Root Narrative Theory and Character Assassination

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This paper develops a theoretical device for the analysis of the contexts in which character attacks will take place that can help explain why, when, and how they will succeed or fail. This device is called the root narrative profile, which is based on a narrative theory of conflict and politics that provides a way to simplify the variance in political arguments into a manageable number of representative categories. The root narrative profile is based on the idea that character attacks will be successful when they can be represented as an example of the abuse of social power. Accordingly, there are as many types of character attacks as there are forms of social power to abuse. This insight is useful for practitioners who can use the root narrative profile to either protect themselves before relevant audiences or to advance their interests with more effective attacks on their opponents. This paper develops this concept and provides illustrations of its use in a variety of empirical data.

Keywords

character assassination, reputation management, root narrative profile, root narrative theory

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In a famous appearance in the White House Rose Garden in December 1998, Bill Clinton introduced a phrase that would define the era, "the politics of personal destruction." Clinton had used the line several times in the past, but after the Managers of the House of Representatives had voted to deliver Articles of Impeachment to the U.S. Senate to begin a trial to remove President Clinton from office, he warned the country of the dangers of this new form of character assassination that he saw as typical of partisan attacks and of the difficulties it would pose for the country moving forward (Kelly, 1998).

> We must stop the politics of personal destruction. We must get rid of the poisonous venom of excessive partisanship, obsessive animosity and uncontrolled anger.

Critics of the president saw nothing in his statement but self-serving pity projected onto the nation's politics. After all, rhetors since Aristotle have known that arguments rise and fall on their appeals to logic, emotion, and most importantly character. In one sense, there was nothing new about the politics of personal destruction apart from Clinton's vulnerability to it, but in retrospect, President Clinton was simply the most visible and early target of a wave of character attacks that have become commonplace in the internet, social media environment. There is nothing new in the substance of rhetorical competition, which has maintained a similar form across the ages (Icks & Shiraev, 2014), but given the nature of changes in technology, the material through which character attacks can be made is more readily available than ever.

It is not only the famous and well-connected who are vulnerable to character attacks; the ready availability of the personal information being logged in private servers leaves all of us subject to potential ill-intentioned hackers, and we use social media to publicly curate our whims in ways that would have been unthinkable in earlier and less forgiving epochs. Data availability has made everyone vulnerable to character attacks in ways they never were if on the whole most people are able to navigate their professional lives without incident. What explains who is vulnerable to such attacks and when it is that they will work? Which kinds of character attacks are likely to succeed and under what circumstances? How can leaders map their vulnerability to such attacks and how can they work on ways to survive them when they do come?

Although no single theoretical model can provide answers to such a broad array of questions, I propose a way to provide one kind of answer to such questions that uses recent developments in narrative theory, sociological analysis, and critical philosophy to develop a simple tool that I call the "root narrative profile" for mapping reputation risks,

for planning public relations campaigns, and for negotiation in even the most radical disagreements (Ramsbotham, 2013, 2010). The root narrative profile is one of the most useful tools derived from an emerging perspective called Root Narrative Theory (Simmons, 2020).

Root Narrative Theory is developed from the idea that radical disagreements are based on rival interpretations of social power, one side seeing the source of power (armies, governments, businesses, and social institutions) as a force for good and the other as a root of evil. In this sense, all political disagreement boils down to the moral complexity imposed by rival stories that provide incommensurable interpretations of abusive power (Cobb, 2013; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). For every form of power, there is a form of abuse; for every form of abuse, there is a root narrative through which to interpret its effects; and for every form of abuse, there is an abuser. These types of abusers are the adverse character materials that partisans use to attack their enemies' reputations and assassinate their characters, and these villains are always embedded in stories of power and those who use it in the wrong ways.

This narrative based approach to character assassination provides a way to note and recognize the effects of discursive moves on reputations even in data that do not appear to rely on strictly personal attacks. Plot and character are interwoven in what can be very subtle and otherwise technical accounts. The root narrative profile is also attractive in that it provides a way to represent the features of character attacks that apply across diverse cultural contexts, without losing the color and granularity of local cultural contexts (Samoilenko et al., 2020).

Root Narrative Theory would predict that a successful attack on political reputation is a function of local political culture, which is in turn structured by a typical profile of political stories. A successful character attack will rely on some combination of these stories and will only be successful insofar as it speaks to the root narrative profile of the audience in question. Those character attacks that do not resonate with the root narrative profile of the audience (defined in terms of the salience and legitimacy of each narrative in members' political imagination) will fail, while those that do match the root narrative profile will succeed. If the theory is correct, it is imperative for those who would protect their reputations in our newly rich information environment to understand first which audiences and stakeholders matter for the realization of their plans and second what the root narrative profiles are of those audiences and stakeholders.

In the following, I describe the advantages of a ternary as opposed to a binary theory of narrative in politics, the mechanics of Root Narrative Theory, what a root narrative

profile is and how to measure it, empirical examples of root narrative profiles in a wide range of discursive data and the kinds of character attacks that should be effective given the analysis, and conclude with reflections of the implications of the theory for the emerging field of character assassination and reputation management.

A Ternary Theory of Narrative: Beyond the Binary of Reason and Emotion

Ever since Walter Lippman published his landmark book on the topic in 1922, there have been scores of approaches to the study of public opinion, each with its own advantages (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011; Lippmann, 1922; Mayer, 1992). The development of attitude measurement theory in the 1930s gave rise to novel measures in settings like the Gallup Poll and the National Election Studies and other studies that have produced countless variations on a common theme, and scholars have developed constructs around values, ideology, identity, and other related ideas pertinent to characterizing the psyche. Following Nietzsche, we might label these approaches as the students of Dionysus, those who teach us about our passions (Nietzsche, 1967). In the same period the field of political science, reacting to the field of economics developing ever more impressive models of rational action, especially those based on elaborations of Anthony Down's spatial voting model (Downs, 1957). These are the students of Apollo, those who teach us about our interests.

This gross abstraction that separates the rational actor from his or her psychological behavior plays out in every field and in countless variations across the social sciences, but the basic features of the unsatisfying dualism represented by the gap between classical economics and experimental psychology play out in fractal forms in almost every literature. I argue that narrative provides a middle way between rationalism and emotionalism, explanation and identification. Narrative is certainly nothing new for social science. There is only space here for an aphoristic articulation of the various forms that this turn to narrative has taken over the past half century or more, from Fisher's approach to communication (Fisher, 1984), to the narrative theories of Polkinghorne, Sarbin, and McAdams in Psychology (McAdams, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1988; Sarbin, 1986), to conflict resolution (Cobb, 2013), to the various appeals to the influence of Michel Foucault from philosophy (Hadot & Davidson, 1995) to even financial accounting (Armstrong, 1994)!

Most relevant for this argument is the recent advances in the field of international relations as illustrated by the research of Ronald Krebs (Krebs, 2015a, 2015b). It is typical

for authors trying to open a theoretical space for narrative to propose it as an alternative to the rational actor model—contrasting storytelling and emotionalism to rationality. I argue that this binary theory of narrative is a mistake. Reason and storytelling are not opposite ways of knowing. Reason and emotional identification are (Haidt, 2001; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Narrative is best thought of as a third way, a via media between these two poles. What is needed is a ternary theory of narrative that allows for subtle variations between explanatory stories, and identifying stories: between coherent policy arguments and what an American political scientist would called party identification (Campbell et al., 1960). This is where Foucault is indeed helpful. Complex scientific arguments are not merely the product of reason, they are projects situated in larger fields of meaning that define objectives and set boundaries for rational conversation (Foucault & Ewald, 2003), or as Thomas Kuhn would have argued, they are parts of larger paradigms of sensemaking (Kuhn, 2012).

A ternary theory of narrative allows for the development of a very expansive theory that can be adapted to a wide variety of rhetorical contexts, what scholars of collective memory have referred to as schematic narrative templates (Wertsch, 2002, 2008a, 2008b). Such a schematic approach to narration can cope with conditions in which a rhetor is extremely careful and scientifically rigorous, couching technical accounts about social affairs in pre-given forms of acceptable knowledge that establish empirical relations in a way consistent with the narrative commitments (both rational and emotional) of the speaker/writer. This theoretical approach can also accommodate the most trivial of emotional attacks like this one from Donald Trump on NBCs Chuck Todd, "After having been exposed as a fraud and corrupt, can anyone, including Sleepyeyes Chuck Todd of Fake @NBCNews, continue to listen to his con?" If we recognize narrative or storytelling not as an alternative to rational argument, but instead as a superordinate category, one that links emotional assessments with a potential field of technical arguments, it becomes possible to understand ideological competition, of which character assassination is a particular form, as a set of moves within a larger narrative structure. If we had a way to classify the various kinds of stories people can tell, we would also have a way to classify the various kinds of character attacks people can make. This would apply to elevated policy debates of heads of state to everyday arguments in coffee shops and classrooms.

In the following sections, I illustrate just this sort of ternary theory of narrative, that I call Root Narrative Theory and how it can be used to produce a simple tool through which to characterize empirical documents: the root narrative profile. The root narrative profile is helpful for the student of reputation management and character assassination

because it provides a model of the context in which such character attacks can be made. Characters are major components of stories. If we can understand the range of characters present in the political stories that all of us tell, we will be better positioned to explain how and when character attacks succeed or fail.

Root Narrative Theory

Root Narrative Theory is designed to explain the sources of radical disagreement, which is disagreement that sinks into deep conceptions of power, injustice, and core values (Ramsbotham, 2010). Radical disagreements are disputes at the roots in which the more one party learns about the other the worse the disagreement is likely to get. Radical disagreements take place at the borderlands between different figured worlds, in which the is a gap in how people determine what is right and wrong and how to know the difference (Bruner, 1986). In radical disagreements there is an incommensurability of worldviews, an interpretation gap that precludes productive communication that does not take this gap seriously(Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997). John Burton described this challenge with a distinction between what he called disputes and conflicts (Burton, 2001, 1990). A dispute was a matter of disagreement within an interpretative system, while a conflict was a disagreement across interpretive or normative systems (Rubenstein, 2001). Disputes could be settled while conflicts had to be analyzed and resolved. Root Narrative Theory is intended to help analysts fill the common forms of these interpretation gaps by explaining how interpretations or accounts of conflict work.

The point of departure of the theory is a phenomenological revolution in which human action is assumed to arise somewhere between the beast and the angel in human nature, the intersection of reason and emotion, a space best described as substantive reason or narrative. Narrative is intended to refer to accounts of actions, the past, and of plans that incorporate both theories of change and criteria for evaluation, to both rational calculations of what can happen in the world and moral assertions about how we should feel about what can happen when it does. In psychological terms, narrative is a dual-system vehicle (Petty et al., 1983; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Narrative spans the functions of the left and right brain to bring the kind of coherent accounts into play that are broad enough to establish interpretative systems. Narrative is how we imagine the world and the peculiar mixture of accounts that structure our narrative imaginations constitute our worldviews.

What makes Root Narrative Theory distinct from other approach to narrative and conflict is its assumption about the relationship between power and justice. Most narrative theories after Foucault are concerned about power and its relationship to truth claims, but tend to focus on the distorting effects of power on truth, emphasizing the capacity of powerful actors or perhaps of disembodied discourses to impose a sense of what is true on those who are incapable of resisting it (Foucault, 1995, 1988). In Root Narrative Theory, power defines a narrative, but not as a distortion of the truth that serves the interest of the powerful. Power is here taken as a fundamentally ambivalent phenomenon that has moral effects on those who experience it (Fraser, 2009). Those who support the effects of any given instance of power in action will see it not only as good, but also as something given, natural or not necessary to question. An example would be the use of military power to protect the people from terrorist attacks. Those who oppose the effects of that power see in quite a different way—the military as a form of oppression and abuse. This gap in the interpretation of power is the basis of moral incommensurability in conflict. The result is that the stories and counter-stories that each party tells are incompatible with the others.

Radical disagreement is rooted in incompatible stories about power. What defines these stories is the abuse of power itself. Where two accounts differ but involve no assertion or suggestion that power has been abused by one party or another, the dispute can be settled by introducing new information that overcomes what is ultimately an issue of confusion- you think I cut in line, but I believe I was there first. One of us is right, and if we can establish the facts, our dispute is settled. In the end, this is a win-win outcome, because we have satisfied our interests by negotiating on expressed positions (Fisher & Ury, 1991). In radical disagreement or conflict, we have to come to terms with the story of the other, in which each side is assumed to have abused power in a way that produced injustice. The sense of injustice has produced a wound at the level of identity (Shapiro, 2017). Unless injustice is recognized to the satisfaction of the conflicting parties, there is little hope of a rational resolution of the conflict. Because power is the source of injustice, productive analysis demands that we can identify the various forms of power and their corresponding and characteristic forms of injustice (Avruch, 2015).

There are many theoretical traditions in the study of power, but the one that is most useful for explaining the link between abusive power and injustice follows Max Weber (Weber, 1978). Weber defined power as the ability to realize one's goals over the opposition of another. Subsequent models like that of Steven Lukes have pointed to agenda setting and preference generating functions of power as well (Lukes, 2005).

Foucault's own efforts have described how power spreads to the capillaries—the smallest channels—of social life and structure our self-concepts, but neither the structural nor the normative faces of power displaces the value of the Weberian model for specifying conflict narratives, which emphasizes the power of an antagonist to impose his or her will on another party. Rendered into a primitive story, we have a root narrative which in schematic form would look like this:

The antagonist uses abusive power to create injustice for the protagonist.

In the primitive story, the antagonist uses the power to abuse the protagonist, who suffers the injustice, but at the same time is positioned in relation to power to overcome it to produce justice. The full story might read, *the antagonist uses abusive power/to create injustice for the protagonist/who overcomes the social power to restore justice*. In the root narrative, the protagonist is victim in the middle of the story and hero by the end. The defining feature is the reciprocal relation between abusive power and injustice, the relation of power and justice. In the dramatistic model of Kenneth Burke, it is agency and purpose that best define the political story (Burke, 1969).

The Weberian model is useful in another sense as well, it not only limits power to its narrative dimensions as an action taken against the will of another, but it also specifies the institutional mechanisms of power in basic form. His class, status, and party taxonomy has inspired students of social stratifications for decades (Gerth & Mills, 1946), and with innovations in the model made by neo-Weberians like Michael Mann and Anthony Giddens who split "party' into military and governing components (Giddens, 1987; Mann, 1986), the Weberian model distinguishes four major domains of institutional power, military power, political power, economic power, and status power. These four forms of power have four corresponding forms of injustice associated with them: physical deprivation, political coercion, unfair competition, and cultural disrespect. These four forms of abusive power matched with four corresponding forms of injustice yield four root narratives. These are represented in Table 1.

Table 1 Primitive Sentences of the 'Big Four' Root Narratives

	Antagonist Function		Protagonist Function	
Root Narrative	Character Element	Plot Element	Plot Element	Character Element
	Antagonist	Abusive Power	Injustice	Protagonist
Defense	Foreigners	use armed violence	to create physical deprivation	in the State
Consent	Governments	use force of law	to create political coercion	of the Individual
Reciprocity	Elites	use bargaining power	to create unfair competition	for the People
Recognition	Majorities	use biased folkways	to create cultural disrespect	of the Other

Table 1 Primitive Sentences of the 'Big Four' Root Narratives

Just as there are four basic forms of abusive power, so there are four basic root narratives. I call these the Big Four. Each has two components to define it, a protagonist function and an antagonist function, each with plot and character elements. These form broad categories of interpretation which can be thought of as categories of the moral imagination. The Defense Narrative provides the primitive form of the securitarian imagination. The Consent Narrative provides the primitive form of the libertarian imagination. The Reciprocity Narrative provides the primitive form of the egalitarian imagination. The Recognition Narrative provides the primitive form of the dignitarian imagination (for a more extensive discussion of these root narrative forms (see Simmons, 2020).

These protagonist and antagonist functions can be mixed and matched subject to semiotic constraints to generate contrasts between the big four categories (Greimas & Rastier, 1968), producing novel root narrative variations on the common theme. For example, the narrative, elites use bargaining power to create physical deprivation in the state is an example of what can be called a Unity Narrative. Partisans with special privilege within the community can lead to dangerous, factional dissent. The logic of opposition between each of the four primitive sentences yields three variations on the four major categories for a total of twelve root narratives. These are listed in Table 2.

Table 2 Primitive Sentences: The Full Set of Twelve Root Narratives

	Antagonist Function		Protagonist Function	
	Character Element	Plot Element	Plot Element	Character Element
	Antagonist	Abusive Power	Injustice	Protagonist
Defense	Foreigners	use armed violence	to create physical deprivation	in the State
Unity	Elites	use bargaining power	to create physical deprivation	in the State
Stability	Majorities	use biased folkways	to create physical deprivation	in the State
Consent	Governments	use force of law	to create political coercion	of the Individual
Property	Majorities	use biased folkways	to create political coercion	of the Individual
Merit	Foreigners	use armed violence	to create political coercion	of the Individual
Reciprocity	Elites	use bargaining power	to create unfair competition	for the People
Nation	Foreigners	use armed violence	to create unfair competition	for the People
Accountability	Governments	use force of law	to create unfair competition	for the People
Recognition	Majorities	use biased folkways	to create cultural disrespect	of the Other
Liberation	Governments	use force of law	to create cultural disrespect	of the Other
Inclusion	Elites	use bargaining power	to create cultural disrespect	of the Other

Table 2 Primitive Sentences: The Full Set of Twelve Root Narratives

Each of the twelve root narratives serves in public discourse as a moral grammar through which rhetors can put together novel political sentences that have both explanatory and identifying aspects. As with the grammar of a language, the political grammar only provides the rules for putting together sentences. The range and number of sentences that can be constructed a political grammar is as diverse as it is with a linguistic grammar. The grammar of the root narrative provides the political and moral meaning of the sentence, but because most people do not think of real political life in the focused and rarefied terms of one of the twelve root narratives, actual empirical accounts will most commonly combine complicated combinations of root narratives, even in single sentences. It is quite common for complete documents to combine many and perhaps all of the twelve root narratives in various proportions.

As a final qualification there is nothing in assumptions undergirding Root Narrative Theory that people have to be sincere in their storytelling. Although root narratives combine both premises and principles in coherent renditions of the course of human events, actors are assumed to potentially be as strategic and manipulative as they would be in any other theory of political action. We don't need to assume that people tell stories that they truly believe, instead telling stories they think their audience wants to hear, as Shakespeare's Richard III put it, "And thus I clothe my naked villany with old odd

ends stolen out of holy writ; And seem a saint, when most I play the devil." Even strategic and manipulative stories provide interesting points of reference for the student of character attacks, because they map the rhetorical ground (both theoretical and evaluative) on which such battles are fought: in Richard's case with holy writ, saints, and devils The root narrative structures present in empirical documents are interesting because they reveal the span of legitimate public discourse, the premises and principles with which actors can build arguments, that the documents' authors share with the audiences.

The Root Narrative Profile

The tendency for people to use varied and novel combinations of the twelve root narrative grammars as they develop political accounts provides the opportunity to empirically measure patterns of root narrative use with root narrative profiles. A root narrative profile is simply a form of narrative assessment, an empirical summary of the uses of root narratives in a document. Documents can come in many different forms, but any discursive object in which the moral dimensions of politics are discussed can be characterized with a root narrative profile.

Root narrative profiles can used on any type of discursive data. It is an extremely flexible tool for rhetorical analysis. A root narrative profile can be developed for a single document or for some set of documents simply by assigning some measure of the pattern of use of each of the twelve root narratives in the document or the set of documents. The particular measure can vary according to the preference of the analyst, but the most direct approach is to tally the proportion of any given document that can be reliably associated with indicators of the root narrative. This can be done through assigning codes to section of the document through qualitative content analysis of the document.

There are many good examples of qualitative analysis of ideological content and the techniques that are appropriate for developing root narrative profiles are similar to those (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Richards, 1999). The standard rules and choices for qualitative coding apply to a root narrative analysis as well, although there are some special considerations to keep in mind to apply to method accurately.

In the general application Root Narrative Theory to concrete documents, it is best to assign codes to whole sentences rather than to words or phrases—what in manifesto research are called quasi-sentences (Werner et al., 2011). In some cases, a word or a phrase may contain independent narrative content, as a kind of accent that draws

attention and emphasis away from the main narrative vector of the sentence, but usually speakers use something like sentences to convey a complete thought. This is important as a methodological issue because many, if not most, sentences contain more than one root narrative element. Most people are not ideologues and the stories they tell are full of mixed imagery and reference. Because we are coding for the narrative and not the policy preference, we have to follow the full thought of a sentence to capture the blend of imagery and symbolism that the rhetor is channeling. This natural syncretism of political thought confronts researcher with difficult choices about how to represent any given sentence, whatever method of qualitative content is chosen. As a default, the sentence should be assigned all codes that seem to fit subject to standard techniques of validation.

In general, the most reliable indicator of the presence of a root narrative are the elements of the protagonist function, both the character and plot elements, and character seems to matter more than plot. This means that if the coder can find evidence in the sentence that an injustice that has been done to a certain kind of victim/hero, the next question is who abused their power? Consider the following two sentences from the RNC Convention speech above:

> I have visited the laid-off factory workers, and the communities crushed by our horrible and unfair trade deals. These are the forgotten men and women of our country.

There is a class story here. The people are being cheated of their livelihood by someone. This is a story about the People as protagonist. The next question is who is cheating them? Although there might be some hint of business exploitation here, the real villain is foreign industry. We see this in the plot element of "unfair trade deals." The sentence could be made stronger by attacking the character of those who promote the unfair trade deals, but the gist of the sentence is clear enough in its present form. We should also stress that we are not coding the policy but rather the narrative into which the policy has been positioned. The policy is almost irrelevant in an era of truthiness. What matters is how argument and feeling come together in the story structure.

This example is also important in that it points to a feature of narrative dynamics. It may be easier to pivot from an argument within a protagonist category than across them. This means that a person who is upset about how big business is cheating the little guy might also be persuaded to simply shift antagonists to target foreigners as exploiters instead. This approach builds on a common problem or symbol of injustice, simply

shifting the argument by targeting a different character type: pivoting to a different villain. This has obvious implications for character assassination and political conflict.

Coding Template: Character Driven Story

	Victim-Hero/Protagonist			
Villain/ Antagonist	**The State**	**The Individual**	**The People**	**The Other**
Foreigners	**Defense**	Merit	Nation	→
Governments	→	**Consent**	Accountability	Liberation
Elites	Unity	→	**Reciprocity**	Inclusion
Masses	Stability	Property	→	**Recognition**
	SECURITARIAN	LIBERTARIAN	EGALITARIAN	DIGNITARIAN

Figure 1 Coding Template: Character Driven Story

Coding Template: Plot Driven Story

	Injustice (Nature of Suffering)			
Abusive Power (Means)	**Physical Deprivation**	**Political Coercion**	**Unfair Competition**	**Cultural Disrespect**
Armed Violence	**Defense**	Merit	Nation	→
Force of Law	→	**Consent**	Accountability	Liberation
Bargaining Power	Unity	→	**Reciprocity**	Inclusion
Dominant Culture	Stability	Property	→	**Recognition**
	SECURITARIAN	LIBERTARIAN	EGALITARIAN	DIGNITARIAN

Figure 2 Coding Template: Plot Driven Story

Once a document or a set of documents has been coded in a reliable way, the results can be tallied and represented in graphical form. One sensible way to do this is with a bar chart. The bars should be consistently ordered to preserve the visual structure of the spectrum of root narratives, with the height of the bar representing the proportion of the document covered by the root narrative code. The profile can be used in both four category and twelve category versions. An example can be seen in Figure 3, which represents the root narrative profile analysis of Donald Trump's speech to the Republican National Convention in 2016.

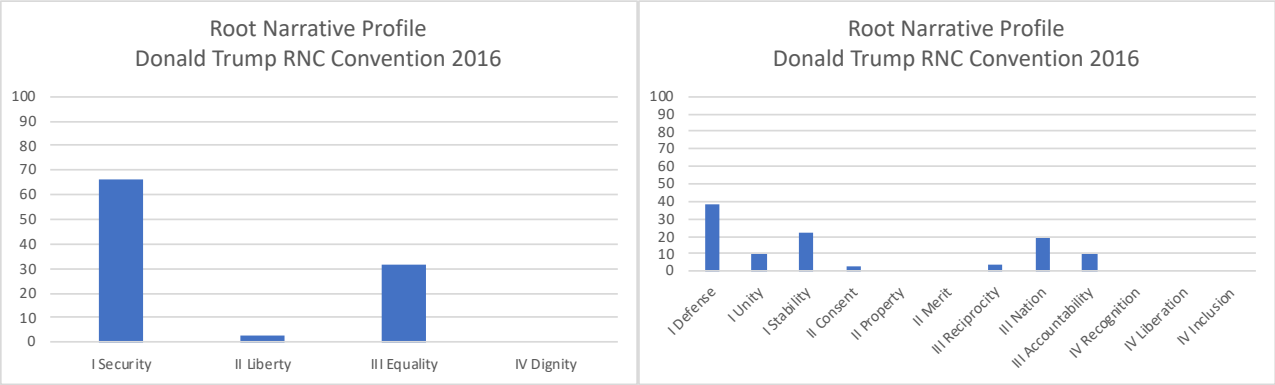

Figure 3 Root Narrative Profile: Donald Trump

These root narrative profiles tell us a lot, even if we take them on a naïve reading. By naïve reading I mean taking the profiles as a representation of what Donald Trump truly believes. On this reading we learn about how we should frame our own arguments when in conversation with the president. At a minimum, we learn that whatever policy proposal we make or however we would like to portray a person who we want Donald Trump to respect, we should use some blend of security and equality arguments as the moral-political grammar of our statements. Concretely this would mean that we should emphasize the problems (injustices) of physical deprivation and unfair competition. It also means that the characters who will have moral resonance in his stories are "the state" (or some broad representation of the collective) and "the people" (best understood as the common folk who are often subject to unfair treatment by elites). We can see this in the rough profile of the left panel.

The twelve-category root narrative profile is even more helpful in helping us to develop arguments and characterizations that would appeal to Donald Trump. Where the four-category profile might lead us to promote a variety of arguments that could easily

miss the mark, like general appeals to unity against division (Unity Narrative) or to class arguments that favor redistribution of wealth and restrictions on the wealthy (Reciprocity Narrative), the twelve-category profile protects us from that error. Convention Donald Trump of 2016 was no unifier, nor was he a class warrior. This might better characterize the profile of his potential rival Bernie Sanders. Instead, his arguments focused on how foreigners were coming to physically threaten us (Defense Narrative) and how these same foreigners were trying to cheat and replace us economically (Nation Narrative). The two most prominent categories of his profile were both defined against the foreigner or "the Other" as antagonist. Convention Trump was a securitarian with egalitarian elements to his profile, leading many to be confused about what form of populism he represented. Root Narrative Theory helps to bring specificity to ideological characterizations like these, taking the confusion out of thinking about populism and other ideological proclivities as well.

Of course, rhetors are often quite complicated and strategic in their communication. We don't know what Donald Trump really believes, and we can't rely on a single speech to represent the full population and distribution of his beliefs, but some discourse is more than revealing than others. We can learn from the root narrative profile of 2016 RNC Convention Trump what he believed his electorate wanted to hear, and he won. Enough of the people must have wanted to buy what he was selling. In this sense we can learn about the base of the Republican Party in rough outline with one very simple empirical measure that is readily available to the public. There are countless refinements one could imagine that we could make to hone in on the actual distribution of narrative proclivities or the current state of play in the development of the same, but the tool would remain as useful. Instead of attitudes that only reveal how people feel, we can use narrative profiles to learn how people think when they are feeling.

Root Narrative Profiles in Public Discourse

The root narrative profile is a data analysis technique that is anchored in current thinking about the literary dimensions of moral and political life. As a theory of moral politics that is based on overcoming radical disagreement it has a wide variety of uses, especially in settings where extreme political polarization is the norm. Because it builds on a ternary theory of narrative that breaks down the walls between reason and emotion, overcoming the Cartesian dualism that places the rational actor on one side and psychological behavior on the other, any document that makes claims about politics and society can be

coded and characterized with a root narrative profile. True, some documents are written in such dry and technical terms that there is not much codable content in them, but even in technical documents we find stray sentences through which the author justifies the study or argument or we find anchoring language that reveals a deeper purpose behind the technical argument and explains the origins of the research questions (Gerth & Mills, 1946). This means that technical reports and academic journal articles can also be rendered with root narrative profiles, revealing the values and purposes of the authors and editors. We can expect that technical and scientific documents will simply present less vibrant moral signals that overtly political discourse. They do not escape the moral context however hard they try. The following examples are intended only for the purpose of illustration of the range of documents that can subjected to a root narrative analysis. The root narrative profiles generated by the technique could then be applied to specific research questions for which the data might serve as evidence, but even outside of the context of a research project, one can imagine how to develop character attacks that would work within the worldview of the document analyzed.

An Interview: Bernie Sanders on Meet the Press 2019

We have already seen how a political speech by a major figure can be coded to produce a root narrative profile. We can do the same thing for interviews with political leaders with only a few modifications. An interview with the media is often characterized as neutral or balanced. The interviewer is not supposed to ask leading questions or to share a standpoint of his or her own. As with technical arguments, it is hard for any interviewer to stand outside the context of moral politics, but unless the analysts want to code the document to capture the interviewer's perspective or to track the dynamism of the question-answer process, the text from the question can be ignored (in which case proportion of document measures have to exclude those lines of text from the denominator of the ratio of coded text to total text), or the question can be coded in the same root narrative categories as the answer, that is the question can be treated as part of the story of the answer. The latter approach might be bit more crude as a measure, but it remains valid, especially when the ideological consistency of the answer is high (only one root narrative used). This was the case in this interview from the NBC television program, Meet the Press, from July 14, 2019, in which Bernie Sanders was interviewed about his presidential campaign. Figure 4 displays Sanders' root narrative profile for that episode:

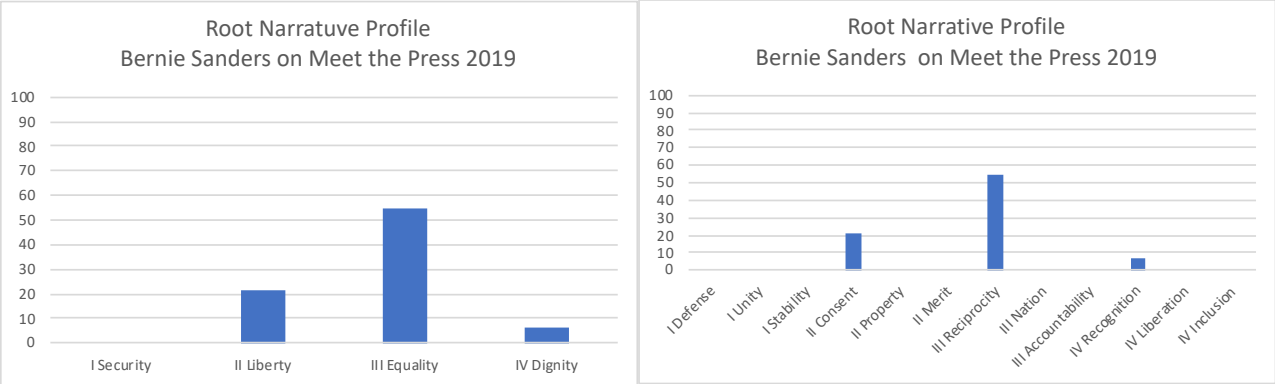

Figure 4 Root Narrative Profile: Bernie Sanders

Right away we can see that Sanders' message is quite different from that of Donald Trump's, represented above. Even though both speakers tended to emphasize equality stories in their speech, Sanders has no references to a security story at all. This is one difference between the populism of Donald Trump and the democratic socialism of Bernie Sanders. Moreover, the twelve-category profile provides even more fine-grained distinctions. In contrast to Trump, Sanders spends all the time in his egalitarian answers focused on reciprocity stories and none on nation stories. Concretely, this means that he speaks of the injustice suffered by working people, but he blames the rich for their plight rather than foreigners. This point seems obvious, but it is of the first order of importance, because the meaning of the movement each leads takes on the character of the root narrative profile that each leader presents. Consider this excerpt from Bernie Sanders' interview:

> And that is that the working class of this country is sick and tired of working longer hours for lower wages. They're sick and tired of three people in America owning more wealth than the bottom half of America. Sick and tired of 50% of American workers living paycheck to paycheck and being the only major country on Earth not to guarantee healthcare to all people. That is why we're going to win this election.

This is standard social democratic rhetoric through and through. And yet, it could easily to be turned to appeal to those who favor the nation narrative. One need only substitute the phrase "of three people in America" with something like "Chinese overlords" to change the entire meaning of the paragraph and the story. This subtle pivot might draw along an audience that is primed for egalitarian rhetoric, but it would shift the story is a fundamental way. The protagonist function is fundamental, but the antagonist can be

borrowed from one of the other three root narratives (subject to semiotic constraint) to fundamentally change the ideological impact of a story. Note too, that the main vehicle of the shift is character assassination, for Sanders of the wealthy few, for the populist, the foreign interest. Rhetors know this implicitly, and we can now measure it with the root narrative profile. The obvious implication is that a character attack made to the audience Sanders is cultivating would involve portraying the target as a member of an exploiting elite. The theory predicts that this type of attack would work better than others for Sanders and for his implied audience.

Social Media: A Few Days in the Life of Ilhan Omar 2019

When applying Root Narrative Theory to social media, there are features of the medium that force an adaptation of method to match the context, especially on Twitter. The messages there are forced to be quite short and pithy, and they often point to other documents to provide context. Although it may be off-putting to think about tweets as forms of literature, people on social media are primed for different styles of communication with literary features, in which humor, irony, and retorts are common features. These literary aspects of the very short documents can make interpretation challenging. The phenomenon of "trolling" captures this dynamic. Moreover, the short format and the hypertextual aspect of the medium sometimes makes it necessary to bring an intertextual approach to the data that would not be justified when coding a speech or an interview. Tweets and social media posts in general are commonly reposts of some other discursive context, which makes it necessary to characterize the tweeter's relationship to the original content. This is a particular problem in trying to make sense of retweets, which may or may not be endorsements. Although it is always preferable to stick to the text when assigning codes, these features demand that the narrative analyst sometimes take the tweet to which any given tweet is responding to into consideration when coding it. This will play a role in the example given here of a few days in the life of the twitter feed of Ilhan Omar drawn on September 22, 2019.

One nice feature about coding tweets is that they are often ideologically consistent and can be coded as a piece without consideration of the subtle moves in language that are typical of prose style or public oratory. A tweet is rewarded with likes and retweets when it is ideologically pure. It is also easy to work with tweets because the problem of the proportion that plagues textual analysis is solved. In a normal prose document or transcript, there are problems of scale in which a rhetor may drill down on one topic and

jump around the point on another. It can be difficult to determine which root narrative is being used in what part of the sentence. This affects the numerator of the proportion. Also, because so much of any given text might not really have any ideological content, the appropriate denominator can be hard to determine as well. In a tweet, the thing stands alone as a unit of discourse, and even though any given tweet may have several root narrative codes attached to it, the whole tweet can often be coded as a unit. This makes it trivial to calculate proportions of text that make up the root narrative profile.

All of these issues are in play in developing a root narrative profile of Ilhan Omar's twitter feed. For this profile, there are 15 tweets drawn from September 20 to September 22, and no retweets were included. This set of tweets contained many pictures that were reactions to an international set of protests to inaction on climate change. Because they appeared without comment, it was necessary to go back to earlier tweets in the feed to find the context of meaning that she intended with the individual post, which was not hard to do. This particular feed may also be a good example of how sampling issues can become critical in narrative analysis. There is no reason to believe that this profile is as stable a representation of Ilhan Omar's ideological orientation as were the previous two examples.

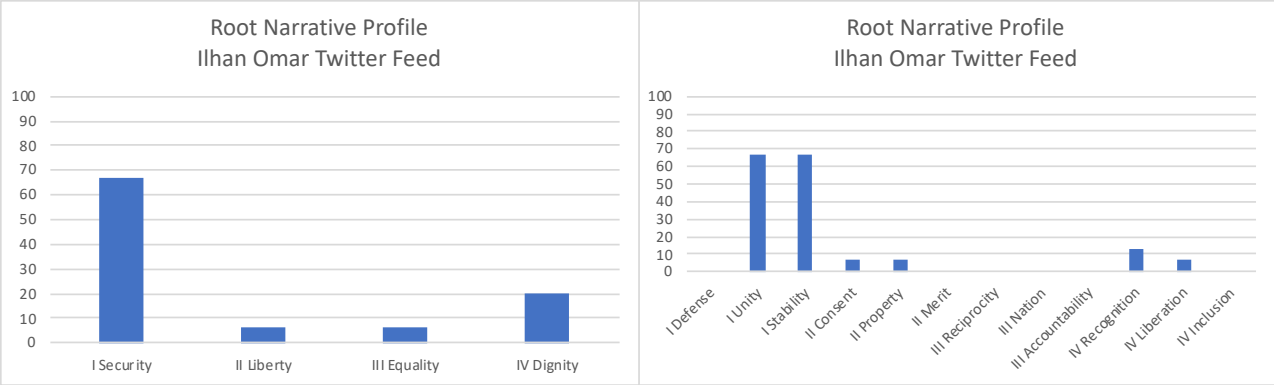

Figure 5 Root Narrative Profile: Ilhan Omar

This example is important in that it demonstrates how the root narrative categories are not flat entities that produce caricatures of the rhetor but categories of the moral imagination that can be deployed in extremely subtle ways. Omar's feed is dominated by securitarian thinking, but the sort that emphasizes unity and stability in order to protect human life. There are no foreign enemies that appear in her statements but there are threats to life and limb implied. Also, hers is the first of the three examples to focus on dignitarian thought. She takes time to speak to the issue of black girls taking pride in their

hair when worn naturally and of confronting the "Islamophobic agenda in schools" that appeared in a story she shared about Duke University. Omar's rhetoric feels different than that of the other two, and we can see this reflected in the root narrative profile of her discourse. Little wonder that the villains of her story are climate deniers and xenophobes. All of this suggests that if you would like to convince Omar of something, it might be prudent to adapt your request to mirror the root narrative profile she herself presents. Neither Trump's nor Sanders' models would be likely to be effective with her and vice versa. I hope it is clear that this small sample analysis provides suggestive evidence that the kinds of character attacks that the theory predicts will be effective for Omar and her audience will focus on selfish and destabilizing elements who fail to take the group dignity of their adversaries seriously.

Press Statements: The Treasury

One of the most promising aspects of narrative theory in general and root narrative theory in particular is the way it breaks down barriers of technical and popular argumentation. The fact-value distinction does not apply to narrative theory just as it fails in all intellectual models influenced by Hegel's phenomenological revolution. In practice, this means that we can code and characterize bureaucratic documents just as well as overtly political statements. In fact, in some cases the line between them is already effaced in practice.

As an example, consider the following analysis of a press release from the United States Department of the Treasury from September 17, 2019. This document is perhaps not the best example of a purely technical or informational document, but it is representative of the kinds of statements made by this bureaucratic office in the month of September, 2019. The title of the document is, "Treasury Releases Proposed Regulations to Reform National Security Reviews for Certain Foreign Investments and Other Transactions in the United States." The main target of these reforms is Iran, and we can immediately see how fiscal matters and ideological orientation can intersect. Figure 6 presents the root narrative profile of the document.

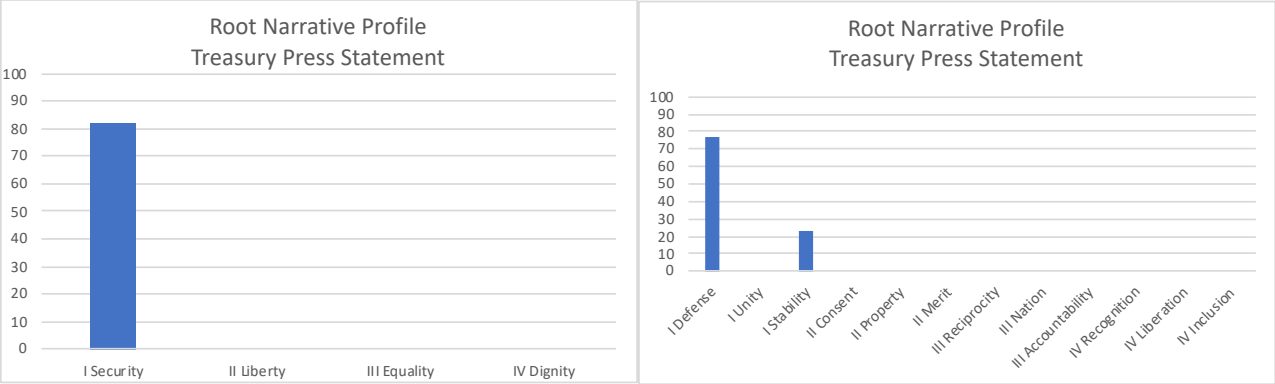

Figure 6 Root Narrative Profile: Treasury Press Statement

The issue of sample and generalizability are critical to keep in mind for this analysis as it was in the examples above, but it is striking to see how important a securitarian frame of mind is for this press release. In fact, one can almost read this as a war document, and given that the struggle between Iran and the United States has more to do with sanctions and economics than with weaponry, perhaps this makes sense. Character attacks that should work for this audience will be foreign adversaries, especially those who use economic means to threaten the United States and its interests. The United States Treasury is here concerned with the defense of the country and with the stability of the international economic system. It also demonstrates how easy it is to align economic issues with security, although this document may be atypical in that it focuses more on the Defense Narrative than the Stability Narrative. The latter is more common for economic arguments. However representative it is of all Treasury press releases, it would be hard to argue that this press release was only a technical and not an ideological document. Even technical accounts like these can function as the basis for character attacks, and those who align with this technical argument know how to craft them with little effort.

Academic Journals: The American Political Science Review

As a final point of illustration, we should consider social science journals as well. A premise of a ternary theory of narrative is the breakdown of the dualism between facts and values, reason and emotion. Like professional journalism, social science analysis has assiduously attempted to avoid value-laden accounts of social phenomenon, presenting findings as if they were the expression of a natural science likes physics or chemistry. As helpful as these precautions are, it is not possible to avoid values in the design of research

questions, nor is it easy to write in a way that avoids all codable content, both ideological and moral. To demonstrate this, Figure 7 portrays the root narrative profile for fourteen article abstracts from the American Political Science Review in 2019. Because the abstract of a top-tier social science journal can stand alone, it was not necessary to refer to the content articles for root narrative coding. The profile bars in Figure 7 represent the average proportion of the fourteen abstracts that could be coded into the given root narrative category.

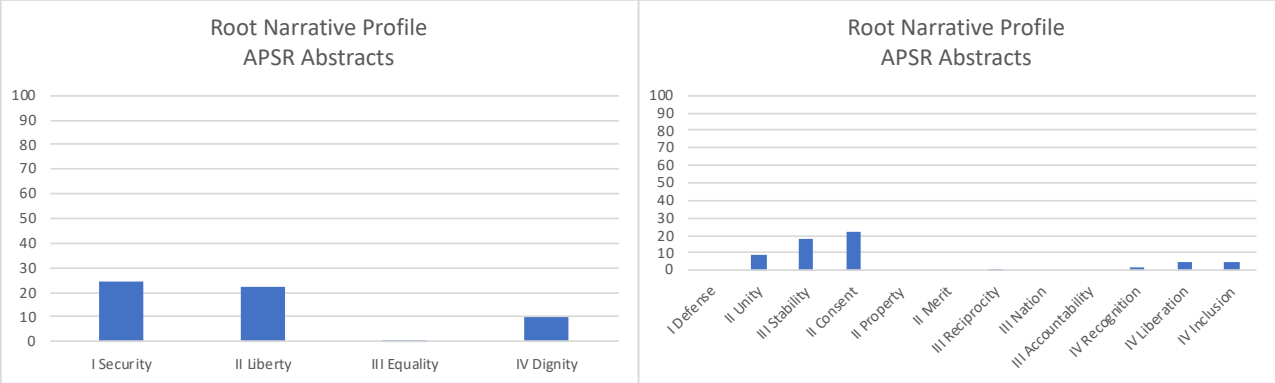

Figure 7 Root Narrative Profile: APSR Abstracts

Although it is true that overall, there is less codable content in these abstracts than in the other discursive sources, there is a clear ideological profile to them. This implies that although the American Political Science Review presents itself as a value-neutral vehicle of scientific opinion, in fact it has a fairly clear and distinctive ideological agenda. Its focus is on stories that explore evidence that supports both securitarian and libertarian agendas, although to a lesser extent, it also supports a dignitarian agenda. What is clear is that there is no class politics going on in the APSR in this snapshot. In that year, and with these articles, there is no evidence being adduced that would push forward an agenda that challenged capitalism, the rule of elites, or the economic challenges that are facing the struggling middle class form any source. A more in-depth analysis might turn up a more nuanced story or perhaps cycles of narrative attention in the journal, but this illustration providers us with evidence that social science is also an ideological enterprise, perhaps most importantly where it most tries to avoid it.

The conclusion of Root Narrative Theory would be that if an author intends to publish an article in this leading journal of political science, he or she should be careful to disguise any egalitarian signifiers that the argument might contain. It appears that the editors and reviewers are unmoved or unimpressed with such arguments and

characterizations. This is critical for the study of character assassination and reputation management because it demonstrates how character portraits are relevant even in the subtle arguments of supposedly value-neutral social science. This reveals how character portraits (if not direct attacks) will play important roles in settings like academic conferences. Character distinctions, defined by empirically verifiable root narrative portraits, will be deployed in research settings and should color or influence the interpretation of research arguments, research questions, and the researchers themselves. This implies that reputation management within social science itself is a topic worthy of study and the root narrative profile provides us with a tool for reflexive analysis, in which we make ourselves the target of investigation.

Conclusion

This paper develops a novel approach for the study of ideological data and moral politics, called the root narrative profile. The root narrative profile is a method for classifying the moral content of statements that rhetors make in various kinds of discursive data: speeches, interviews, social media, press releases, and publications. The method is based on a simple idea: the moral ambivalence of the uses of social power. Conflicts only become radicalized when parties disagree about the moral implications of the use of social power. When one side supports the rightness of the use of a form or power and the other side does not, conditions are ripe for mutual and incommensurable accusations based on narratives about the abuse of power by the other side.

No amount of unanalyzed contact between parties involved in a radical disagreement will solve their problems. In fact, contact will produce the opposite effect. The solution for one side is an injustice for the other. The more each side learns about the other's narrative, the character and plans of the other side, the more entrenched they become in their own story. Policies presented in such a setting will only gain traction if they align with the narrative of the intended audience. Character attacks and defenses will only be successful if they can be articulated with the story structure. Because of the centrality of narrative for moral opinion formation, those interested in intervening in polarized moral conflicts of this kind need tools with which to portray the moral worldviews of the participants. The root narrative profile is an easy-to-use tool for these purposes.

Root Narrative Theory and the profiles it generates build on a neo-Weberian taxonomy of forms of social power and a structural-performative theory of justice for the

way that moral actors come to terms with the ambivalence of social power. Because the four forms of power are so different from one another, the moral condemnation of their abuses produce radically different political stances. Rejections of the power of private violence produces a securitarian mindset. Rejections of the legitimated powers of government coercion produces a libertarian mindset. Rejections of the economic power of wealthy and well-connection businesses and families produces an egalitarian mindset. Finally, rejection of the status privileges of hegemonic ingroups and those benefitted by biased cultures and folkways produces a dignitarian mindset. From this mix we can recognize authors in history as diametrically opposed as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Karl Marx, and Frantz Fanon. Contemporary thinkers at all levels of representation in the public have opinions formed by these big four root narratives.

Most people have mixed and even contradictory worldviews, but the logic of their claims can be traced back to the root narratives, which implies that their moral values and narrative predispositions can be portrayed with the root narrative profile. A root narrative profile analysis is therefore quite useful as a tool for discovering which narrative elements will be helpful in providing color for the arguments and characterizations that are the main substance of political debate. The root narrative profile can be used to generate simple stories that reframe both people and policies in new moral contexts. Most importantly, root narrative profiles do not represent "rational" content—the policies—but the emotional-laden stories in which policies are positioned in discourse.

The root narrative profile is an attractive option for students of moral politics and moral conflict because it is designed to accurately portray the most radically opposed ideological positions in a coherent, systemic, and actionable framework. It is easy to use, requiring only small well-chosen samples of often publicly available text from which actionable generalizations can be made. Unlike similar approaches that been developed in the fields of cognitive science and moral psychology (Haidt, 2012; Lakoff, 2002), the general categories of root narrative theory are tied in direct ways to potential courses of political action.

In Root Narrative Theory, political values are postulated to derive from primitive criticisms of abusive power not from parental paradigms or evolutionary dispositions. Moral values and the stories they imply are easy to connect to political action, where parental images and moral emotions are not. For example, the libertarian imagination and the stories of the coercion of free individuals that animate it are easy to direct against the primary antagonist in the story: the government. It should therefore be little surprise that a neo-liberal movement led by the leading figures in the international community

would lead to local popular movements like the Tea Party in the United States. The story is the same; governments use force of law to create political coercion of the individual. A root narrative profile provides the analyst with a palette of the characters and plot elements that are most likely to resonate with intended audiences.

In the specific context of this special issue of this journal, the root narrative profile is important for the field of character assassination and reputation management as has been demonstrated in a range of discursive documents. The theory predicts that a successful attack on political reputation will rely on some combination of these stories and will only be successful insofar as it speaks to the root narrative profile of the audience in question. Those character attacks that do not resonate with the root narrative profile of the audience (defined in terms of the salience and legitimacy of each narrative in members' political imagination) will fail, while those that do match the root narrative profile will succeed. If these hypotheses are true, every student of reputation management will want to learn how to develop root narrative profiles both for themselves and their competitors and for the stakeholders who support them.

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