Towards a Revised Theory of Collective Learning Processes: Argumentation, Narrative and the Making of the Social Bond

The beginning of the story

Societies change; and sociology has, since its inception, described and evaluated these changes. In this article, we propose a revised theory of collective learning processes, a conceptual framework that addresses the ways in which people make sense of and cope with change, by drawing on Habermas' classic proposal while introducing the narrative form and its relevance for constituting the social bond.[1] We use this revised framework to understand why people react to events in the form of collective learning or collective non-learning, i.e. by reacting to such change through imagining either more inclusive or more exclusive social relations.

We agree with Habermas' basic idea that communication follows counterfactual, often broken, rules (openness, freedom, equality and sincerity in the raising of claims), which, if approximated, lead to the revision of knowledge (both factual and moral), enabling a broadening of the speaker's horizon and the overcoming of deception (Habermas, 1984: 22). More importantly, from a sociological perspective, we also draw on the argument that communication not only affects cognitive structures, but also social relations. People involved in communication based on these counterfactuals engage, first, in practices of mutual recognition as free, equal and competent speakers. Second, they simultaneously participate in practices of cognitive

decentring that lead to the expansion and interpenetration of their social worlds – hence, they learn 'to include one another in a world they construct together' (Habermas, 2003: 105).[2] In line with existing studies, we conceptualise the process of social relations being imagined as more inclusive in terms of collective learning,[3] and relations evolving towards exclusion as blocked learning processes.[4]

As social change is a permanent condition, we focus on how people make sense of it, and control it, through how they imagine their relations. In doing so, we take aim at Habermas' focus on rationality as unfolding in and through argumentation only; instead, we claim that this rule-governed activity occurs within social situations and interactions in which more than argumentation is at stake. In other words, we argue that Habermas' concept of discourse, i.e. the implicit rules of communicative action, needs to be embedded in a more sociologically robust theory of social interaction.

We do this by carving out a specific role for stories, for the narrative form. Stories are fundamental to the human condition (Fisher, 1987; Ricoeur, 1984; Barthes, 1977); and it is the networks in which they circulate, and thus provide the basis of everyday interaction, from which Habermasian discourse[5] arises whenever people disagree with these stories. Narratives are selective arrangements of events, arrangements which are, however, not simply chronologically ordered, but causally connected. They are thus event-driven structures through which humans make sense of time, as one event 'naturally' leads to the next. As such, events, relentlessly rearranged and

reconstructed (for an exploration of the 'nature' of events, see Wagner-Pacifici, 2017), are key within structures, but 'what happens' outside narratives might also have effects, i.e. real, imagined and mediated events can irritate existing stories, which thus need to be extended, and sometimes substantively transformed, in order to incorporate these new events into the plot.[6] This is what we refer to as the *event-driven dynamic* of narrative. Due to a narrative's emplotment, certain story-elements can be isolated from criticism, e.g. by naturalising certain ones or pre-emptively discrediting possible criticisms (e.g. concepts such as 'false consciousness' can have this effect). This, in turn, can also have consequences in terms of excluding some actors from discourse or elevating others to the status of unquestionable authorities. As we will outline below, the consequences of these features influence whether the learning potential of communication is triggered or blocked.

Indeed, as people tell stories to each other, they create shared cognitive structures (Strydom, 2011; see also O'Mahony, 2013 who develops this in the context of the public sphere) with the qualification that 'telling' should be understood here in a broad sense, encompassing written, spoken, visual etc. performances. These stories can be replaced by alternative stories (i.e. the aforesaid event-driven dynamic). One of the factors that change and might even transform narratives are arguments – which are themselves embedded in narratives and can only be understood as such.[7] By engaging in argumentation, people can learn collectively and thus tell new stories. Our

contention is that whether or not people are willing to engage in argumentation depends (partly) on the narratives they take for granted and through which they convey their positions. Stories create different subjectivities, which, in turn, account for why some people are more open than others to counterarguments and counter-stories.

To spell out the dynamics underlying collective learning more specifically, we propose a lens through which the effect of performing narratives on collective learning processes can be identified: narrative genres. That is, stories have a plot (or a number of interconnected plots) that link characters, events and objects to each other. From the emplotted nature of narrative it follows that stories can be classified into different narrative genres: the archetypical ones being romance, tragedy, comedy and irony/ satire (Frye, 1957). More specifically, we analytically differentiate narrative emplotment along the two key dimensions characterising stories: the axis of *hero/ine* (the main character projecting a positive self-image or not) and *resolution* (how the narrative ascends, i.e. a happy ending is present/ promised or not; is the story reassuring or irritateing?). Romance features a heroic, self-assured protagonist whose actions fulfil wishes and result in triumph. Comedy – not to be reduced to the cultural artefacts disseminated by Hollywood – too features a happy ending, though the protagonist(s) are characterised by a slightly more ambivalent status, as these stories feature internal conflict which, however, is ultimately overcome. Tragedy depicts the fall of the hero/ine and thus offers no happy ending. While this fall does

contain the possibility of resignation, it does also include the potential for reflexivity and agency. Finally, irony points to ambivalent and non-heroic actors, thus staying in a shiny world of clear-cut triumph and joy.

Our contention is that whereas comedy (to a certain extent) and romance (especially) allow for the blocking of collective learning, tragedy (to a certain extent) and irony (especially) allow for such processes. In the following, we will develop such a model schematically; though, as we note below and seek to explore separately (Engelken-Jorge et al., in preparation), 'real-world' stories can be, for example, comic to various degrees and contain elements of different genres – the effect of which remains an empirical question.

From an empirical perspective, the concept of collective learning opens new research avenues aiming to understand the processes of change (or lack thereof) of shared cognitive structures, allowing for the intermingling of argumentative and non-argumentative elements. Of course, it is one thing is to define a theoretical perspective that can guide empirical research towards answering such questions; it is another to apply such a framework systematically in the context of an empirical research project. While we are not able to offer such a project here, we will briefly refer to examples that are subsumed under the notion of 'populism', from both the left and the right, throughout this article. Why is it that stories, e.g. in the context of political communication by populists in present-day Europe, enjoy steady support, even though their 'alternative facts' have been proven wrong? The current

prevalence of the diversity of populisms, the different ways in which left- and right-wing populism rearticulates social relations, makes it an ideal case to illustrate the empirical application of our theoretical project. To do so, we will draw on short examples from both left-wing populists, the case of the Spanish party Podemos, and far-right populists, the case of the German *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD, Alternative for Germany). While our intuition is that a revised theory of collective learning processes will be a useful tool in such a research endeavour, we will conduct a detailed application in a second paper (Engelken-Jorge et al., in preparation).

In the following, we, first, review existing literature on (collective) learning processes and their distortion. Second, we present our revised theory of collective learning processes and their blocking, starting with a discussion of the narrative form. Against this background, we identify and focus on narrative genres. After a discussion of these genres and their role in our conceptualisation, we close with a summary of the main ideas and hypotheses derived from these sections.

(Collective) Learning Processes and their Distortion: The Story so far[8]

A normative, sociological notion of (collective) learning processes, and their blockage, can be traced back to the 1970s and, in particular, to the 1980s (Strydom, 1987). Habermas' initial theory of learning processes was basically individualistic, drawing on the cognitive psychology of Piaget (and Kohlberg) and its concern for developmental processes. In *Communication*

and the Evolution of Society, Habermas (1979: 121) situates learning mechanisms at the psychological level. This learning might then find its 'way into a society's collectively accessible store of knowledge. (…) It is only in a derivative sense that societies "learn".' Following criticism, including from within (Strydom, 1992), this research programme developed into a more 'collective' direction. Before going into more detail, let us, however, introduce Habermas' general take on communication so as to better understand the working (and blockade) of learning processes.

Habermas' reformulation of Critical Theory attempts to lay the foundations of this research programme at a deeper level by identifying implicit rules in the act of every language game, i.e. rationality based on the presuppositions of argumentation (inclusiveness, equal communicative rights, sincerity and freedom from repression and manipulation). Participants implicitly have to assume that they are contributing freely and equally, that they are participating in a cooperative search for truth and/or rightness, and that the interlocutor is raising claims that s/he considers to be true, right and/or truthful. Without such presuppositions, communicative acts such as lying, manipulation or cheating could not be identified as something deviating from our implicit assumptions about appropriate behaviour in communicative situations (Habermas, 2008: 26f). They offer theoretically justified implicit criteria through which communication processes can be evaluated, not only by the observer, but also by actors in the respective communicative situations.

These assumptions thus constitute unavoidable idealisations that exert an influence – usually a weak one – over communicative interaction.

The concept of collective learning assumes that communication perceived in this way is a conflict-ridden process of permanently evaluating claims and counterclaims made by actors in a communicative situation. This does not necessarily mean that actors are 'driven' by the goal of reaching a mutual understanding. By arguing with each other, putting forward new perspectives and assessing them, social actors construct, challenge and modify their common cognitive structures. They might consequently enable more inclusive worlds – or not.

The collective nature of learning processes, as well as their blocking, has been especially elaborated by Eder and Miller. The latter (Miller, 2006 and 1986) has extensively worked on actual interaction as the source of new (moral) insights by observing how children's argumentative abilities develop in the face of dissent. Thus, this notion of learning refers neither to the accumulation of knowledge, nor to the recovering of what actually happened, but to the changing quality of social relations (becoming more or less open); the possibility to transcend existing beliefs by realising the potential of the quasi-transcendental conditions of intersubjectivity. Eder (1985, 1996, 1999 and 2007) offers a related criticism of individualist notions of learning, pointing to collective learning processes as processes of circulating cognitive claims through networks of social relations.

People can learn by communicating with each other (and can certainly learn different things), but they do not necessarily do so. By communicating with each other, actors are sometimes forced to decentre their initial perspectives in order to understand other actors' claims. Irrespective of whether or not these claims are finally accepted, cognitive decentring implies the distancing oneself from particular points of view – hence, the inclusion of other actors' perspectives. Besides, cognitive decentring rests upon the prior recognition of the other as a competent speaker, i.e. upon her prior inclusion in the linguistic community. It is against this background that we understand collective learning as referring, among other things, to the changing structure of social relations, be it in an inclusive or an exclusive way.

Elaborating on collective learning processes, both authors have also explored the distortion of the potential inherent in communication, i.e. the blocking of collective learning processes (Miller, 2006: 227-257; 1986: 207-443; see also Eder, 1985: 422-469). Miller initially proposed a model closely linked to the three validity claims in Habermas' work. Here, blocked learning processes were seen in terms of rational exchange being distorted by limiting the generalisability of knowledge by an authority (authoritarian learning), by limiting the objectivity of knowledge due to a reliance on ideologies, traditions or beliefs (ideological learning), or by limiting the truth/ consistency of statements (regressive learning). Recently, Miller (2006: 241; for an application, see Forchtner and Schneickert, 2016) distinguishes between two mechanisms of legitimation (i.e. allusions to the authority of a

[corporate] actor or the authority of certain ideas or institutions) and two mechanisms of closure (i.e. consensus pathology and disagreement pathology), which leads him to identify four ideal types of learning blockages. *Dogmatic learning* refers to those situations where a consensus cannot be seriously questioned due to a legitimising reference to the authority of an actor. In the case of *defensive learning*, discourse is blocked through reference to the authority of an idea or social institution. *Ideological learning*, in turn, refers to those cases where the existence of antagonism between specific actors or ideas cannot be questioned on the basis of the legitimising authority of a given idea or social institution. Finally, *regressive learning* leads to the exclusion of the other as a legitimate interlocutor. This typology clarifies the characteristics of blocked learning processes. We claim, however, that through integrating the dimension of narrative genres, we address a dimension that is conceptually prior to the mechanisms of legitimation and authority, and can therefore offer a model explaining how learning blockades come into being, one that goes beyond identifying pathological paths of learning processes.

Towards a Revised Theory of Collective Learning Processes: The Narrative Embeddedness of (Blocked) Collective Learning Processes

If discourse is understood as exerting a weak influence over social actors, then one might ask whether this counterfactual scenario is 'unrealistic'. However, this would miss the point concerning counterfactual rules. Yet, one

can indeed ask whether Habermas' proposal gains its strength by producing a cost: the undercomplex conception of social relations, which are modelled as social relations of argumentation.

Therefore, we argue that Habermas' concept of discourse needs to be embedded in a sociologically more robust theory of social interaction. In his account of modern societies, Habermas (1984, 1987) himself uses the concept of lifeworld to provide a sociological underpinning of 'real' relations of argumentation. We propose shifting the focus towards looking at the form through which social interaction in lifeworlds unfolds from arguments to story-telling, thus putting the narrative form centre-stage. That is, we turn to the narrative organization of social relations – and examine narrative's role in collective learning processes, be it to enable or block collective learning.

The Narrative Form

The idea, in short, is that shared stories create cognitive structures in which people live (Eder, 2009; Forst, 2015). Stories organise not only the objects and events around social actors ('$event_1$ happened which then led to $event_2$'), but also the social bonds between individuals ('we share a common language and have lived here forever, so we are a nation'). This narrative world can be disrupted by other narratives – or arguments – ('we too were immigrants once, and received shelter, and thus we should now offer shelter to others), and as such, narratives can also be used as part of arguments, and vice versa.

Beyond providing space for argumentation, stories decisively structure the social space in which deliberation and learning take place.

> Without some basic understanding of what the other says, without some narrative fidelity, people do not succeed to talk with each other. Discourse is much easier among people who are culturally homogeneous than among people of highly diverse backgrounds. (…). The strength of the narrative bond is the basic variable explaining the working of discourse, the construction of a consensus of a dissensus, a situation in which people can argue about what they disagree upon. (Eder, 2009: 75)

This does not preclude the possibility of arguments being context-transcending, thus affecting the world in a way not reducible to their specific context of genesis. Our point, however, is that even arguments so conceived are then incorporated into stories, which again structure the social space in which deliberation and learning can take place.

In line with Forst (2015: 86): justification in and of normative orders cannot be appropriately understood without (the concept of) stories. By recognising the significance of narrative, we point to its inherently social, interactional, role, which allows putting events into meaningful relations. To point to narrative is thus to point to the ways in which events are related to other events. In other words, the selective arrangement of events into stories

implies a 'natural' movement from one story-element to the next. Narratives are thus emplotted configurations of characters, objects and events, they are 'significant whole[s]' (Ricoeur, 1979: 24). These plots or series of related events are judged not according to their truth correspondence, but according to their ability to generate meaning (Barthes, 1977: 124). As such, the 'life' of a story depends on 'whether the stories [people] experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives' (Fisher, 1984: 8). The influence of stories therefore varies according to their 'narrative fidelity'.

The event-driven character of stories implies that new characters, objects and events (be they new, rediscovered or invented) can significantly modify storylines and become turning points in the generation of meaning. Stories are irritated not only by the formulation of counterarguments, but also by, for example, the occurrence of new events or the emergence of new characters that, for whatever reasons, cannot be ignored, thus forcing storytellers to accommodate them into the plot. These irritations are not a guarantee for collective learning processes; rather, they offer options to allow for processes towards either inclusive or exclusive social orders – and might even end up blocking further learning processes.

An example is the foundational manifesto of the Spanish left-wing populist party Podemos, *Making a Move: Turning Indignation into Political Change* (Monedero et al., 2014), which was built upon the interpretation and interconnection of two major events – one in the past, the other one in the future – and led to the appropriation by Podemos of the narrative constructed

by the 15M movement. The first event is the rise of the 15M movement itself, regarded as an expression of political discontent and a demand for political change. The second event is the 2014 European elections, which were going to be held, according to the signers of the manifesto, in the absence of any candidacy capable of representing this demand for change. A new party, Podemos, was able to 'turn indignation into political change'. In Germany, the supposed 'rescue' of the euro, following the financial crisis of the late 2000s, by taxpayers and, even more so, the opening of German borders to refugees in 2015, are key events which enabled the rise of the increasingly far-right populist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD; Alternative for Germany). As these events have been narrated by various actors in terms of threats and the possible 'end of Germany', the AfD ultimately succeeded in attracting enough voters to enter the German Bundestag in 2017.

Notwithstanding these examples, we assume that not only highly salient events, but also the accumulation of more trivial ones, can change stories (see Peters, 2007: 202). Finally, it should be added that such events are not simply about 'what really happened', but about what is presented as having happened. This indicates the central role that the media play in collective learning processes and their blocking (even though we cannot offer any particular consideration of mediated communication in relation to collective learning processes here).

The consequences of this event-driven temporality of meaning-creation for collective learning are ambiguous. It can contribute to eroding

the narrative fidelity of specific stories, which are expected to resonate with familiar ideas and narratives, as well as to fit unfolding events (Gamson, 2006). When events not anticipated by a story or events occur, this story's narrative fidelity is challenged (ibid.: 123-124). Some reflexivity on the part of its supporters is probable, as they can be expected to interpret the said event in light of their story or to change the latter to fit the former. However, this event-driven temporality can also constrain discourse, as communication can move on to 'new topics' or 'easy solutions' before any meaningful, mutual examination of arguments has taken place.

Besides, stories also organise characters (as well as objects) into a single plot or a limited number of interconnected plots, thus structuring the social bond between these characters, e.g. the (affirmed) hero/ine, our 'friends', 'enemies', 'people who are like us' and actual or potential 'allies' or 'onlookers'. We thus expect stories to constrain the set of interlocutors that social actors consider legitimate, and thus to limit the set of arguments and counterarguments that social actors are willing to consider or that they pre-emptively discard. For instance, characters such as 'fake media', which are represented as untrustworthy and plotting to promote specific interests, are 'pre-discursively' excluded from the community of dialogue (Russell and Montin, 2015). As Miller's (2006) concept of learning blockages suggests, ideas too can be 'protected' and excluded from discourse, e.g. due to a belief in the existence of a nation or class antagonism. Following Miller, we thus argue that stories have a *cognitive mapping* function, which constrains the

learning paths that are possible in each case, for they limit what can be circulated in social relations and what cannot.[9]

Based on this fundamental function of *cognitive mapping*, the narrative organisation of social ties points to a further, albeit closely related, element in social communication that has been underrated in the Habermasian type of communication theory: the role of feelings.[10] After all, through the telling of stories, feelings are (re)organised in social relations. A narrative perspective can correct for this since narratives also organise feelings, thus producing different subjectivities that can facilitate or block collective learning. Different feelings and feelings of different intensities will emerge from different stories and depend on these stories' actual articulation and processes of interpretation. These feelings can range from triumphant self-complacency and self-pity to fear, doubt and even horror, as well as blissful relief. Indeed, stories organise feelings, which can also promote learning; the ability to question oneself – to decentre oneself – is a case in point. Of course, they can also lead to the opposite, as in the case of populist narratives, which depict *us* as innocent victims of sinister elites. Specific stories might lead to the emotional protection of certain elements and promote heavy emotional investment, be it negative or positive, in certain actors, which, in turn, systematically distorts public discourse. In consequence, we assume that in liberal democratic public spheres, where a high degree of political freedom is institutionalised, learning (blockages) can be traced back to how feelings are narratively organised.

In sum, our theoretical proposal is to regard collective learning as embedded in a narrative arrangement of events that allows for the expression of feelings. By paying attention to this specific dimension of stories we should be able to advance our understanding of how both collective learning processes and their blocking unfold.

Narrative Genres[11]

Plots are at first glance idiosyncratic and case-specific. They usually vary according to each story – the characters presented in each plot are different, they are built upon different (arrangements of) events. Yet, they tend to show recurrent forms, i.e. they are organised in narrative genres, which are also referred to as *modes of emplotment* (White, 1973) or *narrative archetypes* (Frye, 1957). Narrative genres thus provide a formal dimension, which facilitates cross-case comparisons. Our contention is that some narrative genres are better at blocking/ triggering learning potentials than others. That is, due to the cognitive mapping of the world that constrains what can be circulated in social relations and what cannot, the feelings these genres provoke will influence the type of social change made possible.

Narrative genres make the unfolding of stories predictable and create a link between story and audience. These links are conventions and trigger certain cognitive-emotional reactions. In particular, we are interested in how narrative genres affect the degree of coherence or decentredness of the idealised subject with which the audience should identify, and the emotional

states that audiences experience when exposed to these narratives. More abstractly, genres give rise to emotional states along the line of *uncertainty*, i.e. a rather unsettled state, which encourages reflexivity, versus *certainty*, in which the self experiences the joy of clear-cut boundaries and of good (*us*) versus evil (*them*). While Forst (2015: 86), also working within a broadly Habermasian framework, has linked narrative to learning processes too, we go a step further in arguing that different narrative genres enable different levels of identification and types of relationships between and within actors. As such, narrative genres organise feelings, which help actors to become subjects with different degrees of readiness to either idealise the self or view it self-critically, to be assured of what one is or to become open to others' perspectives.

Our expectation is that narrative genres are associated with the capacity to add new elements to the existing world of meaning around us in a way that can ultimately enable more inclusive social relations (learning processes). This capacity of continuing stories in light of new events can be blocked to different degrees. Since Frye (1957), it is common to distinguish between four genres: romance, tragedy, comedy and irony (Forchtner, 2016; Forchtner and Eder, 2017; Frei 2015; Jacobs, 1996; Smith, 2005; White, 1973).[12] Already, Jacobs and Smith (1997) linked romance to certainty and solidarity (they point, e.g., to nationalism), whereas irony is viewed as enabling self-reflexivity (i.e. uncertainty). While they consequently speak of 'learning process[es]' in general terms, our theoretical, Habermas-inspired

framework provides an analytical grasp of such processes and offers an explanatory hypothesis: comedy, and even more so romance, is better at blocking collective learning processes, while tragedy and, most of all, irony foster dispositions that reduce the possibility of blocking collective learning. Let us outline these genres in more detail.

Romance structures stories of idealised, pure hero/ines who face clearly demarcated, evil others. Although there might be setbacks, the story tells audiences how things should be. Thus 'subtlety and complexity are not too much favoured' (Frye, 1957: 195), there is no space for nuance here, no need to 'think again'. Feelings of certainty and unambiguity thus strive.

In contrast, tragedy lacks the clarity and fixed path of future events associated with romance. It depicts a world of failure and suffering, and an ambiguous hero/ine; a story at times marked by resignation, and at times marked by moments of (difficult) choice. Such dramas 'tend in the direction of intermittent existential ambiguity and turmoil (recognition of opposing imperatives)' (Wagner-Pacifici, 1986: 280). While these hero/ines and their quests are characterised by ambiguity, they do offer lessons to the audience. White (1973: 9), e.g., explicitly speaks of tragedy as providing 'a gain in consciousness to the spectator'. These lessons might end in the stereotypical resignation so often associated with the tragic genre, visible, e.g., in statements such as 'people like me cannot influence the government's activity', 'politicians do not care much about the opinions of people like me' and 'politics is so complicated that people like me cannot understand it'. Such

feelings of political impotence and alienation are present across the West – statements that can be summarised as 'politics is in itself tragic', i.e. no happy ending can be envisioned for political engagement. And yet, observing a hero/ine failing does offer opportunities for revival – the 'gain in consciousness' identified by White – and agency. This is visible in the tragic conceptualisation of the Holocaust, as reconstructed by Alexander (2002). According to this narrative, the Holocaust has become 'a "trauma drama" that the "audience" returned to time and time again' (ibid.: 31). No path leads beyond tragedy in this narrative of the Holocaust, among other things because this historical episode attests to the 'dark and sinister forces that are *also inside of ourselves*' (Alexander, 2002: 31; *italics* added). It is especially this latter form of tragedy that is able to allow collective learning processes to go on (or to restart). A similar function can be attached to the ironic mode, which, by definition, offers a critical distance to the world out there.

However, tragedies can evolve further: after the fall, a rebirth can take place. This is the comic resolution of initially tragic stories and this genre thus has as its theme (re)integration and rebirth. As such, laughter is not the defining feature of comedies, i.e. the latter cannot be reduced to horseplay and Hollywood movies; rather, comedies are about obstacles that are ultimately overcome, implying movement from a social world in which the subject's desires are blocked to another world which allows those desires to be realized (a 'newborn society rising in triumph' Frye 1957: 192). Comedy involves a transition from a specific social equilibrium, presented as

problematic, to a superior one. An important aspect is, thus, how this transition takes place. Luck can be one reason (Frye, 1957: 169) and, as such, the internal problem could, at least partly, persist. In other words, the overcoming of division would not actually lead to a consensus shared 'happily ever after', but rather constitute a consensus fiction. In cases where luck is not part of socially shared narratives, comic narratives offer ways of deproblematising the current status as a happy ending is promised (due to allegedly, hard-won learning processes). In this sense, comedy is more flexible than romance in that, while problems exist, they can be overcome without radically othering the opponent. This genre, as it tells the story of a hero/ine who might not be quite as pure as the romantic one but ultimately overcomes difficulties and facilitates a happy ending, is nevertheless rather similar to the romantic one in its foregrounding of certainty.[13]

Finally, irony's key characteristic is an attitude of detachment, a feeling of distance. Irony makes a parody of, first and foremost, romance and the latter's attitude of certainty. Echoing Frye (1953: 224), irony gives 'form to the shifting ambiguities and complexities of unidealized existence'. Irony is 'the non-heroic residue of tragedy, centring on a theme of puzzled defeat' (ibid.: 224), and thus undermines clear definitions of what is right and what is wrong; it prevents the in-group from perceiving itself as 'good' by simply othering *them*. Instead of black:white, grey dominates. Formally too, however, irony is far more complex in that it has no clear plot structure (ascending, descending, down-and-up-again) but rather has a corrosive effect

on other genres. That is, ironic elements interrupt (to varying degrees) romantic, tragic and comic plots, they 'open up' ways of understanding (including 'feeling'), something which is most clearly visible in the case of romance. Here, Frye (1957: 223) himself notes that the 'ironic myth is best approached as a parody of romance'. In some way, irony results in happy endings and triumphant self-assurance being prevented, as the hero/ine is impure and the storyline irritates. Irony is thus reflexive, subversive and anti-naive in its juxtaposing of different perspectives, and thereby facilitates ambiguity and fragmentation. As such, like tragedy but arguably much more forcefully, irony too facilitates uncertainty and ambiguity.

To better understand this effect of narrative genres, and to – ultimately – benefit empirical analyses, we suggest analytically separating stories along two axes. Here, the four archetypical narrative genres are schematically mapped onto a space opened by a *hero/ine*-axis (the hero/ine of the story being pure or impure) and a *resolution*-axis (the sequence of events causing irritation or reassurance), something that helps to understand the way in which these genres help to block or unblock collective learning processes (Figure 1).
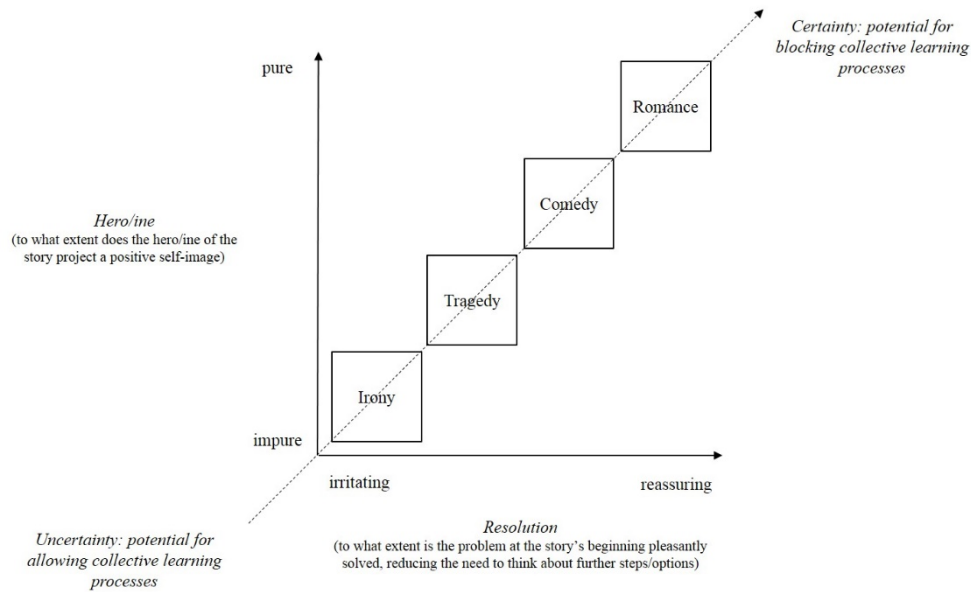
Figure 1: A schematic representation of the link between narrative genres and collective learning processes

The hero/ine-axis depicts the extent to which the main protagonist of a story offers a positive self-image that invites uncritical identification. This axis refers to whether stories problematize the behaviour and moral dispositions of their characters; in particular, whether stories end with a hero/ine characterised by an unsolved internal conflict or not, a subject position which projects certainty or not. In turn, the horizontal axis depicts the resolution of the story, i.e. the absence or presence/ promise of a happy, even triumphant ending, through which a demand for further concern, in the eyes of the audience, is made redundant (a 'reassuring' resolution) or not (an 'irritating' resolution). Thus, this axis too feeds into certainty/ uncertainty by projecting the success or failure of actions taken or suggested. The way we represent this

in Figure 1 is schematic and we are thus not suggesting that 'real-world' stories are necessarily emplotted in clearly demarcated ways. Rather, while a story might be, overall, emplotted as a comedy, 'the comic' will actually be presented in a variety of ways (depending on, e.g., names given to actors, events etc; metaphors used; and so on) and there might well be, e.g., ironic moments flashing through a, e.g., predominantly comic story. To stay with this example, some comedies might thus be 'purer' than others.

As indicated earlier, the idea that certainty/ uncertainty is related to collective learning has been formulated by several scholars from different theoretical perspectives. Almost two decades ago, Eder (1999) made the argument, contra Habermas, that it does not suffice that people communicate with each other to trigger learning processes, they should also wonder how to continue their interaction; that is, uncertainty is a necessary condition for collective learning. Otherwise, social actors are likely to follow routines. In line with this view on certainty/ uncertainty, Douglas (2002: 200) states that '[p]urity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise', thus making clear that certainty, the lack of ambiguity, hinders the exploration of even considering change. A similar argument is put forward by Swidler (1986: 283), who, drawing on Kuhn, contends that 'beliefs about the social world (…) do not seem to depend directly on their descriptive accuracy'. Rather, 'belief systems' are likely to be revised when they fail to support 'strategies of action' that social actors find adequate. This is the case when they cannot derive clear rules from their belief systems, which allow them to continue

their everyday interactions smoothly. In other words, when uncertainty arises in everyday interactions, social actors are likely to revise their narratives. From a different theoretical perspective, the so-called Essex school of ideology (Glynos, 2001) takes the capacity of certain discourses to make contingency invisible – hence, to produce certainty – as the key element to understand their 'gripping' power, i.e. their 'power to transfix subjects' (ibid.: 192).

In sum, stories that produce certainty, i.e. pure hero/ines and easily affirmable storylines through, e.g., happy endings, tend to block collective learning processes, i.e. audiences lured into imagining clear-cut, exclusive symbolic boundaries. Narrative genres that structure stories in such ways are comedy and, most forcefully, romance. In contrast, stories that produce uncertainty, i.e. hero/ines and storylines not easily affirmable, lack the joy of a happy ending and thus force a search for other ways to get on in a world that keeps irritating. Narrative genres that structure stories in such ways are, potentially, tragedy and, more clearly so, irony.

As mentioned above, when looking into 'real-world' stories we discover that they combine elements from different genres, oscillating, more or less, between genres that are indeed analytical abstractions. Far-right narratives, e.g., often oscillate between romantic (the heroic nation) and comic narratives (the coming rebirth of the nation). In turn, left-wing populists also oscillate between the romantic and comic genres – yet with moments of irony.

Turning to populist parties, their populism is defined as establishing a dichotomy between 'the people' (pure and innocent) versus 'the elite' (selfish and degenerated) – while the populist actor knows the ultimate will of 'the people' (Mudde, 2007). If only the elite could be overcome, far-right populists claim, the nation would rise again (see Özvatan and Forchtner, 2019). This is visible in, e.g., one of the two top candidates of the far-right AfD during the 2017 federal election, Alexander Gauland. The latter, following promising exit polls, spoke of the party's intention to 'hunt Mrs. Merkel [the Federal Chancellor and symbol of 'the elite']' and claimed that '[w]e will take back our country and our people [Volk]'. Podemos, too, tells stories about 'the people' opposed to ill-meaning elites. It claims to be the chief representative of the people – or at least to be the 'only political space of opposition to the looting and parasitism of public institutions [by the 'criminal organisation called Popular Party]'. And it clearly delegitimates many of its political opponents. The ruling political party, the Popular Party, is taken to be a 'criminal organisation', associated with the 'old way of ruling Spain', which is 'immoral' and 'rotten' (depending on how one's interprets Podemos' messages, the Socialist Party and perhaps even Ciudadanos can also be taken to be part of this 'immoral' and 'rotten' 'old way of ruling Spain').

Yet, while these romantic demarcations between 'good' and 'evil', 'right' and 'wrong', coexist with comic narratives that tell the story of the gradual downfall of either Merkel's Germany or the Spanish regime that

emerged from the 1978 constitution, and foretell the advent of a better future facilitated by the AfD or Podemos, it is only in the latter case that ironic elements play a role. That is, passages where the aforementioned romantic and comic stories are deflated, where the 'cosiness' of these storylines is interrupted, parodied by a grain of irony. This is best captured by Pablo Iglesias' statement following the 'March for Change' in 2015. There, he clearly adhered to what Canovan (1999: 10) calls democracy's 'redemptive' face – 'democracy is a redemptive vision, kin to the family of modern ideologies that promise salvation through politics'. Yet democracy, in Podemos' view, is also linked to a constructivist ontology: alliances and coalitions have to be built, people have to be seduced and persuaded, and battles have to be (democratically) fought. In short, political identities have to be created and negotiated – not simply posited or discovered – in an uncertain and precarious terrain. Hence, Iglesias' ironic remark: 'we dream like Don Quixote, but we take our dreams very seriously.'

Conclusion

Why do similar events in some cases lead to the emergence of inclusive collective actors/ politics, whereas in other cases they lead to exclusive collective actors/ politics? To answer this, we have drawn upon a specific theoretical tradition: the theory of collective learning processes. Yet, what we have ultimately sought to do was to revise this theory, to propose a conceptual framework capable of guiding empirical research. Thus, to make sense of why

communication sometimes triggers learning processes, yet often also blocks them, we should see the rational dimension of communication as embedded in narratives.

Narratives structure the social bond and prescribe how actors are to behave; they emplot events, actors and objects, and they do so by resorting to recurrent genres; they consequently organise feelings. Throughout the text, we have examined these features, noting their ambivalent consequences in terms of promoting inclusive/ exclusive orders. In particular, we have contended that narrative genre is the key dimension to determine whether stories are ultimately able to trigger or block collective learning processes. Our argument is that the narrative form does influence whether people are willing to 'open up' their horizons to each other, more specifically, that romance and comedy are better at blocking learning processes than tragedy and, in particular, irony, which has the potential to allow for collective learning processes. After all, the former offers certainty as the affirmation of a pure hero/ine and a happy ending facilitates a (more or less) positive self-image, while tragedy and irony comprise an irritating storyline populated by an impure hero/ine (Figure 1). Thus, instead of certainty, uncertainty reigns. However, there is no need to think about a story's emplotment as being pure and, consequently, resulting in absolute (un)certainty. Figure 1 is only a schematic representation and stories will usually contain elements of different narrative genres; for example, romances can be 'performed' in different linguistic/ multimodal ways, more or less stressing the greatness of the

hero/ine, and they might even be 'interrupted' by ironic moments as, e.g., is visible in Iglesias' aforementioned statement.

Throughout our argument on genres and their relation to collective learning, we have assumed a *Wahlverwandtschaft* between stories and practices, whether the latter is concerned with telling further stories or, e.g., taking to the streets in protest against this or that. The question of how collective learning is actually performed and scripted, in particular contexts and in front of particular audiences, needs, however, further discussion. In this paper, we simply refer to work in the field of narrative analysis, which has long claimed a link between the cognitive dimension of the narrative form and everyday action. One of the most concise statements in this tradition was made by Ringmar (1996: 66) who notes that it 'is through stories that we make sense of ourselves and our world, and it is on the basis of these stories that we act', thus describing narrative as a 'causal mechanism' linking thought and action. This link, however, points to the fact that narratives are not only *emplotted* differently, but also *staged* differently (Alexander, 2004; Hajer, 2009). Whether modes of staging, in addition to plots, have any learning promoting/ blocking consequences, and why they have these effects (if any), has to remain the subject of subsequent enquiry.

As such, the revisions we have proposed remain part of a project in need of further development. We hope, however, that introducing the narrative form in general, and narrative genre in particular, to the theory of

collective learning processes opens up new perspectives for theoretical and empirical work on social change.

References

Alexander, J C (2002) On the social construction of moral universals: The 'Holocaust' from war crime to trauma drama. *European Journal of Social Theory* 5(1): 5-85.

Alexander, J C (2004) Cultural pragmatics: social performance between ritual and strategy. *Sociological Theory* 22(4): 527-573.

Barthes, R (1977) Introduction to the structural analysis of narrative. In Barthes R (ed) *Image, Music, Text*. London: Fontana Press.

Canovan, M (1999) Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy. *Political Studies* XLVII: 2-16.

Douglas, M (2002) *Purity and Danger*. Oxon: Routledge.

Eder, K (1985) *Geschichte als Lernprozeß? Zur Pathogenese politischer Modernität in Deutschland*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Eder, K (1996) *The Social Construction of Nature*. London: Sage.

Eder, K (1999) Societies learn and yet the world is hard to change. *European Journal of Social Theory* 2(2): 195-215.

Eder, K (2009) Rational action, communicative action, and the narrative structure of social life. In O'Tuama S (ed) *Critical Turns in Critical Theory: New Directions in Social and Political Thought*. London: Tauris.

Eder, K (2007) Cognitive sociology and the theory of communicative action. *European Journal of Social Theory* 10(3): 389-408.

Engelken-Jorge, M (2016) Two approaches to communicative rationality: Analysing democratic deliberation and collective learning processes. *Revista Española de Ciencia Política* 41: 141-158.

Engelken-Jorge, M, Forchtner, B, Eder, K and Özvatan, Ö (in preparation) Populism through the lens of collective learning theory: a sociological look to the right and the left.

Fisher, W (1984) Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument. *Communication Monographs* 51(1): 1-22.

Fisher, W (1987) *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Forchtner, B and Eder, K (2017) Europa erzählen: Strukturen Europäischer Identität. In Platzer H-W and Hentges G (eds) *Europäische Identität in der Krise?* Wiesbaden: VS.

Forchtner, B and Schneickert, C (2016) Collective learning in social fields: Bourdieu, Habermas and critical discourse studies. *Discourse and Society* 27(3): 293-307.

Forchtner, B (2016) *Lessons from the Past? Memory, Narrativity and Subjectivity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Forst, R (2015) Zum Begriff eines Rechtfertigungsnarrativs. In: Forst R (ed)

Normativität und Macht. Zur Analyse sozialer Rechtfertigungsordnungen. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Frei, R (2015) *The living bond of generations. The narrative construction of post-dictatorial memories in Argentina and Chile*. PhD dissertation. Available from: https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/bitstream/handle/18452/18333/frei.pdf?sequence=1 (assessed 14 October 2018).

Frye, N (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gamson, W A (2006) Movement impact on cultural change. In: Pfohl S, van Wagenen A, Arend P, Brooks A and Lackenby D (eds) *Culture, Power, and History: Studies in Critical Sociology*, Leiden: Brill.

Glynos, J (2001) The grip of ideology: A Lacanian approach to the theory of ideology. *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6(2): 191-214.

Glynos, J and David H (2007) *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*. London: Routledge.

Habermas, J (1979) Towards a reconstruction of historical materialism. In: Habermas J (ed) *Communication and the Evolution of Society*. London: Heinemann.

Habermas, J (1984) *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume I. Reason and the Rationalization of Society.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, J (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume II. Lifeworld and System*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, J (2008) Communicative action and the detranscendentalized "use of reason". In: Habermas J (ed) *Between Naturalism and Religion: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, J (2003) *Truth and Justification*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Hajer, M (2009) *Authoritative Governance: Policy-making in the Age of Mediatization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jacobs, R N and Smith, P (1997) Romance, irony, and solidarity. *Sociological Theory* 15(1): 60-80.

Jacobs, R (1996) Civil society and crisis. Culture, discourse, and the Rodney King beating. *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (5): 1238-1272.

Kølvraa, C (2017) The discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau. In: Wodak R and Forchtner B (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics*. Oxon: Routledge.

Kuusisto, R (2009) Comic plots as conflict resolution strategy. *European Journal of International Relations* 15(4): 601-626.

Mackie, G (2006) Does democratic deliberation change minds? *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 5(3): 279-303.

Laclau, E (1990) *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time*. Verso, London.

Martin, J L (2002) Power, authority, and the constraint of belief systems. *American Journal of Sociology* 107(4): 861-904.

Miller, M (1986) *Kollektive Lernprozesse. Studien zur Grundlegung einer*

soziologischen Lerntheorie. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Miller, M (2006) *Dissens: Zur Theorie diskursiven und systemischen Lernens*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

Monedero, J C et al. (2014) *Mover ficha: convertir la indignación en cambio político*. Available from: https://www.scribd.com/document/199547061/Manifiesto-Mover-Ficha (accessed: 15 March 2018).

Mudde, C (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Mahony, P (2013) *The Contemporary Theory of the Public Sphere*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

Özvatan, Ö and Forchtner, B (2019) Towards a 'happy ending'? The far right in Germany. In: Waring A (ed) *The New Authoritarianism. A Risk Analysis of the Alt-Right Phenomenon. Volume II*. Stuttgart: ibidem.

Peters, B (2007) *Der Sinn von Öffentlichkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Ricoeur, P (1979) The human experience of time and narrative. *Research in Phenomenology* 9: 17-34.

Ricoeur, P (1984) *Time and Narrative. Volume 1*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Riessman, C (2008) *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. California: Sage.

Ringmar, E (1996) *Identity, Interest and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden's Intervention in the Thirty Years War*. Cambridge University Press.

Russell, M and Montin, A (2015) The rationality of political disagreement: Rancière's critique of Habermas. *Constellations* 22(4): 543-554.

Smith, P (2005) *Why War? The Cultural Logic of Iraq, the Gulf War, and Suez*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Strydom, P (1987) Collective learning: Habermas's concessions and their theoretical implications. *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 13(3): 265-281.

Strydom, P (1992) The ontogenetic fallacy: The immanent critique of Habermas's developmental logical theory of evolution. *Theory, Culture & Society* 9: 65-93.

Strydom, P (2011) *Contemporary Critical Theory and Methodology*. Oxon: Routledge.

Swidler, A (1986) Culture in action: symbols and strategies. *American Sociological Review* 51(2): 273-286.

Thagard, P (2006) *Hot Thought: Mechanisms and Applications of Emotional Cognition*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Wagner-Pacifici, R (1986) *The Moro Morality Play: Terrorism as Social Drama*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wagner-Pacifici, R (2017) *What is an Event?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

White, H (1973) *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Zerubavel, E (2006) *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---

[1] There have been various proposals to differentiate story and narrative. However, following contemporary conventions, we use the two terms interchangeably (Riessman, 2008: 7).

[2] As we briefly indicate in our conclusion, we assume a link between cognitive states (the imagining of social relations as more inclusive or more exclusive) and actual practices (the 'work' towards a more inclusive or exclusive order based on how these relations are viewed).

[3] Other authors (e.g. Miller, 2006) perceive learning in a broader way, assuming that communication processes that systematically deviate from Habermasian counterfactuals should also be regarded as specific cases of learning. This leads to some paradoxes, like defining 'regressive learning' as 'unlearning' (*verlernen*; Miller, 2006: 246). To avoid these inconsistencies, we have opted for a narrower conception of learning (as inclusive) and will refer to communication processes evolving towards exclusion as 'blocked learning'.

[4] To block learning, and thus not-to-learn, does not imply that these actors simply 'do nothing'. Rather, to block learning requires work as well – e.g. counterarguments and counter-narratives have to be discredited, dishonest intentions have to be attributed to critics, and events challenging one's preferred narrative have to be reinterpreted. However, as we will outline in the following, such 'work' contributes to maintaining a narrative that promises comforting 'certainty' (instead of irritating 'uncertainty'), and thus blocks the incorporation of others' perspectives.

[5] In line with Habermas' own usage of the term 'discourse', we use it to refer to an idealisation that is clearly counterfactual or to allude to empirically observable communicative interactions that to some extent approximate to

these counterfactual idealisations, i.e. in which the give and take of arguments play a significant role.

[6] This understanding is reminiscent of Laclau's notion of *dislocation* (Laclau, 1990: 39-43). Dislocation denotes the destabilisation of existing meaning which, as Kølvraa (2017: 100) put it, 'literally throws it [discursive structure] "out of joint"'. A massive earthquake might be one example; a case of political corruption unveiled – or invented – might be another.

[7] In fact, stories can also be part of arguments, and narratives are not devoid of reasons.

[8] This chapter draws on Forchtner (2016) and Engelken-Jorge (2016).

[9] What the precise mechanisms linking stories to the exclusion of certain narrative elements from discourse are is still an open question (for various proposals, see Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Mackie, 2006; Martin, 2002; Thagard, 2006; Zerubavel, 2006).

[10] Although there is no shared terminology, it is now customary to distinguish between terms such as emotions, feelings, affects, sentiments and so on. Given the character of this article, however, we use them interchangeably.

[11] This section draws on Forchtner (2016).

[12] In the following, we ignore satire – which Frye (1957: 223) describes as 'militant irony' – as this genre runs counter to irony's effects (for a detailed discussion of satire, see Forchtner, 2016: 222-224).

[13] It is worth noting that our understanding of the comic genre differs from Kuusisto (2009) who, working on IR, welcomes comic plots as a conflict resolution strategy which brings actors together. While this might indeed be welcomed, our conceptualisation focuses on more abstract, cognitive, feeling-related consequences of the various genres, thus viewing comedy as a mode which tends to block collective learning processes.