

Dominant narratives



The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion but allow very lively debate within that spectrum – even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there's free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate.

- Noam Chomsky²

Narratives are rooted in larger belief systems and worldviews. For example, the systemic logic of white supremacy and patriarchy 'validates' the inequitable hierarchies embedded in institutions that devalue and subordinate some people based on gender, ethnicity, and skin colour. Dominant narratives legitimise and activate those underlying belief systems – systemic power – to protect the interests of those who benefit from them. With vast commercial media conglomerates that dominate news, information, and culture, together with the explosive power of digital and social media, narratives are a central battleground for any change work.

Dominant narratives tap into prejudices that have shaped our societies and institutions for a very long time – for example, that 'bad women' get involved in politics rather than tend solely to their duties as mothers and wives, or that indigenous peoples are 'backward' in relation to modern culture. Powerful actors activate these narratives to reinforce prejudices, confirming their 'naturalness' and 'rightness'. When we want to shift such narratives, we need to engage not just with the words but also with the deeper beliefs, emotions, and systemic logic that find expression in the narrative.

Dominant narratives also shape people's understanding of themselves, perversely leading many people to internalise those prejudices. Self-doubt, marginalisation, discrimination, and violence are then reinforced and justified on that basis. Similarly, beliefs about the supposed efficiency and superior role of business to solve problems legitimise the privatisation and reduction of government services, and thus the growth of corporate power and the curtailment of the state's capacity as safety net and defender of human rights. Economic projects that generate money and wealth – no matter that they benefit privileged elites – are seen as positive and modern 'development'. Those questioning such projects are portrayed as backward, narrow-minded, or anti-development, their concerns mocked and treated as unrealistic and outside the mainstream.

Capitalist narratives

As workers, consumers, and citizens, we are all embedded in a globalised capitalist system of mass resource extraction, commodification, production, commerce, consumption, and waste. These have become so naturalised that we seldom question the underlying logic or consider alternatives as realistic. This extractive, carbon-intensive economic system is reinforced by individualism.

Dominant narratives play a role in perpetuating norms and beliefs such as:

Free-market capitalism is the only viable model.

If people work hard, they can succeed. People living in poverty have only themselves to blame.

Inequity is inevitable but wealth trickles down.

Progress and growth are built on the exploitation of resources.

Global investors help 'underdeveloped' countries exploit their resources to become more modern.

Taxes and government intervention in the economy are ineffective and bureaucratic; the private sector is better at providing health, education, energy, and other public goods.

Technology can solve most problems and save us from environmental catastrophe.

Work in the labour market is 'work', work at home is a family obligation.

These narratives help to normalise global financial and extractive industries based on fossil fuels, mining, logging, large-scale farming and fishing, retail and digital monopolies, and mining of personal data. At the same time, these narratives prevent deeper investment in regenerative economic models and public discussion of energy alternatives.

Contemporary capitalism turns everything from water to DNA into commodities to be exploited and traded for profit. Dominant narratives frame and endorse neoliberal policies, regulations, property laws, resource concessions, and corporate subsidies, while justifying poverty wages, privatisation of public services, and shareholder profits as all in the public interest and necessary for growth and progress.

Neoliberal economics are taught in prominent universities to the exclusion of other approaches. Efforts to soften capitalism with ideals of sustainability, corporate responsibility, and ethical investment can sometimes reinforce dominant narratives, because they do not question the underlying logic of the system. These narratives also reinforce values of individualism, consumerism, and material possessions as key to success and happiness.

Patriarchal narratives

Patriarchy is everywhere, expressed in different ways, in nearly all institutions and structures. It systematically discriminates against women and LGBTQI+ people. Patriarchy is socialised through our families, culture, religions, and the media and is

embedded in all our laws and political institutions. It shapes our most intimate and family relationships as well as our organisations. Patriarchy is actively upheld by dominant narratives, for example that:

Gender roles are biologically determined and natural.

Women's place and value are in the home and in the family.

Women's primary role is to give birth, raise children, and care for others.

Sexual/reproductive rights – giving women the power to make decisions about their bodies – are subversive, anti-family, and encourage sexual promiscuity.

Heterosexuality is normal and other sexual identities are deviant.

Gender is binary – men or women – and any other identity is deviant and threatens the social order.

Women are less capable than men and do not deserve the same pay and opportunities.

Women are soft, emotional, and unable to make tough choices.

Women and LGBTQI+ people bring sexual violence on themselves by challenging social norms and the rightful authority of men.

Backlash – against women's and LGBTQI+ rights, reproductive and sexual rights, and feminism – is both a legal and narrative battle. Conservative forces claim to be 'pro-life' and 'pro-family' and depict gender, women, and feminists as immoral and selfish, narratives that tap into and exploit old prejudices and patriarchal values.



If we were fish, gender would be the water we swam in. Gender is a set of behaviours and processes handed down to us by peers, relatives, and authority figures; it's the substance that surrounds us, with the power to alternately buoy us or drag us down. Asking people to change how they engage with gender is tantamount to asking a fish to think critically about its fishbowl—how can it, when it's never known anything else? The fish has probably lived its entire life without noticing the water at all.

- Dominique Dickey, "Gender is a story we tell ourselves", *The Narrative Initiative*

Racist and white supremacist narratives

Racism and white supremacy are deeply embedded in the structure of most societies. As with patriarchy, dominant norms and beliefs about race, skin colour, and ethnicity are socialised through family and culture, reinforced by religious and educational institutions, and reproduced in politics, government, the private sector, the media, and civil society. Narratives are key in propagating norms of white supremacy and racism, for example that:

Race is biologically based and fundamentally determines who we are.

Whiteness and white people are superior, people of colour are inferior

Black men and boys are dangerous, criminal, and immoral, and Black women are aggressive and hyper-sexual.

Racial inequities are natural – people of colour have less because they lack skills, intelligence, or a strong work ethic.

White culture is 'normal' and 'universal,' whereas non-white cultures are 'exotic' or 'different' – and borrowing from them is appreciative not appropriation.

White people today are blameless for historical genocide, forced and enslaved labour, colonisation, and other forms of violence against non-white people. That's all a thing of the past.

Anti-Blackness is the exclusion of Black people from social, political, and cultural belonging. It is core to white supremacy and rooted in histories of slavery and colonialism. Alicia Garza describes “the fulcrum around which white supremacy operates ... an organizing principle for access and for power and for influence, and that impacts everybody.... The closer you are to Black, the worse off you are. The closer to white, the better off you are.”

In their extreme forms, white supremacist and racist narratives are used to justify systemic citizen and police brutality and the murder of Black people. For decades, narratives criminalised Black men as 'super predators', and depicted them as bad fathers, and poor Black women as 'welfare queens'. White nationalist movements have developed narratives to undermine anti-racist work and promote conspiracy theories such as what they describe as 'white replacement' and fears of immigration and the population growth of Black and Brown people. Right-wing populist leaders frequently use narratives that portray the 'real people' (coded as white people) as being threatened by 'others' or 'foreigners', meaning people of colour or refugees.

Around the world, racist and white supremacist narratives, entrenched in social norms and education by colonialism, shape how and what is taught, particularly about history, culture, and human rights. Narratives that involve critical discussion

about race are said to promote censorship and cancel culture. White people who do not think of themselves as racist use more insidious, everyday 'denial' narratives that reinforce racism and white supremacy.

Colonial and imperialist narratives

Racism and colonialism are intertwined. Narratives are a central part of the story of conquest, exploitation, extraction, and wars. Capitalism and the competition for geopolitical domination drive colonialism and imperialism, but colonial narratives mobilise racism to justify occupation, genocide of indigenous peoples, and the wholesale robbery of the natural and human resources that 'developed' the industrialised countries of the Global North.

To this day, racist narratives of colonialism and imperialism are perpetuated by corporate media, religions, and international development and security, for example, by:

Africa as a place of exotic cultures, animals, and primitive people who suffer from endless wars, corruption, and poverty, and who are in need of aid.

Depicting Latin America as a place of narcos, cartels, and communist uprisings, in need of security and stability.

Depicting indigenous peoples as backward, primitive, and simple – and whose ancestral lands and territories are better put to use by others.

Using the terms 'Third World' or 'undeveloped' to describe the non-Global-North world.

Imposing expertise and solutions that are not appropriate or beneficial to countries and indigenous peoples in the Global South in the name of modernisation and development.

Continuing to extract resources from poor countries, leaving land and water depleted and poisoned.

Colonial domination devalued non-Western culture and knowledge as 'primitive' and imposed Christianity as a 'civilising' measure – despite the fact that many of the colonised or occupied peoples had much older and advanced civilisations. 'Science' validates Western knowledge, and, in many cases, seeks to erase knowledge and ways of knowing from people and places deemed 'primitive'. The legacy and continued influence of colonial education can be seen around the world.

Demands to decolonise knowledge, conservation, aid, culture, philanthropy, and civil society are rooted in a long history of anti-colonial and liberation struggles. Activists and progressive academics seek to upend the assumptions at the heart of unequal structures in order to recognise and value multiple ways of seeing, doing, and thinking in different contexts and cultures.