

New York Times' Thomas Friedman, shuffling facts to feed his bias



by Lev Tsitrin

Chronology is the natural enemy of untruth, and of biases that it feeds. By sticking to chronology while telling a story, a narrator keeps the link between the cause and the effect clear, thus maintaining in a listener the proper attitude towards protagonists. After all, in a fight between two siblings, which one will get consoled, and which one will get a slap from a parent? The answer is obvious: the punishment will go to whoever started the fight. Causality is the bedrock of true justice.

But there is a flip side to it: sticking to causality makes a job of a storyteller all but impossible – how do you build suspense that is a backbone of any good story if you stick to chronology? To know identity of the culprit upfront (and the crime always precedes the discovery of a criminal, not follows it – so every detective story inevitably goes backward!) would spoil any whodunit. Chronology is boring.

Needless to say, the *New York Times* wants its reports and its editorials to be fun (and therefore suspenseful) read, too. To that end, straight chronology is typically avoided, just as is done in detective stories; writers' tricks of building up the suspense until the key factual tidbit is finally revealed is used to keep the reader captive.

And then, there is another use for disrupting chronology insofar as the *New York Times* is concerned – telling the reader how to feel about the story. The “what you should think” is stated right upfront, before there is a chance to form a personal, fact-based opinion. First, the reader learns who in the story is good, and who is bad – and only then is the story told. This way, facts themselves have lesser effect, which is the key purpose of the paper– since the whole point of telling the story is to move the reader's emotions about protagonists, not to provide factual information. Once the reader knows who to root for the facts become near-irrelevant; the details get forgotten, only the remembrance of who was right and who was wrong remains. It takes a very strong-minded reader to say “wait a minute – this contradicts what you told me before!” Most readers will read the facts in the light of the attitude that has been set for them upfront, and not notice any contradiction.

Thomas Friedman's recent [*The Israel We Knew Is Gone*](#) is a classic example of this chronology-breaking sleight-of-hand.

Suppose his op-ed started with “There has been a dramatic upsurge in violence – stabbings, shootings, gang warfare and

organized crime – by Israeli Arabs against other Israeli Arabs, and Israeli Arab gangs and organized crime against Israeli Jews, particularly in mixed communities. The result is that, “like in America, ‘policing’ has become a huge issue in Israel in recent years”” – a paragraph that he stuck in the middle of his piece.

This properly becoming the chronologically starting point, one feels sure that the presumably-sensational revelation about which, per Mr. Friedman, we should get indignant – that political clout and numeric representation of parties that “see Israeli Arab citizens as a fifth column who can’t be trusted” grew considerably – would not cause any surprise (leave alone outrage) in a reader – especially if the reader remembers the events of May 2021, when barrages of Palestinian rockets coming from Gaza got accompanied, for the first time in Israel’s history, by rioting of her Arab citizens, hell-bent on killing the Jews, Israeli police taken aback and unprepared to deal with this new threat.

With chronology followed rather than violated, electoral success of such parties would look natural: like people elsewhere, Israelis want to know they are protected. It is precisely to prevent a reader’s natural empathy that Mr. Friedman builds the outrage right upfront, to have the captive reader engulfed in it: “Israeli political trends are often a harbinger of wider trends in Western democracies – Off Broadway to our Broadway. I hoped that the national unity government that came to power in Israel in June 2021 might also be a harbinger of more bipartisanship here. Alas, that government has now collapsed and is being replaced by the most far-far-right coalition in Israel’s history. Lord save us if this is a harbinger of what’s coming our way.” Tremble, reader, at the horror of what is to follow – though there is nothing in it horrible at all (except for the Palestinian terrorism, of course).

By breaking with chronology and – therefore – with causality,

Mr. Friedman presents Israeli election as a premonition of doom coming straight out of a Greek tragedy. But that's not what it is, Mr. Friedman – and to have a proof, all you need to do it is read your own op-ed from the end towards the beginning – or perhaps from the middle outwards – whichever direction straightens out your chronology. Don't let your dramatic sense – and for that matter, your obvious bias – dictate your writing. Though, to think of it, why would the *New York Times* employ an unbiased, honest writer, given that editorial bias is what the paper lives by?