


POLITICAL NARRATIVES AND CONCRETE DEMOCRATIC HOPE

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This paper is part of a book symposium on Manuel Almagro's *The Rise of Polarization: Affects, Politics, and Philosophy* guest edited by Miguel Núñez de Prado Gordillo (University of Granada) and Manuel Almagro (University of Valencia)

ABSTRACT

A central thesis of Manuel Almagro's *The Rise of Polarization* concerns the power of narrative to drive the phenomenon known as affective polarization. Societies are affectively polarized to the degree that they are divided in their emotional attitudes towards each other—to the degree, in other words, they see the other side as untrustworthy, ignorant or hateful. While other views of polarization tend to emphasize the importance of identity politics and misinformation as drivers of affective polarization, Almagro argues that people's rational engagement with, and commitment to, political narratives is a further dimension of polarized societies. As such, Almagro's book is essential reading for anyone trying to understand our current political dynamics. Yet, Almagro's focus on the importance of what he calls "abstract" political narratives also raises some complex questions about the nature of narratives, the possibility of political criticism and the power of authoritarian movements. In this essay, I ask some of these questions, exploring the extent to which Almagro's account can answer them. I end by suggesting that, at least in the United States, the weaponization of narratives has reached a new turning point.

Keywords: misinformation; political narratives; polarization.

1.

Americans like myself have recently discovered what it is like when a significant portion of one's fellow citizens are no longer committed to a democratic way of life. We are experiencing what many others in the world have experienced before, seeing their country slip over into authoritarianism, and marveling at how so many Americans seem just fine with that.

This shared experience by members of my Lefty political tribe is in many ways similar to an experience Manuel Almagro recounts early on in his remarkable and incisive new book (Almagro 2025).¹ He describes revisiting his family in Ceuta, after having been away some years studying philosophy in Granada. He had always believed, based on their generosity to immigrants and community involvement that they held roughly left-wing political views. He returned to find his parents embracing views similar to Spain's far right:

They hadn't changed much about their everyday lives, though (...). They continued collaborating with NGOs and helping those in need. The change was evident at the *abstract* level (...) their actions and judgments in concrete, everyday situations remained largely unchanged. This shift, in their abstract discourse, however, was enough to influence their voting behavior. During that family gathering, one relative mentioned his intention to vote for the extreme right-wing party Vox in the upcoming national elections. I couldn't believe it. (2)

Almagro uses this experience as the narrative frame and motivating puzzle of the book, which itself concerns the power of narrative to drive the phenomenon known as affective polarization. Societies are affectively polarized to the degree that they are divided in their emotional attitudes towards each other—to the degree, in other words, they see the other side as untrustworthy, ignorant or hateful. While other views of polarization tend to emphasize the importance of identity politics and misinformation as drivers of affective polarization, Almagro argues that people's rational engagement with, and commitment to, political narratives is a further dimension of polarized societies.

Political narratives, similar to what some call "deep stories" are not, Almagro notes, independent of identities and beliefs (see Hochschild 2016). But they aren't reducible to them either. They are a way of

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references are to this book.

reinforcing people's emotional reactions to political events, and connecting those reactions by incorporating them into a story. On the far right in the U.S., these stories have heroes (white people) threatened by others (immigrants) but whom emerge victorious because of the Great Leader (Trump).

Ignoring the role of narratives, Almagro warns, can cause us to oversimplify the phenomenon in a number of ways. It may encourage us to falsely think that the endorsement of political ideologies is purely emotive, and that much abstract political discourse really amounts to something like cheerleading. Or it may encourage us to see affectively polarized people as epistemically deluded, or poor thinkers—as people making judgments without recourse to evidence. And it may cause us to miss the fact that polarizing narratives can be both manufactured or simply encouraged by political actors for political gain. Those who can tell a story have power, and those that can use stories to further divide us may even have more.

Finally, underestimating the importance of narratives, Almagro warns, can blind us to our own. Almagro, with refreshing self-awareness, makes it clear that it not just his family that had changed while he was away at university. He had too, “I had adhered to an abstract narrative that made sense given my experience and way of life” (134). This leads him to a central conclusion of the book: that affective polarization can be rational. But in saying so, he hastens to add, he isn't denying that our embrace of political narratives isn't a matter of motivated reasoning: “There's no neutral alternative to motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning is simply human reasoning” (134). Two groups of people can rationally adhere to inconsistent narratives of what is going on politically.

Almagro's personal narrative is a familiar one to many Americans on the Left. Here too some of us find family members and friends committed to Trumpism's creed of cruelty and isolationism, while seeing those same people still engaging in charity, working and living with immigrants, basically seeming to go about their personal lives as usual. As such, Almagro's book is essential reading for anyone trying to understand our current political dynamics.

Yet Almagro's focus on the importance of what he calls “abstract” political narratives also raises some complex questions about the nature of narratives, the possibility of political criticism and the power of authoritarian movements. In this essay, I ask some of these questions, exploring the extent to which Almagro's account can answer them. I end

by suggesting that, at least in the United States, the weaponization of narratives has reached a new turning point.

2.

Almagro's account of political narratives builds on his account of narratives in general. The general account is Wittgensteinian, in that it holds that narratives provide "a *framework of reference* from which certain phenomena can be understood and viewed under a certain light (...) *they do not describe states of affairs but rather reorganize them in a specific way (...)*" (70, emphasis in the original). This suggests that narratives aren't truth-conditional. They aren't true or false; but they can organize or illuminate what is. Invoking Wittgenstein, Almagro suggests they are what shows (illuminates), not what is said.

Examples of political narratives are those that "include the myth of immigrant invasion" and "climate change denialism" (74). But again, political narratives are "not necessarily bad. Dangerous political narratives are those devised and employed to divide public opinion, destabilize the democratic system and perpetuate injustice" (74). Note the language here. Dangerous narratives aren't dangerous because they themselves are false. They are dangerous because they make sense of things that are false (the assertion that climate change is a hoax, for example) and persuade people to act on those falsehoods.

How then, one might ask, do people relate to narratives? Belief seems not to be on the table, since to believe is to take on a positive attitude towards a proposition's truth. But narratives, we've been told, aren't true (or false). I can no more believe them, therefore, than I can believe a sunset. I can appreciate them, I can act in accordance with them, I can turn away from them. But I can't believe them.

With this in mind, it is interesting to find Almagro arguing that we place subjective credence in narratives, where credence, unlike full belief, is a matter of degree. We can, as he sometimes puts it, have more or less *confidence* in a narrative, and our confidence often increases the more the narrative makes sense given our identities and experience. That's interesting in part because credence is generally understood as degree of *belief*—and that in turn, as Almagro notes, has been understood as the subjective probability that one assigns to a *proposition's being true*. The higher the probability assigned, the more credence (degree of belief) one has in the proposition. And Almagro does certainly want to say that we often do sincerely believe our political narratives (or have some degree of

belief in them, at least). But how then, does that square with an account of narratives as frames with truth-values? To put it somewhat differently, if narratives aren't what is said—aren't propositional—then how can we think of them as propositions we can evaluate as probably true?

Almagro seemingly anticipates this worry when he notes that “the basic idea (...) is that the level of subjective probability in a certain political narrative—i.e. in the core ideas of a certain political narrative articulated in a certain way through such a narrative—indicates the degree of membership of a particular identity” (101). This indicates that confidence in narratives is not directed at the narrative itself but its core ideas (or propositions)—that which it organizes into a story. Moreover, on Almagro's account, we don't consciously place our confidence in narratives (or their ideas). Our confidence is a factor of our degree of membership in a social identity (being a Trump supporter, or a progressive, or a Christian and so on). We don't just wake up and decide what narratives we have confidence in. Our contingent situation, our past, our experience, our present identities, makes that decision for us.

Almagro is keen to emphasize that for this reason two people can be completely rational in placing their confidence in distinct and incompatible political narratives. But here he leans perhaps a bit too much on the credence approach: “two people can have exactly the same information about a certain proposition and still assign quite different subjective probabilities to it without being irrational” (100). Indeed, as he notes, this can happen when we assign different weights to the evidence, or because they possess what I've called elsewhere different epistemic principles (Lynch 2012). But if so, and if something similar happens in the case of political narratives, that raises another question: if, in short, people can sometimes be equally rational in their confidence in different political narratives, can they not also sometimes be irrational in their attachment to a narrative?

On Almagro's account, this could presumably happen when there is a mismatch between one's identity and the narrative one endorses. And indeed, partisans accuse each other of such irrationality all the time—the Right points out that the “woke” Left's insistence on respectful language is inconsistent with its narratives of free inquiry; the Left points out that workers on the Right who endorse pro-Tariff narratives are often undermining the very manufacturers they wish to support.

But incongruence between identity and narrative is not the only rational fault of climate denialists and fascists. They also, I venture to suggest, believe certain false propositions without evidence.

It seems there should be some room for that fact in our narrative.

3.

Here are some things that seem plausible: people can be equally rational in endorsing conflicting political narratives. Those narratives are appealing to us because of our past history and identities. But those narratives can also lead us to believe falsehoods, or to deny that there is any truth beyond what the Great Leader says is true, or any number of other absurdities. And that can be irrational.

The key to being able to say all these things is to be careful about what one means by “rational”. It is a slippery word, “rational”—much like “justified” or “reasonable”—can be used in quite distinct ways.

I sometimes like to say that loyalty to our self-identities can make it practically rational for us to be epistemically irrational (Lynch 2019). By this, I mean that it can be in our self-interest to commit to ideas or ideologies which are nonetheless epistemically unjustified in that they are the result of unreliable belief forming practices. It can be in our self-interest to do so because those ideologies reflect who we aspire to be. To deny them would be to deny ourselves.

Almagro, at points, wants to go further—he wishes to argue that our embrace of ideologies built on falsehoods can also be epistemically rational—in at least one sense. Here the epistemic rationality in question is that of subjective probability, as we noted above. A more traditional way of putting the point would be in terms of *subjective justification*, where one is subjectively justified in having confidence in P to the degree to which one’s own experiences, subjectively understood evidence and other beliefs support P. Subjective justification is relative—it is contingent on what experiences and belief one already has.²

It is uncontroversial that two people can be equally subjectively justified in having confidence in (or believing) P and not-P respectively. Yet I suspect Almagro thinks this is something we on the Left sometimes seem to forget. We think that somehow our opponents are always less clever, or less educated, less appreciative of the facts. But as Kahan (2013) and others

² The distinction can be found in the work of Goldman (1986), Alston (1985) and others. A critical discussion of the distinction can be found in Richard Feldman’s (1988).

have shown, clever, educated and highly knowledgeable people are often more polarized and less persuaded by evidence than others.

This is all important. But it is also important, especially at this political moment, to note that not all political narratives come of a piece epistemically. That's because in addition to subjective justification, there is also the objective question of whose narrative is best supported by reliable (that is truth-conducive) methods of inquiry. Almagro calls this "Irrationality*": Partisans hold conflicting narratives that cannot be true at once, and therefore one side must be driven by unreliable and negligent epistemic methods" (82). (To this, I add that sometimes conflicting narratives are both mostly false, as I'm sure Almagro would agree—sometimes both sides get it wrong).

Almagro thus implicitly notes this epistemic distinction between subjective and objective justification, but at points he seems to minimize its importance. In his view, to acknowledge Irrationality* implies that people on one side must be "bad knowers" (82) and that they are therefore at epistemic fault. Moreover, "polarization is a fundamentally social phenomenon" and

narratives are often deliberately crafted to bring extreme ideas into the mainstream, thereby dividing public opinion for political gain. From this perspective, the question of whether individuals are polarized due to epistemic deficiencies becomes less significant. (87)

Almagro's point here could be put like this: when it comes to polarization, the action isn't found around the question of whether we should or shouldn't blame individual believers for employing—perhaps inadvertently or without conscious deliberation—unreliable epistemic sources or methods. The action is found around the issue of who is producing divisive narratives and why.

I agree wholeheartedly. Humans are constructed from crooked timber. So we can rest assured we are all worse reasoners than we'd like to tell ourselves. What matters therefore is what is happening on the societal level. What matters is the weaponization of polarization.

My agreement, however, comes with two important caveats. On the question of individual blame, I'm sure Almagro would agree that it depends on who the individual is. If, for example, the individual is an anti-vaccine, anti-science Health and Human Services Secretary in the U.S. government, in charge of the health care of hundreds of millions, then we

can and should blame him for employing shoddy or nonexistent epistemic practices. And the blame here will be both moral and epistemic.

The second caveat is the question of the reliability of epistemic practices as actually crucial for understanding, and therefore combatting, weaponized polarization. In most cases, (but, as just noted, not in all) the issue isn't whether this person or that is using reliable practices. The question is whether a given society is protecting and promoting reliable epistemic practices in general—in the law, in schools, in museums, in scientific institutions and in universities. At the present moment, the United States government is actively undermining reliable epistemic practices, or simply abandoning them, in all of the above institutions. That, besides being a key and longtime tactic of fascism, is also the very best way to further deepen the gulf between ordinary Americans. For it makes every point of information a spear in the war against the other side.

4.

Almagro's book, in addition to its obvious virtues of being a model of interdisciplinary scholarship with both empirical and philosophical results, is also a model of how to weave personal narrative into one's argument in a way that is at once deeply engaging and on point. Doing so allows Almagro to return again and again to what he noticed when he returned to his family after living in Granada—the discrepancy that sometimes exists between polarized people's abstract ideologies and their concrete, everyday judgments.

There is indeed much to be said about this incongruity on both the Left and the Right. I want to end, however, by noting that, at least in America today, we are witnessing a shift. The weaponization of polarized discourse by Trump and his government is no longer content with simply getting otherwise good people to embrace authoritarian ideology in the abstract—and hope that's enough to get them to vote their way. All political leaders, once they do seize power, turn their attention from achieving it to wielding it—and in the case of authoritarians, that means turning their attention to domination. What such authoritarians know more than most is that complete political domination requires making people embrace authoritarianism in *concrete* form—that is, in their everyday lives. It means not just getting your followers to talk about “invasions” happening in another part of the country, but getting them to not vaccinate their kids, no longer talk to their politically different neighbors—and even, as we are starting to see in some cases, reporting those same neighbors to the secret police. It means turning the abstract into the concrete.

Yet this same point also shows us what we defenders of democracy must now try to do. Our charge, surely, is to resist this tactic. And one way to do that is to find ways of highlighting the everyday concrete moral judgments our fellow citizens still manage to make even when they are in the grip of abstract authoritarian ideology. In their ordinary lives, at least some of those who voted for fascists may still find themselves defending people in their own community that the abstract fascist ideology tells them to hate. When that happens, we must, as Almagro's book suggests, celebrate that fact—not the vote for Trump, or Vox, but the humanity that such a voter, if we are lucky, shows in hiding their immigrant neighbor when ICE comes knocking. Where that happens, there is still hope. Rather than sneering at such voters' political gullibility, we must use such moments to remind people that it is, in fact, *people* that matter most, not ideologies. We must push for the concrete over the abstract.

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