



Storytelling

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Storytelling: An Introduction

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This issue of *New Area Studies* is dedicated to the intersection of storytelling with the various disciplines that make up our field. This is a timely theme: in recent years Area Studies has turned its attention to questions of narrative in renewed ways. Most recently, Hodgett and Rhodes’ *What Political Science Can Learn from the Humanities: Blurring Genres* (2021) has set a new agenda for this dynamic, highlighting “a common concern” between the New Area Studies and the humanities, particularly in relation to “interpretive approaches, and qualitative methods that focus on the meaning of human action, fieldwork or thick descriptions, narrative analysis, historical contingency, and plausible conjectures.”¹ In this issue, all of those convergences are firmly on display. Of course, there is also a deep heritage to this conjunction. Back in 2011, in response to an earlier “narrative turn”, Goodson and Gill could survey “the last few decades” and conclude that “social researchers have shown an increasing interest in individual’s and groups’ narratives or stories” and “the relationships between self, other, community, social, political and historical dynamics.”²

Ultimately, the productive tension surrounding storytelling and the social sciences is a story that we could trace to innumerable sources embedded deep in human history

¹ Susan Hodgett and R. A. W. Rhodes, *What Political Science Can Learn from the Humanities: Blurring Genres* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 3.

² Ivor F. Goodson and Scherto R. Gill, “The Narrative Turn in Social Research”, in *Counterpoints*, 386 (2011), 17-33, 18.

and culture – so let’s begin close to home. This journal is edited from the University of East Anglia, based in Norwich, a small city in the east of England which holds an unexpectedly auspicious place in the history of the relationship between narrative and the social sciences. In the autumn of 1827, Harriet Martineau borrowed a neighbour’s copy of Jane Marcet’s *Conversations on Political Economy* (1816). In the years to come, the polymathic Martineau would become one of the most famous women in the country: an influential thinker, writer and world traveller who would persevere in the face of persistent health problems, including the deafness that necessitated her signature ear trumpet. In 1827, though, Martineau was stuck in genteel poverty in Norwich, as her family’s textile business teetered on the brink of collapse. Her timely encounter with Marcet’s book – itself a groundbreaking text that helped to popularise the ideas of the likes of Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo – opened up new possibilities to Martineau’s omnivorous intellect. Convinced of the necessity of circulating the theories that she discovered there to as wide an audience as possible, Martineau developed a literary plan. What was needed, she decided, was narrative. “It struck me,” she wrote later in her autobiography, “that the principles of the whole science might be advantageously conveyed [...] not by being smothered up in a story, but by being exhibited in their natural workings in selected passages of social life. It has always appeared very strange to me that so few people seem to have understood this.”³

Martineau’s pioneering plan to weave the ideas of Smith, Malthus, John Stuart Mill and other political economists into a series of short stories to popularise their ideas for the common good was, ironically, helped along by the final collapse of her father’s business affairs. Though left with “precisely one shilling” in her purse she “began to feel the blessing of a wholly new freedom” as the writing that she had previously been obliged to pursue in stolen moments could now occupy her full and urgent attention.⁴

³ Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1877), 2 vols, 1:105.

⁴ Martineau, *Autobiography*, 1:108.

Finding a publisher who could share in her vision was another matter. Part of the problem was the general sense of social and political turmoil in the wider world. First, the country was consumed with the passage of the Reform Bill. Second, in ways that we may newly appreciate, was the small matter of a pandemic: cholera reached Britain in December 1831. No publisher was willing to take a risk on an experimental series of economic short stories “on the ground of the disturbed state of the public mind, which afforded no encouragement to put out new books.”⁵ The publishing arrangement that she finally agreed to required her to try and find hundreds of subscribers before the first part was released. Even then the publisher panicked: they changed the contract at the last minute so that Martineau would have to sell a thousand copies in the first fortnight, and even recommended a wholesale change of approach, asserting that Martineau’s “method of exemplification, — (the grand principle of the whole scheme) could not possibly succeed; and Mr. Fox now required of me to change my plan entirely, and issue my Political Economy in a didactic form! Of course, I refused.”⁶

In short order, Martineau was proved right. “The entire periodical press, daily, weekly, and, as soon as possible, monthly, came out in my favour,” she happily remembered. Sales of the stories soon reached 10,000 a month – a truly extraordinary number at the time – and correspondence to her Norwich address had to be transported in a wheelbarrow. Her stories addressed a wide range of contemporary issues, from slavery (Martineau was an abolitionist) and industrial action to free trade and the Poor Laws, and much more besides. As Martineau had predicted, by melding political theory and narrative she struck a chord with readers looking for answers to the chaos that surrounded them. In Elaine Freedgood’s words, Martineau’s explicatory stories offered “powerful consolation to Britons caught up in the intensive changes of

⁵ Martineau, *Autobiography*, 1:123.

⁶ Martineau, *Autobiography*, 1:129.

the first thirty years of the nineteenth century."⁷ And in the process, as Deborah Anne Logan has put it, she carved out an "entirely new genre" in which character and plot were intimately wedded to pressing social problems and their possible solutions.⁸ Of course, not everyone was converted. John Stuart Mill himself complained that Martineau's narratives reduced "the *laissez faire* system to absurdity."⁹ In a long and largely sympathetic review, the *Edinburgh Review* praised Martineau's achievements: "Perhaps no single writer, certainly no young lady, ever contracted so extraordinary an engagement with the public as that of a Monthly course of Political Economy, embodied in apposite fables, uniting at once dramatic beauty and scientific truth." But it also mistrusted the effects of her new medium: "Common readers, who run through these stories as through a common novel, will find that they have been taking fairy money which turns to nothing in their hands."¹⁰ To some, mixing storytelling with serious matters of state was still innately suspicious. Still, her popularity was unassailable. With no little relish, Martineau recorded the frustrations of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, who also sought to find the public ear on the same issues that she successfully popularised in her narratives, that they should "be driven out of the field by a little deaf woman at Norwich."¹¹

If Martineau's stories themselves are no longer much read, their significance lives on in their influence. By melding an early literary realism to the working through of social and political ideas, Martineau's work paved the way for writers who were explicitly impacted by her groundbreaking writings: Dickens, Gaskell, Eliot and a host of others acknowledged a debt to her and followed her lead in saturating their work

⁷ Elaine Freedgood, *Victorian Writing About Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 18.

⁸ Harriet Martineau, *Illustrations of Political Economy: Selected Tales*, edited by Deborah Anne Logan (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2004), 29.

⁹ R. K. Webb, *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* (London: Heinemann, 1960), 109.

¹⁰ "Illustrations of Political Economy by Harriet Martineau (The First Thirteen Numbers)", *The Edinburgh Review* (April 1833), 1-39, 3-4.

¹¹ Martineau, *Autobiography*, 1:133.

with contemporary social problems. Like Martineau herself, who travelled extensively throughout the United States, her writings crossed the Atlantic too, and contributed at least some inspiration for Harriet Beecher Stowe when she wrote the era-defining abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). Even if the literary realists of the late nineteenth century would go on to formulate a different relationship between text, narrative and pressing social problems, their attempts to triangulate between them, in a period of significant social churn, were still central to their art. As Edward Bellamy described this moment in *Looking Backward*, his enormously popular Utopian novel published in 1888, the sense of “an impending social cataclysm” was widely felt: “Humanity, they argued, having climbed to the top round of the ladder of civilization, was about to take a header into chaos.”¹² And so the story continued – and continues still.

It might therefore be no surprise, in our own period of social, political and economic turmoil intensified by the global pandemic, the stories that we tell about ourselves, about our disciplines, and about others, should be clamouring for attention. Certainly, the articles in this issue of *New Area Studies* offer a compelling panorama of the ways in which storytelling and Area Studies can interrelate in dynamic and generative ways. Philip Wilson’s article, which opens this collection, provides a rich account of the deep connections between narrative, philosophy, and a multiplicity of other disciplines, suggesting ways in which Area Studies practitioners might consider “embracing storytelling at a metaphorical level.” In its wake, a variety of contributors offer diverse and powerful accounts of the relationship between people, place and stories that span the globe and offer an array of innovative methodological models and interdisciplinary approaches: Mandy Sadan, Dan Smyer Yü and Seng Lawn Dan explore life stories involved in the trans-border jadeite trade between northern Myanmar and China, particularly in the Kachin region; María Eugenia Ulfe and Roxana Vergara describe, and meditate on, the pioneering pandemic podcast that they

¹² Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (Boston: The Cambridge Press, 1889), 23.



Susan Hodgett and Thomas Ruys Smith, “Storytelling: An Introduction”, *New Area Studies* 2:1 (2021), 1-6.

produced in collaboration with the Kukama Kukamiria people in the lower Marañón river basin; and Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith analyse the World Comics India (WCI) project, an innovative movement which encourages people and communities to create and disseminate grassroots comics about the issues affecting their lives. Other contributors contemplate the manifold effects of stories told about others: Zahia Smail Salhi examines the way that were told about – and by – Algerian women, in ways that echo down to the present day; Sandford Borins and Beth Herst consider the ways in which Canadian politics has been depicted on film and television since 1960. And finally, R. A. W. Rhodes shines a light on the stories that we tell ourselves as academics through a ground-breaking exercise in evocative, analytical autoethnography. Taken together, they represent the myriad ways in which storytelling, broadly conceived, is a vital tool for Area Studies, crossing disciplines and centring the voices of people and places that might otherwise go unheard. It is an old story, and it has still barely begun.