

Social Fictionalism and the Politics of Interpretation

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Abstract: Current political debates in many countries concern not just questions about the redistribution of resources but are also about the very nature of these countries, and about who belongs to them. Yet while these might seem like questions which have a social-ontological dimension to them, social ontology as a discipline has tended to focus on other types of social entities than nations or countries. This paper explores an anti-realism about such social entities coupled with a fictionalism about them (and possibly many other social entities as well), but where the reality of so-called *sociomaterial assemblages* is still recognized. On this approach, something like a *politics of interpretation* is an ever-present feature of social constructions like nations and countries. And while social fictionalism does not tell us which way to go on these political issues, it does help open them up for possible alternatives to dominant narratives.

Keywords: Social construction, Anti-realism, Fictionalism, Power, Assemblages

Human beings organize themselves in complex ways and refer to various entities by name in doing so. These entities vary from small-scale, *e.g.*, the Stockholm philosophy department baking club, via medium-scale, *e.g.*, the International Social Ontology Society, to large-scale, *e.g.*, the United States. But how to understand these ontologically? A parsimonious option is that they are *fictions*: useful ideas that help us coordinate our actions, but ultimately not real. But while the idea of *persona ficta* has a long

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tradition in law, starting in the 13th century with the doctrine of Pope Innocent IV,¹ many people feel that these things are more than mere pseudo-entities. Early on, even a razor-wielding nominalist like Ockham tried to end up with something a little more robust by proposing that such entities are structured aggregates, accidental wholes, but still real entities (Pelletier 2021). And in contemporary social ontology there is a lively discussion of social groups, where some authors attempt various identifications, such as with sets (Effingham 2010) mereological fusions (Hawley 2017) or pluralities (Horden & López de Sa 2020), while others postulate some kind of *sui generis* entities and spell these out in terms of ontological dependence relations (e.g., Hindriks 2013; Epstein 2015; Passinsky 2021). There is often a tendency towards abundant realism in social ontology,² with Griffith (2025) as a recent defense.

The questions at hand are however not just social-ontological. There are possible political implications as well,³ especially with respect to larger societal entities such as countries or nations, which have in recent years been foregrounded in political debates in many places. The relevant societies are pluralistic and multicultural in terms of how they are currently composed, but historically they were quite different. How should we then understand them? For example, is the US at its core a nation of immigrants or is it at its core a white Christian nation? Or should it be understood in terms of settler colonialism? Social ontology is unlikely to decide the kind of *politics of interpretation* involved in such questions, but could perhaps still provide conceptual tools with which they can be addressed. On the whole there is however also a tendency in (analytic) social ontology to focus on smaller and cooperative groups (cf. Kutz 2000, 11; Burman 2023, 74). It is not clear that such theories extend to entities like nations or countries. These are messier in character, involve ties to specific geographical places, and history plays a significant role in how they are understood. Their character is often strongly contested even by people who belong to them. To what extent are there facts of the matter concerning them? There are many ways to answer that question, and this paper will mainly explore *one* option: that these entities are *fictions*. Yet the position proposed here will not be a complete anti-realism about the social realm. A basic realism will first be articulated by drawing on assemblage theory. On the

1 One thing accomplished by this doctrine was allowing monasteries to own property in their own name even though the monks had taken vows of poverty (Kurki 2019, 34). In philosophy, Hobbes (1994, Chapter XXI, Section 4) is an early example of what is arguably a form of social fictionalism, arguing that “[f]or a body politic, as it is a fictitious body, so are the faculties and will thereof fictitious also.” Menge (2020) is a work on the ontology of power that draws on these aspects in Hobbes.

2 Hansson Wahlberg (2025) is a recent exception, arguing that there can be truthmakers for many claims about social entities even though these are not real existents. Hacking’s (1999) *dynamic nominalism* is perhaps also an exception, and shares some features with the present approach.

3 This overlap with politics is often stressed by social ontologists whose works integrate aspects from critical theory, such as Jenkins (2023) and Haslanger (2024).

resulting picture, there will be many social goings-on that involve matters of fact—but also many others that are crucially about storytelling, and ultimately matters of interpretation.

1. SOCIOMATERIAL ASSEMBLAGES AND REALISM/ANTI-REALISM

Human beings are not the only animals who organize themselves into complex groups with social hierarchies, and who are capable of staking out pieces of the physical environment as theirs, even modifying their living environments to fit their needs and social mode of organization. Bees do it. Ants do it. Even naked mole-rats do it. They are of course agents in a much more limited sense than what characterizes most human beings. Yet they still exhibit not just a form of agency, but social agency as well.

If we look at an ant colony, it would be odd to say that there is nothing like a *society* there. There seems to be different *social roles* played by different ants, in that they perform different functions. If we look at human societies, however, these have a discursive side to them that is entirely lacking in the ant colony. We do not just play different functional roles, we have ideas about them and about various entities to which some of us belong. Nations and countries are examples here. When we talk about, say, the US we do not just seem to say that people have lived on a certain territory over time, interacted a lot, and come up with various joint enterprises. Rather, many of us would think that there is a distinct entity, the US, that came into being at a certain point of time and which has endured over time, even though it has also undergone many changes.

What a social anti-realist would deny is not that there are such things as societies in the sense that an ant colony is a society, but rather the notion that human societies involve any extra real entities that we would not find among the ants or the bees. A realist like Griffith (2025, 66) notes that “[b]eavers build dams, ants form colonies, and gorillas set up social hierarchies. Perhaps there are even cases in which some non-human social interactions construct, in our sense, objects, facts, and structures.” But then he sets non-human sociality aside. For Griffith and many other social realists there is a category of *the socially constructed*, which is a realm of objects, facts, and structures that introduces further real existents beyond patterns of behavior among human animals in their material environments. In contrast, the starting-point here is to *not* introduce a natural/social divide, but to instead frame the typical study objects of social ontologists in terms of the natural social behavior of human animals (*cf.* Rouse 2023). Again, there is certainly a discursive side to human societies that is largely lacking among non-human animals. The point is just that this does not mean that any new ontological categories or levels are introduced. Rather than understanding

these extra entities as higher-level ones, grounded in more fundamental facts about human goings-on, they will be understood as fictions.

In developing this type of approach, the argument here will draw on *assemblage theory*,⁴ where Deleuze & Guattari (1987) are important early writers. They take a non-Hegelian approach to societal wholes, affirming the externality of relations,⁵ and the contingency of how things are arranged. Assemblage theorists seek to deemphasize the distinction between human beings and other entities. But they also tend to emphasize the dynamic or processual character of societal wholes, as well as their materiality. Bennett (2010, 23) describes assemblages in terms of a “coexistence of mutual dependency with friction and violence between parts”. Though the connections between them are contingent, the trajectories of things over time take place in a crowded space of materiality, where shifts lead to other shifts, and so on. Using terms from Deleuze & Guattari, processes of *territorialization* and *detrterritorialization* are constantly on-going: strengthening or loosening the connections between the different elements in an assemblage.

If we start with what we as human beings have in common with the ants and the bees, we can say that we all form dynamic constellations of embodied agents and material objects,⁶ where these interact with each other and shape each other’s trajectories, and where the agents continuously code people, things, and events in ways that then shape how they act, and where they also keep track of other agents, relating to the behavior of others, adapting their own behavior in the light of this, as well as signaling to others in ways that allow them to adapt their behavior. We can refer to such constellations as *sociomaterial assemblages* (cf. Suchman 2007). All parts of these assemblages act and respond to each other, or have the capacity to do so. Some of these entities are more complex in how they transform input to output, and certain such complex entities have to be involved for something to be a sociomaterial assemblage. These assemblages have elements of sociality because of how the relevant agents keep track of each other and coordinate in joint projects. But they are also material in character, and where the material organization of them both enable and constrain the relevant agents. They are sociomaterial in that the social and the material are inextricably entangled with each other. While no specific social or material element is essential to this kind of whole, the point is that the material elements do not just form a kind of stage on which the agents happen to find themselves. Indeed, when talking about *human agents*, the idea is not that we stand out because of our capacity

4 The focus here will be on the social realm, but see DeLanda (2016) for a more generalized version.

5 A point emphasized in Deleuze’s (1991) reading of Hume, and also as a main principle of Deleuze’s own understanding of the empiricism that he embraces.

6 Cf. Haslanger (2024, 401): “society is a complex dynamic system composed of functionally individuated material sub-systems”.

for action (all parts of an assemblage have a basic capacity for action and reaction⁷), but rather that we stand out by having more complex schemas for coding things, a larger capacity for keeping track of each other, and for our capacity to tell stories and to share these. These aspects then need to be attended to when seeking to understand sociomaterial assemblages with a significant human presence to them.

Strictly speaking, what we have is not a number of wholly distinct assemblages, but rather a vast mosaic of entities contingently related to each other. But there are stronger and weaker intensities in interactions in different places. There is higher or lower viscosity in different flows of change. When we talk about various sociomaterial assemblages, we are talking about clusters of intense interrelatedness in the bigger mosaic. These clusters can then loosely correspond to notions that we have about various cities, government agencies, corporations, etc. There are certainly different scales involved, *e.g.*, the Stockholm philosophy department baking club and the US are assemblages on (very) different scales of things, but there are no ontological levels proper. Our ideas about social entities organize and coordinate our behaviors so that certain structural features of the sociomaterial assemblages in which we are integrated become stabilized and are maintained over time, *i.e.*, they perform a territorializing function. These features being relatively stable means that it makes sense for us to continue to think and speak in terms of the relevant entities, and to have names for them. There is what Hacking (1999) has called a looping effect, where what happens in the discourses shape how things relate to each other and how we relate to them. Discursive elements are not anything that exist over and above the assemblages. They are aspects of them. Discourses consist in recurring similar-enough and interconnected occurrences of thought and speech, and all discursive events have a location somewhere in the assemblages. The effects of different discursive moves will always depend on where they happen.⁸

2. MAKING SENSE OF CHANGE: REALISM VS. ANTI-REALISM

Human discourses are of course rich in character, but one key thing that sets us apart is our sense of history. Take any ant colony—it will have a past. But take a human society, and there will be a sense of history, ways in which the past is being told and through which the past bears on the present. The role that history plays will

7 A similar approach can be found in actor-network theory (*e.g.*, Latour 2005), which also involves a flat ontology with many similarities to the one proposed here.

8 The fictionalism proposed in the present paper is intended to allow one to attend to discourse without introducing a problematic dualism between the material and the ideational, the goal being to achieve an integration of what Deleuze & Guattari (1987, 88) understand as the *machinic* and *enunciative* dimensions of assemblages.

be different around different parts of the social landscape, but especially for entities like countries or nations, history is clearly very significant. Take an example: The US starts out as the Thirteen Colonies, subject to British rule, but adopts a Declaration of Independence in 1776 and breaks loose through the Revolutionary War. It establishes a government built on law through the Constitution of 1789, expands westwards, goes through the Civil War, is reconstructed, and eventually emerges as a dominant power in the international system. However: institutionalized slavery and ethnic cleansing of indigenous peoples are also parts of this history. It is a nation of immigrants, but where much of that immigration has been in the form of settler colonialism. Depending on which aspects that get emphasized, the narrative arc of this history will come out in quite different ways.

Our main interest here is not US history as such, but one basic feature illustrated by this short outline is *change*, how territorial boundaries shift and the composition of the population varies. Many people would still insist that there is an entity, the US, which goes through these changes but which also maintains its identity over time. Even recognizing the reality of sociomaterial assemblages, this is however a point where a form of social anti-realism remains an option. According to such a position, there is certainly a sociomaterial assemblage that loosely corresponds to our notion *the US*, and where an aspect of that assemblage is an ongoing discourse where the idea of the US plays a key organizing role in stabilizing, or territorializing, the assemblage. But it does not have an essence or a nature or a core. There are borders in the sense that there are maps with lines on them, crossings and border guards, as well as people who adapt their behavior in the light of these things. There are individuals who according to existing practices are classified as citizens, others as residents or as aliens, and people will be treated differently depending on how they are classified. What is real here will however just be these behaviors, the registers, the documents, the guards and their guns, as well as the beliefs that people have.

Might that not still be enough for concluding that, say, the US is a real existent? Some form of *reductivism* would seem possible here. Certainly, if one is happy about that kind of move, one is free to make it. But such a reductive identification would not really seem to capture the sense of *the US* that most people have in mind when they talk about it: they do not appear to merely think that there is a sprawling constantly shifting and changing assemblage that is stabilized by how they think and talk about it, but which really has no essence or nature. The vague boundaries and shifting character of the relevant sociomaterial assemblages will also make it more difficult to make sense of how *the US* can be strictly identical to such a sociomaterial assemblage, as well as for understanding how it can maintain its identity over time (rather than simply being an idea that people have, and which then loosely corresponds to how things have clustered in certain ways, with significant changes over time).

If we turn to the contrast between the anti-realist and the *non-reductive* realist, it seems reasonable to think that the burden of argument lies with the realist (because parsimony). Everyone will presumably be in agreement about there being sociomaterial assemblages, or at least the kind of interrelated things that this concept is meant to refer to. But the non-reductive realist wants to add something more as real existents. There might be different ways of doing so, but one would presumably have to invoke something *immaterial*. An entity like the US could then be something like an abstract artifact that has come into existence at a certain point of time and which is materially manifested in certain ways, although the more exact ways in which it is materially manifested has varied over time. However, one problem that Passinsky (2021, 6–7) has raised for the analogy between social entities and other candidates for being abstract artifacts, such as poems and novels, is that the latter can have multiple material manifestations at a single time. But it seems weird to think that there could be a distinct copy of the US in another location.

Another problem is that it is far from clear how such immaterial entities are brought into existence other than in the weak sense that from a certain point of time it makes sense to speak in certain ways. On the 4th of July, 1776, the Second Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence. Should we then say that the US as an immaterial entity, with a certain material manifestation, came into being on that day? But what happened on that date would rather seem like, as Effingham (2010, 253) puts it, “a change in what predicates apply to what objects, not a change in what things exist. The thought is that only wizards and warlocks can bring things into existence merely by uttering a few phrases.” However momentous the consequences were of the Declaration of Independence, on a metaphysical level, what happened on the 4th of July, 1776, seems better understood as a mere Cambridge change (*cf.* Hansson Wahlberg 2021).

There is also a potential regress problem here. It would presumably only be under certain specific circumstances that we can bring such immaterial entities into being. Not just any random group of people can get together and make a Declaration of Independence through which they found a new nation. The Second Continental Congress gathered delegates from the Thirteen Colonies, and these delegates, as well as many inhabitants of those colonies, presumably saw the Declaration as expressing the will of the people rather than just the will of some people. But exactly how did the Second Continental Congress get such powers of creation? One might appeal to how these delegates were elected and thus invested with the power to speak for their constituencies. But this just shifts the explanatory burden a further step: from where did some people get the power to invest certain other people with the power to found a new nation? And so on. Social ontologists often appeal to things like collective acceptance or we-intentionality in explaining how institutional facts are established,

but many of the examples which are then under discussion, like a specific paper note being a dollar bill, often occur within the context of a particular society, where certain institutional frameworks are already in place. Such accounts do not put an end to the regress.

Now, there might be many other ways of being a realist about social entities, but they seem likely to run into similar problems, such as accounting for how these entities come into being without assuming some already existing social entities that provide the relevant powers of creation.⁹ The more parsimonious position is that there are only ongoing loops of discourses and behavior, where the ways in which we think and talk play a role in stabilizing the relevant sociomaterial assemblages.

3. SOCIAL FICTIONALISM AS NARRATIVE FICTIONALISM

With (a partial) social anti-realism in place, the next step is to make sense of our discourse about social entities. For this type of project, fictionalism has become a prominent alternative in many philosophical sub-fields during the last couple of decades or so: mathematical fictionalism (*e.g.*, Yablo 2001), moral fictionalism (*e.g.*, Kalderon 2005), modal fictionalism (*e.g.*, Rosen 1990), mental fictionalism (*e.g.*, Toon 2023) religious fictionalism (*e.g.*, Van Leeuwen 2023), and so on. The most common way of developing such approaches is in terms of *pretense* or *make-believe*, inspired by Walton's seminal accounts of representation in art (1990) and metaphor (1993).¹⁰

Fictionalism about social entities is however rare, almost non-existent. Thomason (2003) entertains a form of fictionalism, but merely in outline, and she also notes that *make-believe* might not be readily applicable to the social case. Of course, one should not assume that all discourses for which fictionalist treatments are potentially viable should be dealt with in the same way. Take moral fictionalism as a contrasting example. Our ontological commitments are then typically interpreted as involving entities of a very special kind, mind-independent and yet capable of exerting some

9 Passinsky (2021, 13) proposes that social objects are material-normative compounds, where “[t]hese parts come together to form a compound whole when the material components instantiate the normative components.” She (2021, 10) recognizes that her account requires ascribing certain normative powers to us but says that these “are not posits of the normative account of social objects. We clearly have such powers. And so the metaphysical mystery surrounding them is a mystery that everyone must contend with.” But it is far from obvious that we have such powers, and where they would come from, at least when taken as something more metaphysically robust than our powers to expect or demand things from each other, to blame each other, etc.

10 In talking about what happens in a fiction, according to Walton (1990, 392), it is not the case that “the speaker is making a genuine assertion about a fictional world (a work world) from a perspective outside of it, that he is saying something about what fictional truths it contains. The pretense construal has the appreciator pretending to describe the real world rather than actually describing a fictional one.”

kind of normative pull on us (Mackie 1977). As an analysis of moral discourse, this is probably incorrect (*e.g.*, Beebe et al. 2015). But that can be ignored for now. The issue is that if it really was the case that our moral discourse involves appeal to non-natural entities, while the world does not contain any such entities, it becomes highly unclear how the world is supposed to bear on statements involving moral predicates.

The social case seems different. When we talk about, say, the US and Japan, and say things like “the US is a larger country than Japan”, there is stuff in the world that we can quite straightforwardly be understood as talking about. We can also rely on reasoning in terms of such entities to predict things that will happen in the world. If there is something fictitious here it would seem to involve *the unity or cohesiveness* of the relevant assemblages. As social creatures we find ourselves in these messy and complex sociomaterial assemblages and in order to navigate them and to organize the swirling multitude of people, places, and events we tell sense-making stories that impose stability and structure.¹¹ While there is a creative element in our narrative structuring of various aspects of sociomaterial assemblages, the social entities that we appeal to as sense-making devices are not whole-cloth inventions. What the social fictionalist should then arguably say is that social-entity discourses are ones that have strong *fictionalizing elements*, but where it is also the case that the world bears on the things that we say to an extent where it can still make sense to regard statements made in these discourses as truth-apt, at least in an everyday context.¹² There are underlying facts pertaining to the sociomaterial assemblages. We can tell different stories about them, but those facts still constrain the storytelling.

Given the everyday character of how we tell stories featuring various social entities as a kind of characters, one problem with notions like *pretense* or *make-believe* is that they ultimately rest on a contrast with *non-pretense* or *non-make-believe*. This contrast is easily grasped for representational art or metaphor, where we occasionally engage with things in a distinctive way. But in relating to things in the social realm there is an everyday character to our engagements, where many social entities are more like the furniture of the world as we inhabit it. Even if there are fictionalizing elements to how we engage with the world, relying on them is arguably more like taking a

11 The fictionalism proposed here has some similarities with Hume’s fictionalism about the self, where there is “a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations” (Hume 1978, 207), and where it is the idea of a unified persisting entity *the self* that is a fiction.

12 Quine (1939, 709) at one point argues that some ways of talking involve “fictions, in this sense: there are no such things, from the standpoint of our unabbreviated official language, but we talk as if there were by dint of an eliminable shorthand.” The sense of *fiction* being proposed in the above is however not about being an eliminable shorthand. The social entities under consideration are much too shapeless for a paraphrasing strategy to work, but various facts pertaining to the relevant sociomaterial assemblages can still bear on how we talk about them.

relatively stable *perspective* on things. Here is Camp's (2017, 78) characterization of this notion:

A perspective is an open-ended disposition to construct rich, intuitive representations of particular individuals and events, and of relations among them. An agent with a perspective "knows their way about" the world being interpreted, in the sense that they know how to assimilate, extrapolate from, and respond to particular bits of information as they come in, and how to navigate among the bits of information they already have.

Rather than operating with a binary distinction between pretense/non-pretense, a perspectival approach instead opens up for there being several different perspectives. A key feature of the kind of perspective that is relevant here is for certain storytelling resources involving social entities being second nature to someone. Such a perspective is not something that we switch to, occasionally looking at thing in a non-literal way. It is the default mode of relating to these things. But it is always also the perspective of someone located somewhere within a host of sociomaterial assemblages. The idea is accordingly not that there is such a thing as *the* social perspective, but rather that in human-involving sociomaterial assemblages, there is a multitude of social perspectives. Some of them will be very similar, others more dissimilar. All will involve having some particular location(s) in some sociomaterial assemblage(s).

4. ARRANGING THE ASSEMBLAGES: SCRIPTS AND STORIES

Fictionalists rely on an analogy with fiction (*cf.* Skiba & Woodward 2020, 260). This goes for social fictionalism as well, and as understood here it obviously stresses the analogy with narrative fiction. More specifically, *theatre* arguably stands out as a further illuminating analogue to social life. Notions like *actors*, *roles*, and *scripts* are fairly straightforwardly applicable to a lot of our daily behavior, and the physical environment with *sets* and *props* play an important part in setting the stage. This being said, one thing that clearly separates actual social life from theatre is the provisional character of the latter. While there are material objects and environments that in a way function like props or sets in the performance of everyday life, these are entangled with our practices in a much deeper way: we do not just design sets and props in order to stage a certain play, so to speak. While we certainly shape the material environment, the material environment also structures our trajectories, often funneling us along certain paths. There is a reciprocal relation. Another difference is that even to the extent that we are all playing our parts, we are all also engaged in multiple productions, some smaller in scale, some larger, some fairly isolated, some overlapping. In looking

at such narrative structuring of everyday life, the proposal here is that there are two core narrative elements at work:

(i) *Scriptive elements*. Most human social action will follow certain routines, where coordination is enabled by us behaving in expected ways. In classic script theory (e.g., Schank & Abelson 1977), scripts are cognitive templates for sequences of events or actions, where in a given situation or scene, different people have different roles and take certain stereotypical actions in response to the situation and what others do in it. A standard example is that of a restaurant where the customer and the waiter play out a certain series of events or action. Scripts can however be personal too, so that an individual has a more or less standardized way to proceed, and these can then interact with the situational and shared scripts. Features of the material environment can serve as props and provide behavioral clues. The sense of scripts or scripting that is of interest in the present context is however broader than just cognitive scripts. The layout of the material environment can also be understood as part of what is scripting our behavior, cognitive and material components working in tandem in order to shape our behavior in predictable ways. We can talk about these material aspects as *scriptive things* (Bernstein 2009). These can be both larger physical structures, e.g., how our homes, offices, and public spaces are laid out to prompt the ways in which we behave in these environments, but also how smaller items are designed to enable certain actions and constrain others. These scriptive things rarely close down alternative behaviors completely, but falling in line with how they script our behavior typically makes matters run more smoothly. Scriptive things do more than just prompting pre-existing cognitive scripts, the kind of learning that goes on in interacting with them will partly shape our cognitive scripts.

As such, cognitive scripts and scriptive things need not involve any fictive elements, appeals to non-real entities or properties. The ants and the bees have rudimentary scripts too. And these animals also create a form of scriptive environments. Of course, while human sociality is continuous with that of non-human animals, there will be a discursive side to human societies, as well as a higher level of complexity. But the social roles that we inhabit are at root still scriptive in character, coming with different bundles of scripts.¹³ Being a professor or student, a physician or patient, a politician or citizen, and so on—these roles will come with coordinated expectations about how to act, and how to respond to what. Especially within organizations, different roles are often quite explicitly scripted, leaving less room for individual judgment or for improvisation. One natural reason for this is that for an organization to function it needs to be quite strongly held together *qua* sociomaterial assemblage.

13 See Stotts (2026) for a behavioral account of social institutions according to which they are made up of behavior that clusters into copied roles.

When such an assemblage is *scriptively integrated*, a decision taken in one place, and in accordance with the existing scripts, will have predictable and coordinated consequences in other places. We will get something that might look like an entity acting as a single body, even though many small decisions taken in various places need to line up in order for concerted effort to happen.

(ii) *Story elements*. In the staging of social life, at least in human societies, social roles are not just bundles of scripts, mechanically enacted. Being a professor or being a physician is not merely about acting and responding in certain predictable ways. We think of these roles in terms of social statuses that we have by virtue of being recognized as occupying the relevant roles. We introduce element of storytelling, possibly also identifying ourselves with the roles in ways that create narrative structure for our own lives. By themselves, scripts (even complex bundles of them) do not in any deeper way make sense of matters. And while self-interest can explain some of our script-following, it does not provide much larger meaning. Story elements come in as tools of sense-making. On the bigger societal picture, there will also be narratives about where an assemblage comes from and where it is going, tellings of its history that make sense of how things are ordered now, and where tales about future developments or events can make sense both of sticking to the scripts and (sometimes) changing them. Assemblages that are scriptively integrated will discursively feature different social entities as characters or agents in these stories, and the stories will typically ascribe an identity over time to those entities, even if they have changed considerably.

The US would be an example of a fictional character, and sometimes a protagonist, in stories told about a sociomaterial assemblage in which certain people find themselves, while others are at a distance from it (but often still affected by it). There will be significant vagueness involved in the relevant stories. Often it might even be unclear whether people are talking about *the US* as a nation or a country or a state (or what the differences between these senses are). Some of the stories might feature the US as an agent, other stories will be about concrete individuals or groups whose actions are somehow linked to (or emblematic of) the nation. These stories need not add up to a single sustained and strongly unified 250-year narrative. While one can expect certain themes to dominate, and certain events and time periods to typically be seen as pivotal, the stories can (and typically: will) be sketchy and gappy. Different people might tell them in slightly different ways. Such storytelling will only have to be determinate enough not to cause any misunderstanding in the concrete situations where the relevant acts of storytelling are performed. For the anti-realist/fictionalist there are no philosophical worries to be had about fictive entities being vague. There

is no risk of ending up with metaphysical indeterminacy,¹⁴ since the stories do not play any constitutive role in relation to any real social entities. They are just aspects of the discursive side of human sociomaterial assemblages.

This kind of storytelling is not just a way of making sense of the past, but also a way of understanding the present through a range of sense-making devices that stands in relation to many of the scripts that shape our everyday lives. Of course, in theory, one could perhaps imagine an entity even as large as the assemblage that loosely corresponds to the idea of the US government, but where all that we have is a scriptively integrated assemblage. Everyone acts in accordance with their roles, but no-one has any ideas about the larger whole, its history or its projected future development. This would be similar to the ants and the bees. But in practice, it is difficult to see how this would work for the ways in which human beings organize themselves. For one thing, scripts coordinate routine activity, but not everything will be covered by those scripts. Having a grasp of larger sense-making stories will enable individuals to exercise judgment in the spirit of the lessons that can be found in those stories. When scripts and stories cohere, they will also strengthen each other. When one accepts the relevant stories, one will tend to see the scripts as reasonable, and be able to improvise in ways that will make sense also to others with whom one is scriptively integrated. Conversely, when one is used to the scripts, the stories will also seem like natural ones to subscribe to.

5. NATIONS, HISTORY, AND STORYTELLING

As already pointed out, the suggestion here is that we can think of things like countries or nations as fictions. Entities like the US, France or Japan are accordingly not real existents, although they certainly feature as characters in the sense-making stories that we tell. Why do we tell these specific stories? This is not the place to fully address that question, but since stories are important for scriptively integrated assemblages, agents (such as political actors) who want to strengthen and stabilize scriptive integration have an interest in promoting such stories. The idea of *the nation* is connected to the development of certain socio-political entities, *nation-states*, with their much higher degree of integration and organization compared to the feudal societies that they (at least in Europe) replaced. A *nation* can here be understood as an idea about “a named community possessing an historic territory, shared myths and memories, a common public culture and common laws and customs” (Smith 2002, 15). The relevant social construction accordingly involves partly the telling of a history tracing the roots of

14 Richardson (2024) accepts metaphysical indeterminacy given realism about social construction, but many would see this as a price they would rather not pay. Brännmark (2024) argues that the pervasiveness of social indeterminacy is a problem for standard theories in social ontology.

the present-day community back to a shared past, partly an increased homogeneity in how actions are scripted: achieving common laws and customs. The historical development of nation-states (at least in Europe) also came with the development of a capitalist economy and modern bureaucracy, and with these came higher degrees of specialization and standardization. Such tendencies potentially threaten people's sense of meaning: the more specialization and standardization that we get the more one risks feeling like an insignificant cog in a vast machinery. Such threats can potentially be counteracted by something like the story of the nation: how everyone is part of something bigger, and how a supposed "we" can with concerted effort move forward towards greater things.

The above picture is just a sketch,¹⁵ and the emergence of the idea of *nations* is surely more complicated. But what matters here is that by now *the nation* is established as an important idea in many places. It is also a contested notion in that people will differ both on how significant it is (or should be) for political practice and on how to best interpret the nations to which they understand themselves as belonging. There is typically enough of a correspondence between the discourses featuring social entities as characters and the relevant sociomaterial assemblages for statements about the *existence* of those entities to come out as trivially true, at least from an everyday perspective. Statements about the *nature* of the relevant social entities will however often be much more problematic and contestable. These are statements where the storytelling aspects of the social realm come to the fore: how we select and highlight certain features and how we connect the dots in telling our larger stories will have implications for which people that will be seen as belonging (or not), as well as which things that will be seen as owed to whom. As an example, take these lyrics from Woody Guthrie's famous song:

This land is your land, and this land is my land
From California to the New York Island
From the Redwood Forest to the Gulf Stream Waters
This land was made for you and me

This is a piece of storytelling about the US. It can be read as sending an egalitarian message (and was certainly intended that way). The *you* addressed by the singer is not the Rockefellers and their ilk. These lyrics are meant to speak to the common folk whose hard labor built the nation. But a second look at the story being told, or at least implied, casts what is being said in a much more problematic light.

15 These are of course contested matters, but at least in modernization theory the emergence of nations and nationalism is typically connected to the emergence of capitalism and industrialization, e.g., Gellner (1983).

What does it mean to say that *this land was made for you and me*, when there is another possible story, which is certainly respectful of other brute facts that pertain to the development of the US as a country, and according to which *this land was stolen from indigenous peoples*? Or a third story according to which *this land was built on the backs of slaves*, whose descendants still have their life opportunities shaped by structures that can be traced back to when slavery was institutionalized?

Now, pointing these things out does not mean that there is not a grain of truth in the story that the US was built by the hard work of immigrants who came there voluntarily. A complete history of an entity as complex as the sociomaterial assemblage loosely corresponding to *the US* would be an almost endless catalogue of people, places, and events, impossible for anyone to grasp.¹⁶ Some things always have to be omitted, some things always have to be highlighted, and narrative themes and threads need to be introduced in order for the whole to make sense to us. White (2000, 28) makes this point well:

[C]onsidered as accounts of events already established as facts, competing narratives can be assessed, criticized, and ranked on the basis of their fidelity to the factual record, their comprehensiveness, and the coherence of whatever arguments they may contain. But narrative accounts do not consist only of factual statements (singular existential propositions) and arguments; they consist as well of poetic and rhetorical elements by which what would otherwise be a list of facts is transformed into a story.

It lies in the character of such narratives that for complex social wholes there will always be multiple stories that can be told. There will certainly also be some stories, *e.g.*, that the development of the US as a nation was engineered by the Illuminati as part of their masterplan for global domination, where presumably there is very little in the real world that this narrative is responsive to. And there might be stories that stretch things, but which still gets at least something right in terms of highlighting things that really are there in the relevant sociomaterial assemblages. But an inherent problem in making such judgements, except in the clear cases, is that different people will be prone to accept different stories, partly because of where they are located in the relevant sociomaterial assemblages. Depending on where they are positioned, they will see different things in their everyday lives, presumably then tending towards stories that highlight or make sense of those aspects. And there is no perspective from the outside, there are only more or less overlapping perspectives from the inside.

¹⁶ The point that certain communities are too large to grasp without employing fictions is highlighted by Anderson (1983) in his account of nations as imagined communities.

Struggles over how to tell the history of entities such as nations is a clear case of *the politics of interpretation*. Is the US a nation of immigrants, constantly changing as the flows of immigration change, or is it a nation defined by how it carries on the legacy and ways of 17th and 18th century white settler colonists? Or something else? How we answer such questions will depend on the stories we tell about the US and its past. As White points out, different tellings of history can differ in their fidelity to the factual record. Some of them can accordingly involve stronger fictionalizing elements than others, sometimes even replacing fact with fiction. But while there are alternative stories to be told, at the basic level there are no alternative facts. The point that the social fictionalist will insist on, however, is that what matters here is never just about getting the basic facts right. The political dimension runs deep. To the extent that we tell stories about the US centered on the valorous actions of early settlers and founding fathers, we will implicitly tell a story about the US as a setting where the main roles are typically played by white men, and where 1776 (the Declaration of Independence) is a key liberatory moment while 1865 (the Thirteenth Amendment) is more like a footnote. To the extent that we marginalize, or even neglect to mention, institutionalized slavery and the genocidal displacement of indigenous peoples, the actions of those early pioneers will appear in a more heroic light. And to the extent that such a narrative construction is in place, it can help make sense of and breed a comfortableness with a contemporary situation where interlocking complexes of cognitive scripts and scriptive material environments systematically tend to place members of a certain group (white men) in dominant positions. Patterns in how things are scripted now then also risks making members of the dominant group invested in a certain telling of history.

Can social ontology help us decide between different stories, beyond telling us that fidelity to the factual record still matters? The account proposed here does not as such come with any normative tools. In terms of possible implications, there is probably a somewhat progressive tendency to the fictionalist approach. The reason is that social and cultural conservatives often insist that a certain telling of history is *the* correct one, and that this history strongly limits our choices in the present. While social fictionalism might not in itself move us in any particular direction with respect to any given political issue, it would still involve insisting on the possibility of meaningful contestation on many issues where the social or cultural conservative might want to say that there is no such room. A space for political imagination would at least be opened up.

To the extent that our aims are also broadly egalitarian and democratic, a natural further path to take when considering which moves that are worthwhile in the politics of interpretation is to stress the importance of having stories from multiple perspectives

being heard and understood.¹⁷ Even though there is no view from nowhere, and everyone suffers from some incompleteness in how they see things, a more complete picture can be achieved through a striving towards multiperspectivity. And while there is no perspective from anywhere in the relevant sociomaterial assemblage that is *epistemically privileged* it can certainly be the case that there is a systemic one-sidedness in the ways in which important stories are currently being told and attended to on a societal level. Certain perspectives might then be *politically prioritized*, in that there is greater need for adding them to the shared set of stories. At least given an egalitarian-democratic stance, social fictionalism accordingly seems to point to a politics of interpretation where it is valuable that dominant (typically: establishment) narratives are at the very least complicated.

6. TELLING COUNTERSTORIES

A traditional approach to politics tends to look at redistribution as the key to addressing problematic asymmetries in what kind of opportunities that are offered to different groups. And it is obviously important. But an emphasis on the politics of interpretation will highlight how socioeconomic differences can also have discursive underpinnings. Power relations that help stabilize a society and preserve the status quo will have a discursive side to them. For those who want political change, it will then be important to also challenge dominant stories, as well as the scripts that these stories enable and help organize.

In theorizing workings of power, and given the picture of society developed here, we will need an approach that works with the dynamic and network-like character of the sociomaterial assemblages in which we are located. One theorist articulating such an account of power is Foucault (1980, 98):

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power.

This is not to say that it is meaningless to understand certain groups as more powerful than others—there is hierarchical power as well. And while Foucault empha-

¹⁷ Young (2002, 75–77) stresses how inclusive political communication involves sharing stories as part of the teaching and learning needed for such communication to function well.

sizes how human agency is capillary in character, and how individual action happens in the fine-meshed networks in which we are situated, he also notes (1982, 795) how “the domination of a group, a caste, or a class, together with the resistance and revolts which that domination comes up against” manifest themselves through a “locking together of power relations with relations of strategy and the results proceeding from their interaction.” We need to do micro-level analysis, but we also need to attend to how things add up in terms of recurring patterns and pervasive features.

If we look for direct disciplinary effects, these would mainly involve scriptive elements rather than stories. And given a Foucauldian picture, to the extent that a certain group is dominant, and other groups dominated, this is not primarily about individuals belonging to the former group holding power that they can then wield as they see fit in relation to individuals belonging to other groups. It is rather about how there are patterns to the multitude of scripts and scriptive things, and how these elements line up so that the dominated regularly need to adapt to severe limitations in their opportunities, while members of dominant group are afforded possibilities for being more expansive in their hopes, ambitions, and desires, as well as being afforded opportunities to act on them. Their strategic situations will differ. Understood in terms of a cast of characters, one group gets to be main characters in the staging of societal practices while other groups will be cast in supporting roles—or even expected to keep themselves off-stage.

As already pointed out, though, scripts and stories are not to be understood as disconnected, but as coming together in the discursive formations that shape human activity in the relevant sociomaterial assemblages. We are disciplined or scripted in certain ways, and then there are overarching stories that makes sense of these scripts, rationalizing and legitimizing them. The scripts and stories are mutually reinforcing. For any society, it is likely that certain stories will dominate, while others will be marginalized. Further other stories will remain at the level of the merely possible: ones that *could* meaningfully be told about that society, and perhaps will be told some day, but presently are not. The way that scripts and stories come together means that one way of critiquing the order of things in a scriptively integrated sociomaterial assemblage is to question the stories that help make sense of that state of affairs, and perhaps tell counterstories instead as a way of undermining dominant stories, and eventually the ways in which things are currently scripted.¹⁸ To continue with the example of the US, we can expect that historical narratives which shift emphasis to matters such as institutionalized slavery and genocide will, at least to the extent that

18 Of course, one can sometimes also attempt to challenge and disrupt scripts more directly, see Hesni (2024) for more on this.

they get to be accepted as ones to be taken seriously, rationalize policy options today which otherwise might never be on the table, such as reparations.

While the framing here (social fictionalism) is perhaps new, this kind of politics of interpretation is not. If we take Foucault as an example here, much of his work during his genealogical period can be described in this way, as telling a kind of stories that are set to destabilize established scripts. Work by decolonial scholars such as Quijano (2000) and Mignolo (2011) can also be understood as tellings of history that contrast with established Eurocentric narratives of enlightenment, in an effort to undermine how something like global trade is scripted. But a politics of interpretation that is ultimately directed towards scripts in this way need not be strongly historical in character, or focused on bigger narratives about the nation or the country. For instance, when debating policy, a typical policy proposal will involve ideas about implementing an organized bundle of scripts, both cognitive and material. It will be formulated in relation to a certain problem description, and with certain outcomes in mind. There will be an implicit narrative structure, where what the problem is represented to be (*cf.* Bacchi & Goodwin 2025) will serve a sense-making function for the proposed bundle of scripts. Recognizing that such problem formulations always involve elements of storytelling, even if they are (hopefully) not entirely fictionalizing, also opens up for disputing this storytelling: is it possible that other aspects of the current situation could be highlighted instead?

Of course, even if telling counterstories can sometimes be an important tool in challenging relations of domination in a given society, this does not mean that telling them will always be an improvement to the order of things. As already pointed out, we need a normative stance in order to evaluate possible moves in the politics of interpretation, and whether these are progressive or regressive. Some might however find this reliance on a separate normative stance unsatisfactory, thinking that we need a stronger account of social reality and truth in order to separate the reasonable from the unreasonable. This kind of worry about possible implications of anti-realism is voiced by Griffith (2025, 178–79):

An assurance that there is truth about, say, what happened at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, as complicated as that truth is, should help block the slide into despair about untangling the events of that day. We should not think that there are only truths about the physical events of the day, e.g., people marched on the Capitol lawn, windows were broken, flags were flown, etc., and say everything else is merely interpretation (was it a “second revolution” or an illegal insurrection?).

This is a good example of how the past bears on the present, not just in how things that happened before might cause things to happen now, but also in that how we tell history will shape how we interpret things that happen today. The events of that particular day clearly violated the everyday scripts, but of course an event like the Boston tea party also violated everyday scripts. Such violations can potentially be made sense of through how they are fitted into larger stories. And in this case the second-revolution interpretation builds on a reading of US history that creates a strong analogy between certain people today and the 18th century revolutionaries.

While the social realist will presumably want to say that there is a matter of fact here also for the bigger issue, and not just concerning the more particular events, the social anti-realist will be prone to say that there is no real truth of the matter on the bigger issue. Changes certainly happened in a sociomaterial assemblage on that day, and a number of discursive shifts then followed. But the storytelling aspect is a matter of interpretation in relation to prominent storytelling resources. Again, this is not to say that the two interpretations, “second revolution” and “illegal insurrection” (or “peaceful protest” for that matter), are equally good interpretations. One side might very well make more far-fetched uses of the relevant storytelling resources. It might also be the case that one side in their storytelling efforts more often ends up omitting certain sociomaterial occurrences, having a lower fidelity to the factual record. That something is a matter of interpretation does not mean that anything goes.

Still, when we get to an actual debate about competing interpretations, convincing other people that their interpretation is weak *qua* interpretation will typically be difficult. Is that a cause for despair (as Griffith worries)? Maybe. But would an appeal to truth improve the situation? If one thinks, say, that the second-revolution reading of January 6th is misguided and wants to argue that case, many of the points a realist would make would probably be quite similar, emphasizing various specific facts, and essentially trying to show how difficult it is to tell a second-revolution story (at least with a straight face) given those facts. One would essentially still have to win an argument over interpretations in order to establish that a certain matter of fact obtains. If there is a difference, it would instead lie in how the fight is framed and which weapons one brings to it. To make their argument in terms of truth, the realist metaphysician would need to bring to the discussion a theory of how complex social truths are grounded in more particular facts, whereas the anti-realist would see the fight as inherently one involving both argument and rhetoric,¹⁹ both attention to particular fact and storytelling that speaks to the sentiments and values of those involved.

19 See Charland (1987) for a study on the role of rhetoric in the narrative construction of peoples or nations (more specifically in his case: the “peuple québécois”).

Griffith (2025) delivers a sophisticated metaphysical framework supposed to enable us to identify it as a matter of fact that the events of January 6th was an illegal insurrection rather than (an attempt at) a second revolution. But for the kind of social anti-realist envisaged here, an appeal to analytic metaphysics in this context risks looking a lot like a bringing a scalpel to a gunfight. Instead, cause for hope rather than despair would have to be built partly through rhetoric and storytelling, similar to how Rorty (1989, 86) remarks that “[w]hat binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes. The vocabularies are, typically, parasitic on the hopes—in the sense that the principal function of the vocabularies is to tell stories about future outcomes which compensate for present sacrifices.” Rorty’s point is that for rhetoric and storytelling to be successful, and for the vocabulary in which it is framed to become widely shared, it needs to create a narrative about the future that can build a large-enough alliance of people that will set aside certain of their present concerns because they feel that they are heading somewhere they *want* to go. While social fictionalism does not automatically give us the tools to succeed in that effort, it would for the anti-realist at least involve being clear-eyed about what kind of struggle that we are facing.

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