertoires of moral concepts is the novel” (Rorty 2003, p. 57). Proxy experience of contingency communicated through literature is an effective means of equipping students with the resources critical to a mature understanding of politics: awareness, preparedness, and openness vis-à-vis the unexpected, the unpredictable, and the range of possible eventualities. Narrations, already a familiar part of the social environment, offer a readily accessible path to these experiences.

Over a period of time, civics teaching on this basis with cross-disciplinary study of imaginative-creative literary texts can arm students intellectually against the oversimplifications purveyed by political demagogues and the Manichean world view of political and religious extremists; and it can win them over to valuing the openness of pluralist democracies. Narrations provide experience of ambiguity and contingency and an awareness of the plurality of values, attitudes, and political options. These experiences cumulatively equip students to recognize the inhibiting or positively repressive nature of dictatorship, absolutist ideologies, and political and/or religious “-isms”—and correspondingly to develop a positive appreciation of the multiplicity of human interests, value judgments, and political opinions. Milan Kundera sums up the *raison d'être* of the novel as follows: “As a Model of this Western world, grounded in the relativity and ambiguity of things human, the novel is incompatible with the totalitarian universe. [. . .] The world of one single Truth and the relative, ambiguous world of the novel are molded of entirely different substances. Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning; it can never accommodate what I would call the *spirit of the novel*” (Kundera 1988, pp. 13–14; original italics). Work in the civic education context on narrative and, more particularly, study of the ambiguities presented in narrative are effective means of helping students develop the ability to tolerate ambiguity.

The multiple meanings to be found in narrations result primarily from the accounts given of the individual literary characters’ differing ways of seeing. The different and in some cases disparate perspectives of the fictive personages alert readers to the wealth of nuances distinguishing the personal, philosophical, moral, and political attitudes of different individuals. The fictive world of narrations prompts and motivates the learner to adopt the perspective of others, view the world as others see it, and use empathy to place him- or herself in a new social role. Literary texts used in this way may well also trigger an emotional response in students, prompting them to engage intellectually with the various viewpoints of others and extending and enriching their own human understanding and cultural awareness in the process. As Eva Dadlez has pointed out: “Empathetic engagement with fiction can be and often is ethically significant precisely because it allows us to explore experiences we have not had from perspectives that are not wholly our own but that we can make our own” (Dadlez 1997, p. 195).

Confrontation with the differing perspectives represented in narrations also challenges students to evaluate the merits of these and rethink their own personal attitudes. The use of narrations in cross-disciplinary civic education thus helps in a

special way to realize the desired outcome of enhancing learners' capacity for political judgment. A specific political judgment can be deemed qualified if it takes the interests of others into account alongside those of the person pronouncing it: "Thus the political judgments of an individual retain their autonomous character, yet by virtue of taking the political viewpoints of others into account ceases to be a purely subjective judgment attributable to personal interests. In addition, the individual who takes account of another's viewpoint thereby acknowledges the relativity of his or her own political judgment" (Juchler 2012b, p. 20).

Hannah Arendt, in an unpublished lecture, used a vivid analogy to characterize the emergence in an individual of autonomous personal judgment—that is, judgment qualifying as autonomous because intersubjectively valid:

I look at a specific slum dwelling and I perceive in this particular building the general notion which it does not exhibit directly, the notion of poverty and misery. I arrive at this notion by representing to myself how I would feel if I had to live there, that is, I try to think in the place of the slum-dweller. The judgment I shall come up with will by no means necessarily be the same as that of the inhabitants, whom time and hopelessness may have dulled to the outrage of their condition, but it will become for my further judging of these matters an outstanding example to which I refer . . . Furthermore, while I take into account others when judging, this does not mean that I conform in my judgment to those of others, I still speak with my own voice and I do not count noses in order to arrive at what I think is right. But my judgment is no longer subjective either (Arendt quoted from Beiner 1992, pp. 107–8; omission present in original).

As the prevailing social and political realities are generally not to be found on one's own doorstep, fiction has the special merit of enabling its recipients to enter these worlds at least in imagination. This was what Martha Nussbaum identified as the social and ethical benefit conferred by the study of imaginative-creative literature: "In fact, I defend the literary imagination precisely because it seems to me an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own" (Nussbaum 1995, XVI). Narrations studied in cross-disciplinary civic education afford students the opportunity to engage with the viewpoints of others, emotionally through the exercise of empathy and also cognitively through analysis and discussion. That is why literary texts can contribute significantly and distinctively to enhancing students' capacity for political judgment.

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Chapter 2

Sophocles: *Antigone*



2.1 Introduction: Theater and Democracy in Athens

Sophocles wrote his *Antigone* about 2500 years ago during the flowering of the first democracy in Athens. It is still widely staged in our own day, both in Sophocles' original version and in numerous adapted versions. It was probably in the year 442 BCE, as part of the *Dionysia*, the rites honoring the god Dionysos, that the very first performance of *Antigone* took place, in the theater built into the southern slopes of the Acropolis.

Ever since theater art first arose in 534 BCE as Attic tragedy, born of the Dionysos cult, under the Athenian tyrant Peisistratos, it has been connected with public affairs—with politics. During the period in which the historically novel political system, democracy, prevailed in Athens, the politics-theater link grew greatly in importance: this was because the stage performances—presented as enactments of myth—addressed real political problems, setting them in the wider context of the great existential questions arising out of the human condition. Stage drama as a shared experience prompted audience members to exchange views on the challenges of contemporary politics and to conduct a reasoned debate. By depicting irreconcilable conflicts on a mythic plane, the tragedies furnished their audiences with experience and insights that individuals could bring to bear on their conduct of their own lives and on their citizenship.

What made this form of citizenship education possible in ancient Athens during the age of democracy was a comprehensive policy of subsidizing both the staging of drama and the prices of public admission to performances. The *Dionysia*, of which tragic stage drama in Athens came to form part, were festivals organized by the *polis* and attended by around 14,000–17,000 spectators, which amounted to “from a third

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