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Bad stories: narrative, identity, and the state’s materialist pedagogy

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How do state actors teach citizen-subjects collective identities? In this article, the author argues that one important way they do so is by teaching subjects to weave into their personal stories of ‘who I am’ shared or public narratives of ‘who we are’. But, although story-telling is an important part of how states produce identities, it is not the only way they help reproduce them. States help reproduce identity narratives by institutionalizing them: by building them into laws and norms and policies. States help reproduce identity narratives by objectifying them, as well: by building them into material forms. Illustrating with the example of racial identities in the twentieth century United States, the author argues that when states institutionalize and objectify identity-narratives, they lend them a resilience they would not otherwise enjoy.

Keywords: pedagogy; state; narrative; identity; institutionalization; objectification

In the present essay, I ask how states shape the identities of citizen-subjects. Throughout, I use the term ‘pedagogy’ in the very broadest sense. My starting point is the premise that the educative work states do is never fully contained in institutions of formal schooling, never isolated from larger social and political processes. I understand pedagogy, what is more, to be a two-way process. The work states do in educating citizens is less a matter of compelling them to behave in certain ways, than inducing them to govern themselves: teaching them, not simply to act in this way rather than that, but also to value, to desire, to perceive in this way rather than that, by enlisting them as agents in the ongoing process of their subjectification.

To the question how states shape identities, I offer a two-part answer. In the first section, I draw on theories of narrative identity to make the case that one important way states influence subject formation is by teaching people to weave into the stories they tell about who they are as unique individuals – into their narratives of personal identity – shared narratives of collective identity. Identification, I argue, is inherently selective, exegetical, productive, and competitive. Together, these four characteristics account for the centrality of narrative to processes of identification, and also for the unavoidably political quality of identity narratives.

If the first section highlights the insights work on narrative identity offers into the pedagogical state, the second underscores the limits of that approach. Here, my claim is that, although story-telling is an important part of how actors – including state actors – produce identities, it is not the only, and it is not the most significant way they reproduce them. Social and political actors, including state actors, help reproduce identities, not just by telling and retelling the stories from which they have been constructed, but also by institutionalizing and objectifying those stories. Illustrating with the example of racial identities in the twentieth
century United States, I argue that states build identity-narratives into laws and other institutions. They build them into material forms, as well, for example, racialized urban and suburban spatial forms. They thus enable their practical reproduction, lending them resilience in the face of challenge and critique.

Identity and stories

How do states shape identities? To tackle this question, I want to start with the observation – now all but commonplace in social and political theory – that people construct both their personal identities, and also their civic and other collective identities, and that they do so in specifically narrative form.2 Seyla Benhabib, to cite one prominent example, writes, ‘We are born into webs of interlocution or webs of narrative – from the familial and gender narratives to the linguistic one to the macronarrative of one’s collective identity. We become who we are by learning to become a conversation partner in these narratives’ (Benhabib 1999, p. 344).3

Story-telling, the claim is, is how people construct their identities: their understandings of who they are as unique individuals, and also as members of particular groups or collectivities. It is how people make sense of the social world, and of their place in that world. But why do actors create identities as stories? And how do states intervene in identity formation? In this first section, I draw on theories of narrative identity to sketch what I want to suggest are four key characteristics of identification, which shed light on the process of narrative identity construction and on the pedagogical role states play in that process.

Identification is selective

First, identification is selective. Imagine a set comprised of all the things that happened to you since you woke up this morning: all the actions you took; all the decisions you made; all the relationships in which you participated; all the traits, impulses, and dispositions you exhibited. Now, estimate how many days you have lived, up to and including today. Even if, on average, only a single memorable thing happened to you each day of your life, for you to recount any one of these as you construct your understanding of (to recall Benhabib’s language) ‘who [you] are’ would be to highlight an infinitesimally small fraction, or subset, of what happened.

But this is precisely what you do each time you offer an account of your lived experience. As you construct your understanding of the life you have lived up to this moment, as you construct your understanding of your identity (of ‘who you are’), you do not catalog everything that happens to you: everything you do and observe and feel, moment to moment. You do not keep a running tally of ‘what happens at time $t$ and what happens at time $t+1$ . . . what happens at time $t+n$ ’ and refer to that log as an objective record. You do not process your experience that way. Nor do you remember it that way. Instead, in the moment, you attend to some of what happens, but not all, making running judgments about significance and meaning. When the moment has passed, and you reflect back upon what it is that you recall, you make additional judgments. You construct events from your recollections. You relate those events to one another through plots, which, typically, you elaborate only after the fact. You thus narrativize your lived experience, constructing a (selective) personal identity story.4

Collective identification is selective, no less so than is personal identification: selective not only of actions, experiences, and dispositions, but of persons as well. Thus, shared understandings of ‘who we are’ – as an American people, for example, or as
African-Americans, or women, or Catholics – constitute some, but not other, past actors and past actions as definitive of ‘our’ history. They identify some, but not other, contemporary people, practices, and values as component parts of ‘who we are’. Just as personal identity-narratives are the mode through which individuals construct their self-understandings, collective identity-narratives are the mode through which these shared understandings are made.

Consider the following (notorious) example: in the early decades of the twentieth century, leading up to the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, elected officials in the United States; eugenicists, including those who served as advisors to the state; and other political actors told stories of American identity that centered on a putative Anglo-Saxon racial heritage. ‘Who we Americans are’, (this story went) was not the ‘blacks’ or the ‘Asians’ who were physically present in the American territory. It was not the practices in which those persons engaged, the ways they dressed and spoke, their experiences and traditions. Nor were would-be immigrants from Southern or Eastern European countries part of the American ‘we’. Instead, Americans were, to quote, Dr Harry Laughlin, expert advisor to the congressional House Committee on Immigration, ‘a race of white people’.5

Of course, not all collective identities are racist identities. All are selective, however, and necessarily so, since to identify particular persons as Xs (and particular actions and attributes as X-like) is always to cull from a larger set of possibilities, a smaller subset. It is through narrative that social and political actors perform this work of identitarian selection.

**Identification is exegetical**

Identification is selective, then. It is exegetical as well. As the political theorist Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, the actions and interactions that serve as the material from which identities are constructed, must, if they are to be meaningful, be interpreted (MacIntyre 2007, Chap. 15). Suppose, for example, you have spent countless hours pounding with your fingers on the keys of your computer, while staring intently at the marks that appear on its screen. To include the action you thus performed as a component part of your account of ‘who you are’, you would need to do more than simply recount this behavior. You would need to say something about why you behaved in the way you behaved: what it was you thought you were doing, what your beliefs were (and are) about this behavior, what your purposes were, what you intended to accomplish. What is more, because your beliefs and intentions are not free standing – because they are related to other beliefs and intentions you hold, and because they are shaped by beliefs you share with others, and by practices and institutions in which you participate with others – you could not stop there. ‘I was pounding the keys of the keyboard’, you might say, ‘because I was writing about narrative and identity’. You might add: ‘I was writing part of a book I was working on, and which I intended to publish. I intended to do so in part because I wanted to communicate with an audience of readers, whom I imagined as I wrote; in part because publishing books is what people do when they engage in the practice of academic political philosophy; in part because the university that employs me encourages and rewards book publishing’ – etc. To paraphrase MacIntyre, one cannot interpret actions without reference to beliefs and intentions, and to what he calls the ‘settings’ that lend beliefs and intentions subjective and intersubjective intelligibility. Narrative is among the discursive forms that best enable such interpretation (MacIntyre 2007, p. 206).

Collective identification is no less exegetical than is personal identification. Every narrative of ‘who we are’ is but one (contestable) interpretation of the meaning of the data from which it is comprised. Consider again the racialized story of American national
identity, cited above. That narrative did not simply select persons and actions and attributes, it also interpreted them. If the raw data from which the story was made included phenotypical variation, for example – variation in skin tone, variation in the color and the texture of people’s hair – if it included variation in observed behaviors – for instance, differences in how well different persons maintained their places of residence – a crucial part of the twentieth century American racial narrative was its interpretation of those data.

In the early decades of the century, phenotypical variation was widely understood to be a manifestation of biological type, which itself was thought an important cause of variation in traits and behaviors (Banton 1998). Specifically, people categorized ‘black’ were widely understood to be a distinct racial group from ‘whites’, and their (biologically rooted) race a cause of undesirable traits and dispositions. Among the latter was an incapacity for responsible home ownership, and hence a tendency to adversely affect, by the mere fact of their residence in a place, the value of property there.

This understanding, needless to say, was an interpretation – and a highly contestable interpretation, at that. A more plausible interpretation of the same data might have been that, due to widespread housing discrimination, Southern migrants to Northern cities were unable to purchase new and/or well-maintained homes. They were confined to overcrowded and physically deteriorated rental housing units, which – because they were discriminated against in hiring and lending – they very often could not afford to repair.

But it was the former, not the latter, interpretation that achieved dominance in the early twentieth century United States. It was the racist narrative that was circulated in the discourse of business elites: among real estate agents, in particular, and real estate lenders and appraisers (Helper 1969). It was the racist narrative that circulated in popular discourse, as well, for example, in local newspapers and in magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* (Abrams 1955). Moreover, it was the racist narrative that circulated among American state actors: among elected officials, members of the nascent profession of city planners, and eventually officers of key New Deal housing agencies, such as the Home Owners Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) (Jackson 1985).

**Identification is productive**

The role of actors such as these – American state actors who told and who retold twentieth century racial narratives – highlights the third trait of identification that I want to underscore: its productivity. Processes of identity construction are productive in the very most basic sense of that word. When people tell stories of ‘who I am’ and ‘who we are’, they do not simply retrieve data from the past and report it, building an historical record of what happened. Instead, by naming or ‘our heroes’ and ‘our achievements’ – or, in the case of personal identity stories, ‘my intentions’ and ‘my purposes’ – they shape present and future perception, evaluation, and action. If part of how I understand ‘who I am’, for instance, is ‘I am a person who writes books’, or if part of how we define ‘who we are’ is, ‘we are white Americans’, then we will think, feel, and value – and we will act – differently than we otherwise would.

The early twentieth century racialized narrative of American national identity was a narrative state actors taught citizen-subjects. They taught it through formal educative processes, for instance though public schooling in civics. They taught it through the informal education of public political speech as well. State actors taught citizens stories of race and investment risk, what it is more, for instance through the underwriting standards put in place by the FHA, which defined as unacceptably high risk – indeed, as uninsurable – mortgages for homes occupied by black persons, and for white-occupied homes located in neighborhoods where black people lived.
The political import of these stories was enormous. Stories of Americans as ‘a race of white people’ legitimized the exclusion from citizenship of whole categories of persons whom they named unassimilable.\textsuperscript{10} At the same time, stories of race and investment risk effectively excluded American blacks from the market in real estate – a crucial avenue for wealth accumulation for whites in the postwar years – while producing a dramatic shift in America’s racial geography. As is well known, black ghettos did not exist in almost any American city at the close of the nineteenth century. At that time, black city dwellers lived in wards that were, on average, only 27\% black (Cutler\textit{et al.} 1999). Just a half century later, a full 55 US cities included neighborhoods that, according to the most commonly used indices of racial segregation, qualified as ghettos (ibid).\textsuperscript{11} By then, black American city dwellers lived in neighborhoods that were, on average, 43\% black (ibid).

\textbf{Identification is competitive}

How is it that a collective identity story can produce such politically significant outcomes? How is that, simply by telling a story, a political actor can influence who is included in, and who is excluded from, a political society, or even the patterns of residence and land use within that society? I want to answer this question, first, by exploring a response suggested by theories of narrative and identity. In the second section, I want to problematize and complicate that response.

Political theoretical work on identity and narrative suggests that political actors, including state actors, will shape subject formation through collective identity stories if and when individuals incorporate those stories into the personal identity stories they tell. If individual citizens in the early twentieth century United States were to weave into the narratives they told about their own lives state-promulgated narratives of nation and of race, for instance, if individual home buyers and home sellers were to weave into their stories state-promulgated narratives of race and investment risk, then those collective identity stories would shape the judgments and choices those individuals made. If, in short, some substantial number of individuals were to tell themselves, ‘I am a white American’, then racial stories would shape their perception, their judgment, and their action. It is just such a process Anthony Appiah has in mind when he writes that ‘becoming who we are’ involves citing in our personal identity narratives shared or public narratives of collective identity: ‘Identification often has a strong narrative dimension. By way of my identity I fit my life story… into larger stories – for example, of a people, a religious tradition, or a race’ (Appiah 2002, p. 243).

It is important to underscore, however, that to the extent that the state’s pedagogy takes this particular form – to the extent that it works as a narrative and through the narratives individuals tell – states are constrained to teach identity stories that citizens will incorporate into their life-stories. States are thus constrained to teach narratives that conform with relatively widely held empirical beliefs about the world as it is, or at least stories that do not clearly conflict with such beliefs. States are constrained to teach narratives that conform with relatively widely held normative beliefs about the world as it should be, or at least do not clearly conflict with such beliefs.

Imagine that in the 1920s, the Congressional House Committee on Immigration had tried to circulate a very different story of American identity than the one that it circulated. Imagine it had proffered a story radically at odds with the putatively scientific claims of the eugenists of that day – perhaps a constitutional patriotic story, which incorporated an explicitly constructivist view of ‘race’. Or suppose that in, the 1930s, the FHA had worked to circulate a very different racial narrative than the one that it circulated: a story that flew
in the face of the claims of early twentieth century land economists, perhaps one asserting
that there was no relation between investment risk and race. If these narratives had struck
most individuals as incorrect, or if they had struck them as morally illegitimate, then one
would expect those individuals not to incorporate those stories into their narratives of
personal identity. One would expect them, instead, to reach for some alternative collective
identity story as they constructed their narratives of personal identity.

This thought experiment illustrates the fourth and final characteristic of identification I
want to highlight. Identification is a competitive process. There is never simply one story
on offer – the story of ‘who we Americans are’ (or we African-Americans, or we women,
or we Catholics). Instead the processes by which collective identity narratives are
produced and reproduced take the form of political contests. Different actors, with
different beliefs, desires, and interests, are differently served by competing versions of
‘the’ story of almost every group: nation, race, caste, class, and community. These
multiple narratives very often contrast with one another on important dimensions. In many
cases, they directly contradict one another. They typically serve the interests of, and/or or
reflect the beliefs or the values of, some, but not other, agents.\footnote{12}

Indeed, it is this competitive quality that accounts for the relation of mutual
constitution between, on the one hand, collective, and on the other hand, personal identity-
stories. Just as the latter can attain intelligibility only if they incorporate the former, so the
former can take root, they can survive, only if they are incorporated into the latter. To the
extent that identities are produced and reproduced as narratives, collective identities must
work through stories of personal identity. Collective identity stories can succeed, theories
of narrative identity suggest, only if some substantial number of individuals build them
into their stories of personal identity.

**Bad stories**

One might, therefore, expect only those collective identities to succeed that take the form
of good stories. By ‘good’ stories I mean stories that accord with, or at least do not conflict
with, widely held empirical beliefs and widely endorsed moral and/or ethical principles.\footnote{13}
One might expect only those collective identities to succeed that take the form of stories
that are ‘good’ in this very minimal sense, because one might think people would find
collective identity stories that were not good stories to be jarring. One might expect, as
individuals told their personal identity stories, that they would not incorporate such ‘bad’
collective stories into them. Hence, MacIntyre’s claim that not only scientists and
philosophers, but also ‘ordinary agents’ – people like you, or me, or mid-twentieth century
American home buyers – find themselves thrown into what he calls ‘epistemological
crises’ when faced with the fact that part or all of the narratives they have been telling
themselves about the world, and about their lived experience, cannot comprehend some
datum or data (MacIntyre 1997).

MacIntyre conceives the trigger of such crises in terms of a new experience: one which
challenges some extant (and the implication is: some extant good) narrative. Suppose, for
instance, an early twentieth century American who identified as ‘white’ were to move to a
racially integrated neighborhood and to observe that the people there with phenotypical
characteristics associated with ‘blackness’ in fact kept their yards neatly manicured and
their homes in excellent repair. By MacIntyre’s account, at that point that individual
should experience ‘radical interpretive doubt’ (MacIntyre 1997, p. 455). She should
wonder how it is that the racial identity story she had incorporated into her personal life-
story could have been so predictively inaccurate on this point. She would then face the
task, MacIntyre’s claim is, of rewriting the story she tells herself (and others) about her identity: reinterpreting all the relevant experiences that she previously had interpreted, but now in a way that accounts for both her black neighbors’ proclivity to maintain their property in excellent condition and her previous beliefs that, due to their ‘racial heritage and tendencies’, they would not.

The (unstated) premise is that ‘ordinary agents’, much like good scientists, have a relatively low tolerance for dissonance between, on the one hand, the stories they tell about the world and their experience in it, and on the other, their considered ontological and evaluative beliefs. In practice, however, people often are not thrown into epistemological crises when new data contradict old identity stories. People often do not revise even those identities – such as, at the turn of the twenty-first century, racial identities – that seem in desperate need of revision. They often do not create new identities, using more credible and more legitimate narratives, even when they are faced with evidence that directly contravenes the stories from which their identities were made.

Why not?

Change and stasis

The year 1940 marked the start of a decade one might have expected to be a turning point in dominant understandings of race in America, and in American racial practices.14 It was in the 1940s that the collective identity story of race as biological difference – the story that had rationalized, by providing an allegedly scientific basis for, the differential treatment of persons based on race – was decisively undermined at the level of scientific discourse. By the end of that decade, scientists in the United States and in Europe had arrived at consensus on what has since been dubbed the ‘evolutionary synthesis’: an explanation of purportedly categorical, and permanent, racial differences in terms of gradual genetic shifts engendered by evolution within reproductively isolated populations (Banton 1998, Chap. 4). Phenotypical variation among individuals, which to that point had been widely assumed a mark of distinct racial types, was now recognized to be continuous, rather than categorical. There is no biologically rooted difference, scientists came to agree, which separates humans into discrete ‘races’, and which produces specifically racial traits, qualities, and dispositions.15

At roughly that same time, the normative stories that had legitimized racial hierarchies through mid-century came under siege. The association of racism with Naziism made American racial beliefs and practices appear to those who self-identified as opponents of Hitler, not just empirically misguided, but also morally repugnant. In 1944, the widely circulated Fourth Report of the Commission to Study the Organization of the Peace (CSOP) underscored that ‘The cancerous Negro situation in our country gives fodder to enemy propaganda and makes our ideals stick like dry bread in the throat’. ‘Through revulsion against Nazi doctrines’, the report continued, ‘we may . . . hope to speed up the process of bringing our own practices . . . more in conformity with our professed ideals’.16 Gunnar Myrdal, writing that same year, took a similar stance. Predicting that ‘The War [would be] crucial for the future of the Negro’, Myrdal averred, ‘There is bound to be a redefinition of the Negro’s status in America as a result of this War’(Myrdal 1944, p. 997).

The latter change (the change in the normative discourse surrounding race in America) made racist narratives (such as the narrative that legitimized the ghettoization of blacks), to recall the language introduced above, ‘bad stories’. The former (the change in empirical beliefs about racial identity and difference) did the same for the larger set of early twentieth century racial narratives. Theories of narrative identity would lead us to expect, in the wake
of these changes, dramatic shifts in how Americans identify racially. They would lead us to expect dramatic shifts in American racial practices as well, as one individual after the other experienced ‘radical interpretive doubt’ and rewrote her personal identity story.

But at mid-century, Americans did not do away with racial – or for that matter, with racist – identity thinking. They did not reconstruct their identities, using exclusively good (that is to say, credible and legitimate) stories. To be sure, one can imagine such a reconstruction. Lionel McPherson and Tommie Shelby (2004), for instance, make the case that an African-American identity based on feelings of racial solidarity, and on a sense of shared political interests and collective political will, is not only morally legitimate, but also compatible with an (empirically credible) understanding of race as socially significant, but not biologically grounded. Such an understanding of is not, however, the understanding most Americans employ. Most Americans, well after the middle years of the twentieth century, continue to comprehend ‘race’, not only in social and political terms, but also as a marker of shared biological heritage. Indeed, even people who are fully aware of the speciousness of claims about race as biological type often adopt this commonsensical understanding. ‘Her mother is black, but she looks white’, I might remark to you in conversation, even though I would studiously avoid in my scholarly work any suggestion that ‘black’ and ‘white’ racial identities are categorically discrete biological inheritances, made plain through phenotypical variation.

Indeed, were I to make such a remark, it would likely strike you as anything but extraordinary. People very often reach for, people very often use, as they interpret and negotiate the social world, collective identities that, when spelled out in storied form, are not good stories. People often use such identities even when they know on some level – even when, if prompted, they would readily acknowledge – that the stories undergirding them are not credible and not legitimate. People often use identities that are supported by bad stories, not only to characterize the beliefs of others, but also as component parts of the stories they tell about their own lives, about their own identities.

**Identities and institutions**

Social actors often use identities made from ‘bad stories’ because, although (as theories of narrative identity underscore) people typically *produce* identities as narratives, they very often do not *reproduce* them in narrative form. To be sure, I sometimes learn and relearn my collective identities by learning the story of who ‘we Americans’ are (or we African-Americans, or we women, or Catholics). But I also learn my identities *practically*. I learn them through everyday action in institutional contexts that have been shaped by narratives of collective identity, and through everyday contact with material forms that embody those narratives.

To illustrate, I want to consider, first, the *institutionalization*, and then the *objectification*, of early twentieth century racial stories. Recall the claim (from section one, above) that collective identity construction is a competitive process. As actors create and circulate identity stories, they compete with other actors, who offer other stories of who ‘we’ are (as a race, a nation, and a people). When a given narrative emerges successful from such competition – when, for instance, in the early decades of the last century, the new story of race and investment risk was incorporated into the personal life-stories of a critical mass of individuals who self-identified as ‘white’ – social and political actors do not simply continue to tell and retell that narrative. Thus actors, including American state actors, did not simply circulate (in civics classrooms and in texts and in public political speeches) the early twentieth century American racial narrative. They also institutionalized that
narrative. They built it into laws and other institutions, that is to say. Social and political actors, including state actors, build successful stories into institutions, which define norms and standards, and which distribute rewards and sanctions accordingly.

A case in point is the racial zoning laws that were passed in many American cities in the second decade of the twentieth century. These is one instance of an institution – in this case a legal ordinance – which codified, and which backed with the force of legal sanction, a story about the incompatibility of ‘the black and white races’. A second example is racially restrictive covenants: deed restrictions from roughly that same era, which, although privately enacted, were publicly enforced. Racial covenants, like racial zoning laws, codified the collective identity story that emerged as dominant in the early twentieth century United States, enforcing it with rewards (state protection of property rights for those who conformed to deed restrictions) and sanctions (legal punishment for covenant violators).

A third example is state policies, such as FHA policies, which also institutionalized racial identity narratives. As noted above, the FHA actively circulated stories of race and investment risk in its publications, including its Underwriting Manual. But the agency did much more than that. By building those stories into its underwriting guidelines and allowing them to strongly shape its investment policies, the agency ensured that federal loan guarantees were distributed as those stories prescribed: to whites disproportionately, that is to say, and in particular to whites who purchased houses in racially exclusive enclaves.

Imagine a prospective home buyer in the early postwar years who rejects early twentieth century racial narratives. Imagine a home buyer who refuses to incorporate those stories into her own story of who she is as a unique individual. Let us stipulate that this home buyer is socially ascribed ‘white’ racial identity, but imagine that (because she is aware of recent shifts in the scientific discourse on race) she finds the stories the FHA cites and circulates not to be credible. Imagine, furthermore, that (because she is persuaded by the normative critique of racist practices that emerged from the war with Nazi Germany) she finds the stories the FHA cites and circulates not to be legitimate.

Even if this home buyer does not incorporate the FHA-endorsed narrative of race and investment risk into her personal life-story, because the agency has institutionalized that narrative, it will nonetheless shape her field of possible action. If she wants to qualify for a federally backed mortgage for a house (or, for that matter, if she wants to be certain she can secure a mortgage on the private market), even if she wholly rejects the racial narrative, she must act as if she accepts it. She must purchase her house in a racially exclusive enclave, that is to say. If she does not – if she buys in a black ghetto, or if she buys in a racially integrated neighborhood – she will face nontrivial sanctions.

I do not mean to imply, by proposing this thought experiment, that all Americans revised their identity stories in the middle of the last century. No doubt, the postwar United States was characterized by a wide range of racial beliefs and attitudes. Some Americans, no doubt, did change the stories they told in response to shifts in dominant racial narratives, while others no doubt clung to now-discredited racial stories. But even if every single American had revised her identitarian story-telling, I want to underscore, absent corresponding changes to the institutions old stories had shaped, American racial practices would not have radically changed. The institutionalization of identity stories lends them resilience in the face of challenge and critique.

**Identities and spaces**

Their *objectification* lends them added resilience. By ‘objectification’ (a term I borrow from Pierre Bourdieu), I mean their translation into object form, or into material form. Bourdieu
(1977, Chap. 2) introduces this notion in his famous study of the Kabyle built environment, in which he argues that the division between the Kabyle house and the public world, along with the divisions of space interior to the house itself, objectify identity categories and the social meanings actors attach to those categories. Objectification in the Kabyle case consists in actors designating ‘male’ spaces – spaces of politics, production, and exchange – and ‘female’ spaces – spaces of domestic work, sex, and reproduction. When people engage in practical activities in such spaces, Bourdieu’s claim is – when those identified as ‘men’ sow and reap in the field, when those identified as ‘women’ cook and care for the sick and the dying in the house – they learn and they re-learn, implicitly, the identities objectified in those forms.

Central to Bourdieu’s argument is his claim that such learning is, at least in part, corporeal. It happens, not only through explicitly thematized identity narratives, in other words, but also through material forms, which work directly on the muscles, the nerves, the tendons that make up a human body. Think of how you learned (and how, if you tried, you might now recall) strongly gendered narratives from your childhood, such as the tale of The Princess on the Pea. Then try, if you can, to remember how you learned (and think how, daily, as if by instinct, you are recalled) to perform your gender well – as you walk, as you talk, as you exhibit (or as you refrain from exhibiting) sensitivity to discomfort. The latter differs from the former qualitatively in that it is an instance of, not consciously and explicitly citing a narrative, so much as mastering practically a social competence. If, like Kabyle men and women, you perform well your gender identity, you do so, not only and not necessarily because you endorse the narratives from which that identity was constructed, but also, and significantly, because you have acquired what Bourdieu calls ‘a feel for the game’ (Bourdieu 1990, p. 11).21

In the twentieth century United States, social and political actors, including democratic state actors, not only institutionalized racial identities in laws and in policies. They also inscribed those identities in urban and suburban spatial forms, such as the black ghettos and the white enclaves that were the product of racial zoning ordinances, racial covenants, and racist housing policies. Racial identity stories changed dramatically in the middle years of the century. Even institutions changed as, for instance, the US Supreme Court ruled racial zoning laws unconstitutional, and racially restrictive covenants unenforceable (Buchanan v. Warley 1917, Shelley v. Kraemer 1948). Yet, state actors helped maintain racialized spaces with new institutions: with zoning laws which, even though not explicitly racially targeted, had predictably racially segregating effects, and with policies, such as Urban Renewal/Redevelopment, which, in Arnold Hirsch’s words, ‘played a key role in fostering, sustaining, and, not infrequently, intensifying the separation of the races even in the absence of Jim Crow legislation’ (Hirsch 1998, viii). State actors helped maintain racialized spaces, as well, through omissions of action: for instance, by failing effectively to enforce the fair housing legislation passed in the late 1960s.22

Recall that, in 1890, only one of those American cities with a thousand or more black residents included a neighborhood that, according to commonly used indices of racial segregation, were ‘black ghettos’. In 1990, 98 of those same cities did: a full 96% of the original set (Cutler et al. 1999). In those cities as a whole, the average black resident lived in a census tract that was 61% black (ibid).

At the start of the twenty-first century, it remains colloquial to speak of the ‘black’ and the ‘white’ parts of town. Those individuals who identify – and who are identified – as ‘black’ or as ‘white’ need not explicitly cite in their life-narratives collective stories of racial identity, in order to know, and to feel, when they are ‘out of place’. Through the actions and the failures to act that contribute to the maintenance of racialized space, the American state teaches its citizens ‘a feel for the (racial) game’. As citizen-subjects act and
interact in racialized urban and suburban spaces – as they shop, as they worship, as they take their children to and from school – they learn and they re-learn, very often without narrativizing, the commonsense of racial practice.

**Conclusion**

In this article, I have argued that narrative is one important form through which states teach and citizen-subjects learn identity: through civic education in the classroom, through public political addresses, and through public documents. But, I have emphasized, it is not the only form. States also teach, and citizens also learn identities practically. Actors, including state actors, teach identities by writing them into laws and other institutions, and by building them into spaces and other object forms. Individuals learn and re-learn identities when they are incentivized by such institutions, and when they experience such material forms with their bodies.

Much ink has been spilt – both in debates about civic education, and in social and political theory more generally – debating what are the best identity stories for states to teach. For some, the answer is ‘civic nationalist’ stories: identity narratives according to which ‘who we are’ is, not members of an ethnically or a racially defined group, but rather people who shared particular historical experiences and/or particular values and beliefs about the good life (Miller 1995, 2000, Canovan 1996, 2000). For others, ‘constitutional patriotic’ stories are best: stories according to which what unites ‘us’ and makes us a distinct people is our particular interpretation of liberal and democratic constitutional principles (see, especially, Habermas 1998, 2001a, 2001b; for an evaluation and critique, see Hayward 2007).

The argument sketched above, however, underscores that the solution to the problem of ‘bad’ identities is never simply ‘tell better stories’. To be sure, telling better stories is often a crucial part of the process of building political support for change. But the point of intervention must be those institutions (those rules, laws, and policies), and also those material forms into which bad stories have been built. In the American case, the solution cannot be simply to teach people to explicate, interrogate, and revise the narratives from which ‘race’ was constructed. It cannot be simply to teach them to identify as ‘American’ for civic nationalist, for or constitutional patriotic reasons. Rather, it must be to change the institutions (including, importantly, the institutions of metropolitan governance) that incentivize people to act as if they endorse racial stories (Ford 1994, Frug 1999). It must be to change the urban and suburban spaces through which Americans learn and re-learn race corporeally.

**Notes**

1. This article is an abridged version of a chapter in my current book project, which is tentatively titled *Stories and Spaces: How Americans Make Race*. Early versions were presented at the Open University Symposium on the Pedagogical State in September, 2008, the annual meeting of the Western Political Science Association in March 2009, and the annual meeting of the International Political Science Association in July 2009. For helpful comments, I am grateful to participants in those sessions, as well as to Courtney Jung, Michael Neblo, and three anonymous referees for this journal.


3. Hence, Hayden White’s claim that ‘every narrative, however seemingly “full”, is constructed on the basis of a set of events which might have been included but were left out’. White (1981, p. 10), emphasis as in original.
4. This claim is consonant with, although not identical to, the view of Paul Ricoeur, for whom people select actions and interactions from their experience and relate those to one another in a specifically narrative form, because it is narrative that best captures what he calls the human experience of time (Ricoeur 1984, 1988). Although we often represent time in a linear fashion, the claim is (as a line linking points, much like a mathematical line links points in abstract space) we do not experience our lives-in-time that way. Instead, we experience the temporal progression of actions and interactions from the particular perspectives we occupy, relating differently to now, than to the past and future. As we construct events from our experiences, we link those events together to form a meaningful whole. '[N]arratives', according Ricoeur, 'are the modes of discourse appropriate to our experience of time' (Ricoeur 1979, p. 25).

5. Quoted in King (2000, p. 132). The quote continues ‘...who have fused into a national mosaic composed originally of European stocks (themselves mosaics) in rapidly descending proportion, as follows: primarily British, Irish, German, Scandinavian, French, and Dutch; secondarily, American Indian, Jewish, Spanish, Swiss, Italian, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian’. As for ‘the negro’, according to Laughlin, although ‘he has, so far as he was able, adopted our institutions, our language, our religions, and essential laws and customs, ... the contrast in blood between the northwestern European settlers and the African negroes is so great that racial assimilation is impossible’. Ibid.

6. This racial identity story represented a major revision of turn-of-the-century racial narratives. After the so-called ‘Great Migration’ of Southern blacks to northern and western cities, beginning with the first world war and continuing through the 1920s, established residents of those cities began to de-emphasize divisions among those whom eventually they would come to regard as ‘white ethnics’, and to focus attention on what they increasingly characterized as a black/white racial divide. At the same time, they revised, in light of the conditions of industrial urbanism, the list of traits and behaviors they claimed biological race caused, and they began to tell a story the moral of which was that the proper relation between ‘the races’ was one of strict separation. See Hayward (2009).

7. Thus, according to one influential real estate text from that era: ‘Among the traits and characteristics of people which influence land values, racial heritage and tendencies seem to be of paramount importance. The aspirations, energies, and abilities of various groups in the composition of the population will largely determine the extent to which they develop the potential value of land’ (Babcock 1932, p. 86). The author went on to underscore that racial differences have a particularly powerful impact on real estate values: ‘Most of the variations and differences between people are slight and value declines are, as a result, gradual. But there is one difference in people, namely race, which can result in a very rapid decline. Usually such declines can be partially avoided by segregation and this device has always been in common usage in the South where white and negro populations have been segregated’. Ibid, 91.

8. Our stories, to borrow Mark Freeman’s (1993) language, do not simply reflect, so much as they ‘re-write’ the selves they take as their subjects. Jerome Bruner (1987, p. 31) makes a similar point: ‘You will ask whether ... narrative forms and the language that go with them ... are not simply expressions of ... inner states ... I believe that the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them ... become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future’. Somers (1994, p. 614) emphasizes that ‘“[E]xperience” is constituted through narratives ... people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from ... social, public, and cultural narratives’. Ibid, p. 614.

9. Thus in its 1938 Underwriting Manual, the agency advised that neighborhood ratings should reflect the presence of what it termed ‘Adverse Influences’, including ‘incompatible racial and social groups’. According to the manual: areas surrounding a location are investigated to determine whether incompatible racial and social groups are present, for the purpose of making a prediction regarding the probability of the location being invaded by such groups. If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes. A change in social or racial occupancy generally contributes to instability and a decline in values (Federal Housing Administration 1938, par. 937).

10. Thus, the 1924 act (cited above) imposed quotas for legal immigration to the US based on would-be immigrants’ nations of origin.
11. These indices include the black isolation index, which measures the extent to which persons identified as ‘black’ are isolated in predominantly ‘black’ areas, and the index of dissimilarity, which measures the evenness of the distribution of persons considered ‘black’ throughout a city. For detailed discussions of both measures, see Massey and Denton (1993, Chap. 2). Cutler et al. (1999) analysis of all American cities with 1000 or more black residents in 1890 shows that, for the nation as a whole, the index of dissimilarity was 46%, while the index of isolation was just 22%. Generally, a dissimilarity index must reach 60%, and an isolation index 30%, to be considered high. A half century later, in 1940, dissimilarity had increased to 71%, and black isolation had grown to 46% (Cutler et al. 1999).

12. Thus, Rogers Smith (2003, Chap. 2) stresses the role political struggles play in generating competition among those identity narratives he calls ‘stories of peoplehood’. Would-be leaders want individuals to consider themselves part of a particular kind of political community, Smith’s argument is: a community circumscribed in certain ways, and defined by certain constitutive traditions, values, and attributes. More specifically, they want people to consider themselves part of political communities for which they would make good leaders.

13. This definition is not meant to be exhaustive. There are other characteristics that can make identity stories good or bad. Good stories, for example, are intelligible, coherent, and internally consistent. Hence, people might reject as ‘bad’ those stories the basic elements contradict one another. See, for instance, Appiah’s (2002) claim that black racial identities in the United States are bad stories because they are incoherent, in the sense that conforming to some of the norms that comprise them militates against conforming to others. One might argue, however, that narrative accommodates incoherence more easily than do many other discursive forms. Still, minimally, it seems plausible to suggest agents are unlikely to incorporate in their personal identity narratives collective identity narratives that violate their empirical beliefs and/or their deeply held principles.

14. See Hayward (2009), on which this paragraph and the one that follows draw.

15. To be sure, there were still some biological accounts of race after mid-century in some scientific realms. In the wake of the Human Genome Project in the early 2000s, the debate was revisited when several studies found patterned differences between African and non-African population groups in the structure of the DNA sequence. Most participants in the scientific debate agree, however, that there is a nontrivial gap between patterns of human genetic variation, and ‘race’ understood as biological type. Thus, the National Human Genome Center emphasizes that ‘race’ as traditionally understood is a flawed concept. Summing up the research presented at the inaugural Human Genome Variation and ‘Race’ meeting in 2004, Charmaine Royal and Georgia Dunston write, ‘... there seems to be consensus that “race”, whether imposed or self-identified, is a weak surrogate for various genetic and nongenetic factors in correlations with health status’ (Royal and Dunston 2004, p. 7).

16. (Commission to Study the Organization of the Peace 1973 [1944], p. 181.) Established by the League of Nations in 1939, CSOP published a series of reports over the course of the war years, lobbied the State Department and the White House, and conducted an ambitious public relations campaign, all with a view to promoting policy changes it claimed were necessary for a lasting international peace. For an historical overview of the Commission, see Mitoma (2008).

17. These were laws the purpose of which was to segregate by racial type. In 1910, Baltimore was the first American city to pass a racial zoning law. A host of other cities – including Atlanta, St. Louis, and Dallas – followed suit. The practice spread, but only until 1917, when the US Supreme Court ruled racial zoning in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. Buchanan v. Warley, 245 US 60 (1917).

18. Legally enforced restrictions written into the deeds of private properties, restrictive covenants had been employed prior to the turn of the century, to limit what were regarded as ‘noxious’ uses, tanneries being one common instance, and another slaughterhouses. It was not until the first half of the last century, however, that legal prohibitions on the purchase, lease, rental, and/or occupancy by blacks (and often by other racialized groups, especially Jews) were written into the deeds of countless properties in American cities and in their growing suburbs (Fogelson 2005).

19. From the start of the FHA program in the mid-1930s, and for nearly 30 years after, through the early 1960s – a period during which the agency insured mortgages on close to a third of new housing in the United States – it awarded African-Americans less than 2% of state-insured mortgages (Squires 1994). Even these it allotted disproportionately to segregated areas in the American South.
20. See Hayward (2004), on which this paragraph draws.
21. On gender as performance, see Butler (1999). Although her account is more psychoanalytic than Bourdieuan, there are important affinities between her view and mine. See also Zerilli (1998) on the performance of ‘rationally repudiated’ identities.
22. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 prohibited racial discrimination in housing sales and rentals, but major housing audit studies in 1979 and 1989 documented widespread discrimination against minority home buyers and renters (Wienk et al. 1979, Turner et al. 1991). Noncompliance is largely a product of ineffective enforcement. Even after the 1988 Fair Housing Amendment Act, which strengthened the Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) powers of enforcement, investigations are triggered only in response to complaints filed by people who experience discrimination. As critics note, this system grossly undermines effectiveness, given that many commonly employed discriminatory tactics are difficult for private individuals to detect. See Feagin (1994) and Reed (1994).

References

Buchanan v. Warley, 245 US 60 (1917).


