

It's not weaponry that can save us from catastrophe n...

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The conflict in Ukraine has left me musing on many things, one of which is how we understand things.

The standard journalistic approach to any story is to answer six questions:

- * Who?
- * What?
- * Where?
- * When?
- * How?
- * Why?

The first five such questions supposedly supply us with the facts. The last is, apparently, explanation.

However, the world is not that simple. Even when it comes to the simplest of events the facts are usually incomplete, whether by choice or because what is reported reflects the chosen (conscious, or unconscious) bias of the commentator. What is not noted, but which nonetheless also happened, is often as important as what is reported.

What that means is that the answer to the question 'why?' is always a matter of interpretation. That is hardly news these days, and yet it would seem that vast numbers of people do, day in, day out, read the opinion of the Daily Mail that is laced through all its content and presume it to be true. As a matter of fact it is not: it is just another opinion.

So why note this? It's because the events of the last week have made it so clear that the six questions journalists supposedly answer are so inadequate as a basis for forming opinion.

What we know is that what is happening in Ukraine is confusing, to everyone. Precisely what the Russians are doing, where, when, how and why is very largely a matter of speculation and guesswork. So far the range of known answers is so wide, ranging from leadership indecision, to logistical failure, to lack of will in many of the armed forces, to some form of deliberate holding back for tactical reasons as yet unknown, that why the Russian advance once the offensive began has been so limited cannot be explained based on any reasonable observation of Russian behaviour.

In contrast we have witnessed an extraordinary tale of leadership, conviction and courage from Ukrainians from their politicians downwards. Ministers and MPs have not fled. People are defiant. Their military has had some successes. An extraordinary cohesion that Moscow could never have anticipated has emerged.

Based on this what emerges is a narrative. Narrative is where I think the dividing line between economics and political economy is to be found.

Economics deals, at most, with the first five journalistic questions, doing so without ever seeking an answer to the question 'why?', about which prior assumptions are presumed to suffice.

Political economy seeks to determine how relationships of power alter the allocation of resources within and between societies. And when power is in play it's not just the 'why?' that has to be answered. In addition the stories that are told that underpin that explanation have to be understood because they are at least as important as the supposed facts.

After all, a great deal of power is not related to facts. Use factual logic and Putin could obviously oppress Ukraine. The arithmetic all stacks in his favour. Tell the stories that support the invasion and the equation changes.

That must be true on the ground. That Russian troops probably have significant doubts about why they are in Ukraine seems very likely, especially when what they are facing are people who are telling them in their own language (which is so much harder to handle) to clear off back across the border because they are most definitely not welcome. No wonder that they stop their tanks.

The Russian story is that the people of Ukraine need liberating. The Ukrainian story is that they do not. The relative power of the two stories is apparent. The Russian story has failed, certainly around the world, and probably in Russia itself. The Ukrainian story has already won, and will be almost impossible for the Russians to dislodge now.

And whatever Putin tries he cannot prevent the Russian people knowing this. They will know about the cancellation of football and other cultural links, whatever the Kremlin says. Even the cancellation of involvement in the Eurovision Song Contest matters. And sanctions are clearly going to hurt when interest rates have already doubled.

The stories that underpin the relationships of power have proven the most powerful issue in this war, so far.

I am not saying that will necessarily remain the case. The risk is that such a massive defeat for Putin - because that is what he has suffered - may produce a catastrophic nuclear reaction from him. I cannot dismiss the possibility. But if it does it will be because the narrative that he believed in has failed. The reaction would be to that failure.

In that case the question to be asked is how can a narrative be built in the coming days that keeps the world safe despite Putin's failure? What stories can be told to ensure we survive his anger at being shown to have failed?

It's not weaponry that can save us from catastrophe now. But new stories might. However, they need to be told with care. Right now we are dealing with the most sensitive of tales, and they have to be exceptionally carefully woven. Do we have the ability to do that?