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Competing Narratives, Competing Selves

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The role of narratives in foreign policy has never been clearer, nor has the role of narrative in constructing specific versions of the state Self. Narratives constrain and permit action and can shape not only state behavior but also state performance. For this reason, there is a growing interest in how states narrate themselves within the international system, and how those Self narratives change and evolve as a result of conflict, crisis, or political contestation. Nonetheless, within this literature there is a preoccupation with achieving for the state what would be impossible even for the individual: a clear autobiographical narrative. Indeed, even when state autobiographical narratives are said to be flexible, they are often treated as fixed. What is missing in conversations about state narratives is an effort to open up the “black box” of discursive material to understand how and when specific narrative strands pull states in one direction or another. In other words, if we accept that narratives are pluralistic and changeable, what happens when specific narratives become fixed, rigid, or overly powerful?

In this selection of papers, scholars engage not with over-arching narratives of state selves, but rather individual strands. Our authors engage in how notions of trauma or victory can create rigid lines of narration, foreclosing “rational” pathways and provoking violence. They equally engage with the narrative entrepreneurs who seek to elevate specific identity narratives at the expense of others. Finally, they seek to pull apart the narrative monolith, to understand how narratives interact, co-constitute, and rhyme with one another, even in different political contexts and across time.

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