



FORTNIGHT

ON NARRATIVES

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I grew up in a country escaping an embarrassingly long dictatorship. For a record 42 years, Portugal was ruled by a fascist-inspired regime that installed poverty and piety at home, and war in Africa. Its ideologues brandished a narrative that glorified a Portuguese race destined to evangelize and civilize a tropical South. It was a heavy and proud sacrifice.

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This narrative crowded the Portuguese public space. Its representation extended into schools and monuments, law and custom, art and sport. One might question if anyone went along with the tale, as we have never lacked ideologies that fail to convince, and dictatorships don't poll their citizens. It might have been fear alone that kept the regime in control—not the appeal of its official line.

Born after the 1974 revolution, I have only ever heard the echoes of it. With some hesitation—loss of identity is a terrible loss—the generation of my parents and teachers turned from the past. In high school my geography teacher, a former combatant in the colonial wars, rounded up racial myths with feelings of bitter loss; while a history teacher of socialist sympathies replaced a curriculum on Portugal's colonial past for a world history where Portugal was invisible.

There was no longer any unifying narrative for Portugal, as it deconstructed and reconstructed itself into a European nation. No longer leering into the Atlantic Ocean—and towards the riches of Africa, Asia and America—the new imagination sought routes into the European Continent. The Portuguese are now trying their best to become *European*, thus rescuing from the rubble of their twentieth century some pieces of social democracy and economic development.

For years, the title that has seconded my name with professional authority—whether on the business card, visa or employment contract—has been “researcher.” I have been a postdoctoral researcher, visiting researcher and junior research fellow. In practice, “research” means roaming archival rooms and library corridors, looking for a past that is more physical than you would expect. Dusty pieces of paper are powerful objects. They summon you to take overseas flights, spend nights at cheap motels and sit for hours, arching in adoration.

To research is also to worry about writing. I am told that most people live happy lives without ever considering that not all narratives are created equal.

It is a common assumption that if a text reads well, it is because the material is good, or the writer has talent. Not so in historical writing. I have been drilled in the craft of sizing up narratives, measuring them in scale and depth. You can imagine that my anxiety about narratives rests on biographical and political bedrock. The national narrative of modernity, which I know best, is like no other; a cultural baggage that had to be thrown aside. But it took French theory and Italian history for me to realize the problem with Portuguese grand narratives.

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Sometime in the early years of my doctoral studies, I bought a copy of Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). I am a compulsive buyer of books that either look good or look old, and that edition of *The Archaeology* beamed from the shelves with warm, appealing undertones. Foucault was a sensory writer with a penchant for gore, misery and tragedy. He staged many stories within asylums, prisons and hospitals. Not so in *The Archaeology*. It is a "desertified" text, and a chore to read. Yet despite itself, *The Archaeology* rocked my world.

I did not find in it the methodology I was searching to make my research whole. No: It set me on a course completely away from grand narratives.

At that time, I had just heard about "whig history," a term coined in a 1930s controversy about nineteenth-century British historiography. Among historians, "whiggishness" was—and remains—a term of abuse; one to be hurled upon politicians, journalists and other amateurs. In the original controversy, the term was meant to tar the chauvinism of historians close to the Whig Party who read Britain's past as an inevitable march towards a Parliamentary monarchy, the empire, the gold standard and free trade. Today, the noun and the adjective denounce any narrative of progress and closure as anachronistic.

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However popular, I have never used the term, it has always been distant to me. I never studied the nineteenth century. I never studied political history.

The Archaeology, with its austere formalism, was a better starting point for me. It was about ideas, and yet no idea in particular. Foucault imagined a geometry of "discontinuity, threshold, rupture, break, mutation, limit." He stated that ideas crack, break and melt into ever-changing, unforeseen "discursive formations." I approved of that uncertainty.

For the historian of economic ideas, it is plausible that there are multiple definitions of "wealth," "capital," and "money" that connect in fresh ways during different epochs. It is also plausible that these definitions will continue to be reassembled without our ever finding a concluding truth. To 24-year-old eyes, grand narratives were obscene, less because they dared extend endlessly into the past, but more because they also did so into the future.

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I was not willing to accept that I lived at the end of history. I decided that if I was to write history, it had to discover fracture. It had to search the record and revive those wrinkles ironed out by power and privilege.

Accordingly, the subject of my research was a crisis in the public authority of economists of the 1960s and 1970s. Two literatures then stood out as committing that capital sin of grand narrative. One argued that, despite the turmoil of the times, economists persevered in their scientific efforts to explain the new phenomenon of low growth and high inflation in updated theories. Story one was continuity in progress.

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The other spoke that the elite of the economics profession had missed another opportunity to correct their mistakes, and had thus continued on its track towards confusion and bad science. Story two was continuity in regress. The strategy to escape this monotone predicament was well known to social historians, but it took some time to get to the history of science—and even longer, to the history of economics. Against grand narratives, one writes micro histories. I didn't come up with it. It was there all along.

At first glance, micro histories are deceiving. They are easily derided as an antiquarian's fetish for the minutiae of the archive. They are thought to imply the luxury to write about subjects that lack gravity. It takes effort to decode an unassuming narrative into the wealth that it contains. Not all authors spell it out for their readers. Not all micro histories contain the same bounty. When these work, it is magical, because one discovers the large in the small as the micro slays the grand. Narrative has the ability to invert the scales and flip the world on its head.

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Consider Europe in the mid-1500s; the century of the Protestant reformation, where theologians broke with the Roman Church to reinvent religiosity. The long view would write up the events of the age as the ascent of reason, empiricism, literacy and public discourse. One would speak of genetic schisms within Europe on their way to the creation of the modern nation states. But instead of writing about the great ideas of men like Erasmus of Rotterdam, Martin Luther, or Francis Bacon, you could look for a miller in the northeast corner of Italy.

In *The Cheese and the Worms*, Carlo Ginzburg reviewed the testimonies to the Catholic Inquisition of one man named Menocchio, rescuing from the court archives clues about one (un)remarkable life.

Menocchio had learned how to read. He owned books and read them attentively, developing elaborate views on the deity and moral order. Menocchio was no Martin Luther. Menocchio fit nowhere in the grid of organized religion. He might have been one of many—but then again, he might not have been. Micro histories offer you fabrics of lives with threads missing; threads at times torn, at times soiled, but always thick. Such narratives contrast starkly with a grand narrative that thins all into a preordained destination.

On my desk sits Emma Rothschild's *The Inner Life of Empires* (2011). Rothschild is an acclaimed intellectual historian who shuttles between Harvard University and the University of Cambridge. Her most famous past work was *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet and the Enlightenment* (2001), an influential interpretation of debates in moral philosophy that have occupied intellectuals, in and out of academia, since 1800. Her new book leaves the great white men aside for one Scottish family, the Johnstones, who spread across the British Empire in quest of fame and fortune.


Rothschild's is a history of living ideas, drawn from letters, and other private papers from the 1700s. We trace beliefs that crossed national borders, class divides, generations and ethnicity—beliefs both made because of movements, and despite them.

The stories of the individuals are entangled, and to the reader of the book their identities become confused. I cannot tell one Johnstone from the other. The micro histories of the individuals become the history of the family, in turn creating something remarkable: an intellectual space that is transnational.

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The new buzzword in the history of ideas is *transnational*. The term will surely make few appearances beyond the classroom and the academic press. Historians are writing narratives of objects, practices and people that cross thresholds of polity and culture. These stories are not small, but neither are they grand. They require familiarity with multiple politics, languages and cultures. They require a prolonged detective work in multi-national archives, taxing the research budgets of already penniless historians. And they are liberating. They convey the autonomy of life and thought breaking free of presumed constraints of power and custom. They are surprising.

Lost from a grand narrative that would anchor me, I have had an itinerant and opportunistic intellectual existence, unlike Menocchio or the Johnstones. Studying in England, working in the Netherlands and the USA, wired to digital media, reading aging books of French theory and Italian social history—I live a quaint, micro, transnational life.

And I do not roam alone. The addresses of my high school cohort stretch across the globe. Some went outward with the plan of a few years of education or career-building, and missed their return trip. They are businessmen, lawyers, artists and criminals. (The politicians are the less mobile.) My workspaces fill with nationalities and personal stories of all sorts that form into unlikely and unordered solidarities. Have our lives resized our narratives? Or have our narratives resized our lives? 

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