Late on the night of Friday June 1, 2001, Saeed Hotary left the Palestinian West Bank city of Kalkilya by car. Two colleagues, who also made the journey, dropped him off at the promenade in Tel Aviv. According to eyewitness reports, Hotary joined a long queue of people awaiting entry into the Dolphinarium nightclub. He mingled with some of the teenagers in the queue and flirted with one girl in particular. Without warning, Hotary detonated an explosive device strapped to his body, which held a large number of metal objects including ball bearings and screws. Within an instant, both Hotary and the girl evaporated. In total, twenty-one people died and one hundred and twenty were injured, the vast majority of whom were teenagers gathering on Tel Aviv’s promenade to socialize at the weekend. (Gill, 2007: 143)

Social identity theory allows us to make sense of actions such as suicide bombings which are harder to understand using the traditional rational choice theory alone (although an integration of the two approaches is possible (Upal, 2014; Upal & Gibbon, 2014)). According to social identity theory, when people perceive their group’s status to be lower than a comparison group’s status, they are motivated to take restorative action to ameliorate the negative impact on their self-esteem, part of which is derived from their group membership. The social identity management strategies are typically classified into individual strategies and social strategies. Individual strategies include individuation and mobility. Individuation involves focusing on one’s individual characteristics that distinguish one from other members of one’s group. Depersonalization is the opposite of individuation where people come to see themselves as typical group members and indistinguishable from other group members. Since individual mobility strategy benefits the individual group members at the expense of their group, groups develop norms that view it negatively e.g., as selfish actions by greedy individuals. Depersonalization and social strategies on the other hand are viewed positively as heroic and unselfish. Group norms include mechanisms for rewarding those who lead social actions that favour the group.

Social strategies include collective violence as well as non-violent actions such as social creativity. Social creativity involves attempts to reshape shared social identity beliefs in favour of one’s ingroup. These include choosing a different comparison group that has a lower status (so that the one’s group looks better by comparison) and dimension shifting (elevating the importance of positive ingroup characteristics and downgrade those dimensions on which an outgroup looks better than the ingroup (Mummendey & Schreiber, 1984; van Knippenberg, 1978)) or outright attempts to denigrate the outgroup's status while boasting about one’s ingroup. Psychologists argue that such ingroup favouritism and outgroup derogation naturally arise because of the group member’s need to feel good about themselves. Since self-esteem of the individual group members depends on the perceived social value of their group, they are biased to preferentially process pieces of information such as rumors, jokes, and folktales that extol virtues of their group and denigrate other groups.
In a number of lab studies where subjects were arbitrarily assigned to groups (but told that they had some hidden characteristics in common with other group members), participants gave more rewards to members of their group than to members of other groups. In a series of experiments British psychologists, Henry Tajfel and his student John Turner, told 14-15 year old boys from a Bristol school that they had been placed in a group because of the way they estimated flashing dots or classified paintings. Then they were asked to assign points to other boys, some of whom had been placed in their group while others had been placed in a different group. They found that even arbitrary group labels such as “over-estimators” and “under-estimators” were sufficient to cause boys to give more points to boys in their group and fewer points to boys in the other group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). If minimal groups set up in the lab where alleged group members may never get to see their fellow group members and which have no prior history, no cultural ties such as a common language, common dress, common food, common stories, or common poetry can control the behavior of its members, one can only imagine the power that real world cultural group must exert over their members.

Another dynamic that is hard to study in artificial groups is the degree of affiliation that members have for a group. In the real world groups, some members feel a stronger attachment to a group than do other members. These high identifiers are known to express more support for in-group favouritism beliefs than low identifiers. The sports fans who strongly identify with a team also report feeling happier than those who weakly identify with a winning team (Hirt & Clarkson, 2010). The more devoted fans are also more likely to report painful feelings such as despair, anger, and “being kicked in the gut” when their team loses, especially to an arch rival. Here’s how St. John describes his feelings after his team’s loss:

when an undefeated Alabama team lost to Auburn my junior year, I anesthetized myself with a steady drip of keg Budweiser. The next morning I woke up on my dorm-room bed, fully clothed and in the fetal position. My roommates reported that I’d taken refuge there at some point in the fourth quarter and had wept myself to sleep...

In the late spring of 1999, another team I’d foolishly adopted, the New York Knicks, lost in the play-offs. I should’ve been prepared—the Knicks always lost in the play-offs—but there I was again at the threshold of despair. I had a familiar internal dialogue: I blamed the players, then the coach, then the management, and of course the referees, and then I scolded myself for even bothering to care. (St. John, 2005: 13)

Members who identify strongly with a group are also more likely to search for causes of the events that led to a loss of their group’s status. After convincing themselves of the reasons behind their group’s subpar performance, they go about convincing others of these reasons, partly because they need other’s support to “fix” the problems. Psychologist Dominic Packer found that Ohio State students who strongly identified with their school were more likely to challenge the perceived student binge-
drinking norm than students who weakly identified with their school. The results were surprising because they question the traditional scholarly expectations that those who strongly identify with a group always want to maintain the status quo. The experimental results suggest that traditional wisdom is not true in this case. Once high-identifiers become convinced that the long term property of their group is in danger, they seek changes to the environments which may include changes to the group’s cherished norms and shared beliefs.

The reason, why those who strongly identity with a group are more likely to challenge their group’s shared beliefs seen to be threatening to the group, is that high identifiers have more to lose if their group loses its status and hence have more reason to be concerned about threats to its future status. High identifiers also have the social capital and the creds that are needed to withstand the blowback that always follows those who advocate changes to a group’s norms.

Because social change, by definition, requires changes in beliefs and behaviors of a large number of people it is a painstakingly difficult process requiring years of efforts by highly motivated individuals. In order to successfully convince their fellow group members of the need for reforms, the reformers must have entrepreneurial qualities not too different from those required of used cars sales staff. They must work as social-identity-change entrepreneurs or SIEs for short. In order to be able to sustain their efforts and high motivation level over prolonged periods of time needed for social change, the SIEs come to see their purpose in life as spreading the message of change. They come to see themselves as social-identity-change entrepreneurs, as defenders of the group interests, and as reformers of ideologies be they religious, economic or political ideologies. This suggests that in order to affect changes to a group’s social identity, SIEs must first affect a change to their own personal identity that allows them to start seeing themselves as SIEs.

3.1 Social-Identity-Change Entrepreneurs as Weavers and Sellers of Stories

Evolution has “hardwired” the process and form of storytelling into human brains and mind. Fisher concludes that humans are really *homo narratus*, and that storytelling is an intrinsic human attribute. That is, story architecture is hard wired into the human mind. (Haven & Ducey, 2007: 11)

People around the world are avid storytellers. They love to tell and listen to stories. Compared to other activities such as reading and writing that require years of effortful training, listening to stories and understanding them seems to come naturally to people. A number of social scientists including the psychologist, Jerome Bruner, argued that the reason for that is that narrative processing is fundamental to our thinking. Bruner says that we have a “predisposition to organize experience
into a narrative form, into plot structures and the rest” and that “we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on” (Bruner, 1991: 4). We don’t understand our lives as millions of unrelated random events but as logically connected sequence of events where everything happens for a reason. If someone asked you a question about a major event in your life, such as why did you do that, what would you say? Psychologists have found that most people tell stories in response. Here’s the description of a social scientist who interviewed women in Kerala, South India.

Asking a seemingly straightforward question (e.g. “what were the main causes of your separation”), I expected a list but, instead, got a “long story”... After coming to the end of a long and complex story of a marriage, a participant would sometimes say “uh, I’m afraid I got a little lost. What was the question you asked?”... Although my question (“were you ever pregnant?”) could have been answered directly (“yes”), Gita chose instead to negotiate a space in the interview to develop a complex narrative. She describes terminated pregnancies, going to a political demonstration, coming home to her husband’s anger, whereupon the scene shifts to the actions of in-laws’ and her husband’s refusal to be examined for infertility. (Reissman, 2001: 695)

Since our understanding of groups is an extension of our understanding of individuals, it is not surprising that we also think of groups as having lives with a sequence of events starting from how the group came to be and how it responded to various events in its environment including incidents involving other groups. Such narratives are shared among group members. In order to change their group’s myths, social identity entrepreneurs not only have to understand the existing group narratives but similar to other marketers, they must also learn how to exploit them to create a narrative of change needed to sell their new social identity myths to their groups. This “selling with stories” technique is considered by marketers to be more effective than traditional techniques as marketing expert Scott McKee explains, “When I build a brand, I’m telling a story. When I have conversations, I’m telling and listening to stories. The narrative is the interesting part” (McKee, 2002).

A narrative of change must not only specify the problem with group’s current thinking or behavior and the solution to that problem but it must also tell the group members why they should care about the problem and why they should adopt the solution being advocated. The narratives of change have to convince group members that current beliefs and behavior of the group members threatens the group’s long term prosperity. They must also frame the offending beliefs and behavior of the group members as contrary to their identity as group members. They have to specify which of group’s many beliefs and behavior is the true cause of the impending decline and they have to explain how the solution overcomes these shortcomings to ensure a glorious future for the group.

Social influence researchers have found that ardent group members, whose support is critical to any change effort, do not like messages that criticize the shared
beliefs or behavior of their group. Similar to the way, St. John’s psyche was struggling against his criticism of Crimson Tide fans, minds of high-identifiers counter-argue against any critique of their group. This makes them even more resistant to messages of change. One way to generate positive feelings in the minds of group members is by praising the group. Researchers have found, however, that simple addition of flattery to a message of change does not make such messages any more palatable (Packer 2008). Any group praise has to be seamlessly integrated with the message of change. A natural way to include praise of a group is to discuss the group’s (real or imaginary) past glory and contrast it with the misery of the present state of decline (presumably due to the group member’s offending beliefs and behaviors) and end the narrative with a promise of a bright future to usher in as a result of the adoption of the solution. Lehigh University social psychologists Dominic Packer, Gordon Moskowitz and Matthew Kugler conducted a series of studies to investigate the effectiveness of such social change messages (Upal, Packer, Moskowitz, & Kugler, 2011). They labeled social change messages that acknowledge that our group is currently not doing well, remind the group of its glorious past, and promise that making a change to group’s shared beliefs will restore that glory in the future, as arcing messages (Figure 1). A series of studies found that such narrative structure was more persuasive than other structures especially on those group members that identify strongly with the group and are especially resistant to most social change messages (Upal, Packer, Moskowitz, & Kugler, 2011).

Fig. 1: Arcing pattern of glorious-past–inglorious-present–glorious future that successfully overcomes a group’s natural resistance to messages of change.
Not surprisingly one can find instances of arcing messages in the speeches and writings of great leaders of all sorts of groups (such as professional, ethnic, and regional organizations as well civic, regional, and national governments). Because of their concern for the well-being and future prosperity of their group, such leaders are often able to spot issues that may impact their group’s future prosperity and see opportunities that if pursued may lead to increased future prosperity of their group. Because of their strong attachment to their groups, they are willing to suffer the abuse of those who want to protect the status quo to seek desired change in their group’s shared beliefs. Such leaders perceive that their calling in life is to advocate the change in the group’s shared beliefs. Because of their social identity change efforts such leaders can be called social-identity-change entrepreneurs.

While all US presidents worked for their nation’s betterment (as they understood it), few modern presidents have been as eloquent advocates of their cause as President Regan. After getting elected, he wasted little time in selling his narrative of change. Here’s part of President Regan’s inaugural speech where he starts by identifying the problem:

These United States are confronted with an economic affliction of great proportions. We suffer from the longest and one of the worst sustained inflations in our national history. It distorts our economic decisions, penalizes thrift, and crushes the struggling young and the fixed-income elderly alike. It threatens to shatter the lives of millions of our people. Idle industries have cast workers into unemployment, human misery, and personal indignity. Those who do work are denied a fair return for their labor by a tax system which penalizes successful achievement and keeps us from maintaining full productivity. (Committee-on-Inaugural-Ceremonies, 1989:332)

Next he presents his diagnosis:

For decades we have piled deficit upon deficit, mortgaging our future and our children’s future for the temporary convenience of the present. To continue this long trend is to guarantee tremendous social, cultural, political, and economic upheavals. You and I, as individuals, can, by borrowing, live beyond our means, but for only a limited period of time. Why, then, should we think that collectively, as a nation, we’re not bound by that same limitation? (Committee-on-Inaugural-Ceremonies, 1989:332)

The solution by now is obvious but President spells it out anyways.

It is time to check and reverse the growth of government, which shows signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed. It is my intention to curb the size and influence of the Federal establishment and to demand recognition of the distinction between the powers granted to the Federal Government and those reserved to the States or to the people. All of us need to be reminded that the Federal Government did not create the States; the States created the Federal Government. Now, so there will be no misunderstanding, it’s not my intention to do away with government. It is rather to make it work -- work with us, not over us; to stand by our side, not ride on our back. Government can and must provide opportunity, not smother it; foster productivity, not stifle it. (Committee-on-Inaugural-Ceremonies, 1989:333)
Selling the solution involves more than just presenting it. One of the problems that reformers face is that by presenting the dangers to the community, they end up alienating the strongly identifying group members who are naturally inclined to question every negative characterization of their group. In order to overcome group member’s resistance, social identity entrepreneurs must often balance negative characterization of the group’s present with overly positive characterization of its past and future and emphasize the strength of their affiliation for the group. They often argue that they criticize the group because they love it. In a survey of anti-Iraq war blogs, Packer (2008) found that a vast majority couched their opposition to the war in terms of their love for their country. Here’s how President Reagan tries to soothe the feelings of his audience for his criticism of US government in his inaugural speech.

If we look to the answer as to why for so many years we achieved so much, prospered as no other people on Earth, it was because here in this land we unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before... Directly in front of me, the monument to a monumental man, George Washington, father of our country. A man of humility who came to greatness reluctantly. He led America out of revolutionary victory into infant nationhood. Off to one side, the stately memorial to Thomas Jefferson. The Declaration of Independence flames with his eloquence. And then, beyond the Reflecting Pool, the dignified columns of the Lincoln Memorial. Whoever would understand in his heart the meaning of America will find it in the life of Abraham Lincoln. (Committee-on-Inaugural-Ceremonies, 1989 :333)

He was even more articulate about how adopting his solution of reducing the size of government would lead to a bright future in his 1984 State of the Union speech.

America’s best days and democracy’s best days lie ahead. We’re a powerful force for good. With faith and courage, we can perform great deeds and take freedom’s next step. And we will. We will carry on the tradition of a good and worthy people who have brought light where there was darkness, warmth where there was cold, medicine where there was disease, food where there was hunger, and peace where there was only bloodshed. (Committee-on-Inaugural-Ceremonies, 1989 :333)

The esteem in which President Reagan is held by Americans, especially by Republicans, shows us the effectiveness of the arcing message of social change. New York’s mayor Rudy Guiliani follows the same template when he identifies the ‘liberal cynicism’ as the root cause of New York City’s problems. In his inaugural speech in 1994, he said:

The era of fear has had a long enough reign. The period of doubt has run its course. As of this moment, the expressions of cynicism – New York is not governable, New York is not manageable, New York is not worth it – all of these I declare politically incorrect. (Guiliani, 1994)

He knows that he needs to sell his diagnosis of the problem to New Yorkers. He says:
it's time for us to convince the cynics that the fear, the doubts and the cynicisms are over with...
Don't let those who are so fearful of transformation stop the process before it begins. Killing ideas by fear. We don't need to be fearful. (Guiliani, 1994)

The solution to this problem, argues Guiliani is to overcome cynicism and doubt and renew and expand New York's traditional strengths. This he promised would lead to a glorious future for New York.

Look anew at Broadway, the opera, the ballet, the museums and the fashion industry as powerful magnets drawing people and commerce to our city. We must expand them all. We must build our future on institutions like this. And as they grow, more New Yorkers will go back to work and have jobs... New York City has the very best health-care institutions in America. But we're not thought of and promoted as America's health-care capital. It should be so and it will be so. We're the home of over 100 institutions of higher learning in every field. We have some of the greatest schools in the world here in New York City. People come here from all over the world to be educated in our schools. Yet we don't think of New York as a college and university town. It should be so and it will be so... Albany, the capital of New York State. Washington, D.C., the capital of the nation. And New York City will again be the capital of the world. (Guiliani, 1994)

Mayor Giuliani’s social-identity transformation of New Yorkers is widely seen as successful. During the first two years in office, New York’s serious crime rate had dropped by half while the number of murders was reduced by a third. By the end of his two terms, the city’s crime rate had fallen by 57%, so much lower as compared to other US cities, that New York was named as America’s safest large city by the FBI.

Despite calling themselves conservatives, those on the right are constantly redefining their social-identity, from Joe Six Pack to Joe the Plumber and from Soccer Moms to Hockey Moms or rather a constant parade of social-identity entrepreneurs such as Reagan, Giuliani, and Donald Trump are at work to sell new ways of being authentic to a seemingly endlessly hungry public that keeps buying them. A February 2010 Rasmussen poll shows that 73% Americans believe that Washington is broken. This is remarkable for a number of reasons. The top reason being that this was a little over a year after Americans had just elected yet another “outsider” Barack Obama as President to fix Washington! Indeed, it seems that for decades at election time, almost every candidate seems to run “to fix Washington” yet it remains broken! Why is that? Why are social groups constantly in need of reformation? The issue is not specific to the American conservative movement or even to Western societies or even modern societies.

No human culture, past or present, seems to be immune to change and evolution. Shared beliefs systems from every domain whether it be politics, religion, art, or science appear to be extremely dynamic. Part of this is because of the role of social identity change entrepreneurs. Physical, social, and cultural environments inhabited by groups are constantly changing. Since reformed cultural groups are better groups (in the sense of being better suited to their environment) and therefore, groups have mechanisms that reward successful reformers. The SIEs get privileged access to
resources such as money and mates and are therefore driven to seek reforms. However, this on its own is not sufficient to explain the level and pattern of cultural dynamism. Cultural trends are simply too numerous and too frequent. They also follow a peculiar pattern. The new cultural trend has a paradoxical relationship with the previous trend. It is defined with respect to it and also defined by an explicit opposition to it. The next chapter will look at the attraction that groups have for new trends and new ideas that I argue drives some of the cultural dynamism.