

Legitimizing Myth and the Search for Meaning

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This paper examines the process of mystification that accompanies new paradigms, and discusses such contemporary legitimizing myths as The Myth of the Magic of the Market, The Myth of the Inefficient Public Sector, The Myth of the Objective Media, and The Myth of American Exceptionalism. While these legitimizing myths limit our understanding of the world, liberating myths such as The Rainbow Warrior are needed to address our spiritual and ecological crises. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2008 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]*

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The writers cited in this paper show us the hidden center or vantage point from which we view the world. The frame through which we perceive what we imagine to be reality contains myths that condition our view. While myths confer purpose and meaning on human activity and justify existing patterns of belief and behavior, they can also impede the quest for truth. The task of the critical thinker is to question and challenge the myths that govern our lives, while seeking to create new paradigms for the purpose of further articulation and inquiry.

Myths may evoke events in a distant past, justify the privileges of a social class, conceal the crimes of empire, or shape the future. However,

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the pattern described is everlasting, or rather, beyond Time. Myth imposes a meaning on human experience and in the process subordinates the complexity of this experience to a social design and end. In myth, as in poetry, an image is detached from its surroundings in order to objectify a spiritual condition. Thus the moon that traverses the night sky might come to evoke a collective memory that cuts across individual existence, instead of a lifeless satellite spinning in space.

According to Roland Barthes, myth is a mode of signification, a form that is defined not by the object of the message, but by the way the message is uttered. Myth is a type of speech² that is chosen by history for a social end (Barthes 109). History determines the life and death of myth, according to the shifting circumstances of power and changing modes of representation. Barthes sees myth as a metalanguage that is constructed from a prior semiological system and which consists of more than just written discourse. Cinema, advertising and photography all support myth whose materials are objects appropriated for social usage, what Barthes calls “ideas-in-form,” including flags, sign-boards, clothes and other objects that bear messages (112, 115).

Myth lifts things out of their immediate historical context in order to postulate a past, a memory, and an order of things. Barthes gives the example of *un soldat nègre* in a military uniform, saluting the French flag to show how a meaningful object serves a purpose – that of the myth of the French Empire, an all-inclusive entity that universalizes humanity through French culture (as suggested by the flag) and militarism (as suggested by the uniform). According to Barthes, the conversion of the black soldier into an object appropriated by myth deprives him of his context and history (116-117).

Myth makes itself look innocent and neutral, not because myth hides its intentions, but because these intentions are naturalized (Barthes 125). Myth provides the illusion of Nature, Barthes tells us, because the images it produces will “naturally” evoke the desired concept with the clarity of fact rather than of explanation (143). History, through the workings of myth, ceases to reveal the dynamic interaction of an object with its time and place, but is instead transformed into Nature, a reservoir of meaning that lends itself to universal and eternal representations of humanity.

Myth abolishes the open-endedness of human acts, dispensing of those elements which contradict its universalism and illusion of eternity. Myth is defined by its intention rather than by its literal sense. An object loses

² Barthes uses the word *parole*, which is often translated as discourse.

its poetic ambiguity and possibilities of action when it becomes an image in the service of a larger design. While myth draws upon a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of objects, it uses these objects for the same discourse; in this sense then, the speech of myth is invariable or “frozen,” as Barthes terms it (125). Myth resists the variables and chaos of existence, denying ideological approaches to reality even while imposing *the* ideological approach that denies its own status as ideology.³

Thomas Kuhn sees in science a similar tendency towards the simplification of reality: the mystification that results when complex experience is viewed in the light of the prevailing paradigm.⁴ By way of example, Kuhn describes an experiment in which certain playing cards had their colors changed. For instance, the queen of spades might be red instead of black. At first, the subjects of the experiment failed to recognize the anomalies, fitting them instead into pre-existing conceptual categories. Only when the anomalies were numerous and frequent did the subjects experience confusion and hesitation, which resulted eventually in a reassessment that led to the creation of a new paradigm (62-63).⁵ The explaining away of anomalies according to prevailing notions and world-views can last only so long before the anomalies, if they are sufficiently unsettling or numerous, provoke a crisis and the subsequent emergence of a new paradigm.

Kuhn states that for an anomaly to create a crisis, and so demystify conceptual recognition, there must also be difficulties in the paradigm-nature fit. Paradigms are essential to science in that they provide the norms and tradition in which scientists work. However, paradigms deceive as well. There is a tendency in science to view history as a linear progression to the presently existing paradigm. What actually happens is that science undergoes a series of revolutions in which paradigms are

³ According to Barthes, the oppressor resorts to myth for the purpose of ideological imposition: “The oppressed is nothing, he has only one language, that of his emancipation; the oppressor is everything, his language is rich, multiform, supple, with all the possible degrees of dignity at its disposal: he has an exclusive right to meta-language. The oppressed *makes* the world, he has only an active, transitive (political) language; the oppressor conserves it, his language is plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical: it is Myth. The language of the former aims at transforming, of the latter at eternalizing” (149).

⁴ In the words of Albert Einstein, “It is the theory that decides what we must observe” (quoted in Eliade 39).

⁵ Kuhn compares William Herschel’s discovery of Uranus to the playing card experiment, noting that the anomalous character of Uranus, which did not follow the pattern of a star, had been observed on many previous occasions but was not taken into account (115-116).

challenged and subsequently replaced. History is written backwards because previous paradigms are seen in the light of recent knowledge and discovery. The process of mystification reasserts itself when one paradigm succeeds another.

Kuhn shows how errors precede discovery and demystify: from the determination of significant facts, the scientist can proceed to the matching of facts with theory, and eventually to the articulation of a new theory. Novel facts, then, are not subversive inconveniences, but the true test to the validity of a theory or paradigm. Kuhn's insights help us understand how capitalism conditions people not to see economic inequality and social injustice.

John Berger describes the process of mystification in art, noting that "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (8). Painting undergoes a "bogus religiosity" that exalts uniqueness in order to enhance the market value of a work of art (Berger 21, 23). History, which Berger defines as "the relation between a present and its past," makes us see art of the past differently from an artist's contemporaries. Berger shows how an art critic mystifies the paintings of Hals and explains away what ought to be evident, namely, the early critique of capitalism in those paintings. According to Berger, our view of the past is mystified by fear of the present: only if the present is seen clearly can the right questions be asked of the past (11-16). However, capitalism, as Berger notes, obscures the present, emptying people of memory so that they are unable to situate themselves in history. They are not free to choose, because capitalism forces people to define their interests as narrowly as possible through false standards of what is desirable (Berger 33, 154).

Berger describes how in the age of mechanical reproduction images can outlast what they represent, taken out of their context at the service of capitalism (10). He demonstrates how context changes our perception of art. After showing us a painting of a cornfield by Van Gogh, Berger then shows the painting again on the following page with one difference: a caption that tells us that it is Van Gogh's last painting. The two paintings are not identical, for the way they are framed determines our perceptions of them (27-28). Berger's insights help us understand how capitalism perpetuates myth by changing the contexts in which images are seen and by depriving those images of their uniqueness in order to make them ubiquitous and ephemeral (19, 32).

There is no intrinsic merit in a work of art: what determines its acceptance and power to seduce is its correspondence with our own observation of people and institutions (Berger 14). And much of this

correspondence comes from the efficacy of myths that turn people into passive consumers of art who think they are thinking for themselves when in reality their thoughts are being thought for them. Berger shows how the faces of female nudes are usually turned toward the male viewer of the painting or photograph, who is the real, though unseen, focus of the artist. The incitation to prurience is a kind of privilege, an understood arrangement in a world where women have usually been objects of desire rather than subjects of their destinies (Berger 46-47).

Similarly, capitalism seduces people into serving the interest of corporations and a privileged few. It turns citizens into consumers who are confined in automobiles and suburbs, or lost to one another amidst the meaningless randomness of cities. Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer observe that under capitalism no one is responsible for what one thinks (149). Not to conform is to become irrelevant; censorship and physical coercion are unnecessary when people “insist on the very ideology which enslaves them” (Adorno and Horkheimer 133-134). The perfect dictatorship is the one whose subjects imagine that they are free.

Adorno and Horkheimer note that capitalism integrates different art forms into one work at its service, incorporating them into a “prearranged harmony” of stereotypes (126-127). The recurrent characters we see in soap operas and films are part of this process. People must choose forms of entertainment which mystify social relations and estrange them from others. Thanks to the incestuous relationship between corporate power and entertainment, Adorno and Horkheimer observe, the freedom to choose is between what is always the same (167).

A legitimizing myth of fascism (properly defined as the dictatorship of monopoly capital) is the Myth of the Magic of the Market. This myth necessitates removing barriers to investment, enterprise, and flow of capital. Deregulation (so the myth goes) will create jobs, streamline government, and encourage investment. In a conjuring trick, individual political freedom is conflated with corporate impunity. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund force poor countries to provide tax credits and legal guarantees to powerful corporations. The resulting investment typically accelerates environmental degradation, pillages natural resources, and exploits impoverished workers.⁶

⁶ World financial institutions also force poor countries to freeze minimum wages and eliminate food subsidies, even as they punish uncooperative governments through the commodities markets. When Salvador Allende’s Popular Unity government nationalized Chile’s copper mines, the price of copper immediately fell sharply, only to rise again after the military coup that overthrew Allende’s government in 1973. Similarly, when

A corollary to the Myth of the Magic of the Market is the Myth of the Inefficient Public Sector, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when governments cease to provide services for the taxes that they impose on the working poor. As citizens lose confidence in the ability of government to improve their lives, it becomes axiomatic that government at all levels is inherently wasteful and inefficient, reinforcing further the rationale for more cuts in public spending. As governments sell off public utilities, unions shrink or disappear, fragmenting the labor force. “The dictatorial freedom of the market,” as Guy Debord describes it (*Society* 9), starves or privatizes public services, including transportation, education, and health care. The dismantling of the social safety net afflicts above all the poor, the elderly, and the sick.

Another legitimizing myth of corporatism is the Myth of the Objective Media. Debord notes that the term ‘media’ is meant to describe “a mere instrument, a kind of public service... a form of communication which has at last attained a unilateral purity, whereby decisions already taken are presented for passive admiration” (*Comments* 6). The supposed differences within the media conceal the harsh logic of what Debord calls ‘the spectacle’ (*Comments* 7), which he defines as “capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image” (*Society* 24). The function of the spectacle is “the concrete manufacture of alienation” which causes one to confuse one’s own needs with the images of needs proposed by capitalism (*Society* 23).

Fox News would not need a slogan like “We report, you decide” were its news not dictated by the market, nor would it need to call itself “fair and balanced” if it presented viewpoints other than those that serve as foils to rightwing talking heads. Robert McChesney observes that:

much of the ideological strength of markets as a regulatory mechanism for the media comes from the metaphor of the ‘marketplace of ideas.’ The image conjured by this term is one where as long as there is no government interference, all varieties of ideas will blossom under democracy’s sun, with the truest ideas growing tallest. The market is assumed to be a neutral and value-free regulatory mechanism. In fact... a commercial ‘marketplace’ of ideas has a strong bias toward rewarding ideas supportive of the status quo and marginalizing socially dissident views. Markets tend to reproduce social inequality economically, politically *and*

Prime Minister Michael Manley nationalized Jamaica’s bauxite mines, the price of bauxite dropped steeply, plunging Jamaica into an economic crisis.

ideologically. The metaphor serves to mystify the actual corporate domination of our communication system and therefore provides the commercial interests with a valuable shield from rightful public criticism and participation in the policymaking process (47-48).

Objectivity in the corporate media consists not of a balance of different perspectives on an issue, but of a strategy that deploys language without emotive overtones and which conceals human suffering (Galeano, *Embraces* 130).⁷ Noam Chomsky notes that:

the system protects itself with indignation against a challenge to the right of deceit in the service of power, and the very idea of subjecting the ideological system to rational inquiry elicits incomprehension or outrage... The very structure of the media is designed to induce conformity to established doctrine. In a three-minute between commercials, or in seven hundred words, it is impossible to present unfamiliar thoughts or surprising conclusions with the argument and evidence required to afford them some credibility (9-10).

The media, which is widely perceived to be liberal in the United States (a myth fostered by the media itself), is intertwined with the military industrial complex, echoing its rationales for permanent war.⁸ One finds in the ostensibly disinterested tone of the media, in the canned laughter of sitcoms, the presence of fascism.

The Myth of American Exceptionalism is encapsulated in a question posed by Virginian statesman John Page to Thomas Jefferson shortly after signing of the Declaration of Independence : “Do you not think that an angel rides in the whirlwind and directs this storm?” Page’s words, which were quoted by George W. Bush in his first inaugural address, express the belief, still widespread in this country, that the United States

⁷ Eduardo Galeano describes some of the euphemisms that the United States government employed during the eighties: “The U. S. State Department decides to suppress the word *murder* in its reports on violations of human rights in Latin America and other regions. Instead of murder, one must say: *illegal or arbitrary deprivation of life*. For some time now, the CIA has avoided the word *murder* in its manuals on practical terrorism. When the CIA murders an enemy or has him murdered, it *neutralizes* him. The State Department calls any war forces it lands south of its borders *peace-keeping forces*; and the killers who fight to restore its business interests in Nicaragua *freedom fighters*” (*Century* 271).

⁸ It is telling that a nuclear weapons manufacturer, General Electric, owns NBC News, and that another nuclear weapons manufacturer, Westinghouse, owns CBS News.

is inherently good and righteous. As the poet Robert Pinsky observes, “a country is the things it wants to see” (quoted in Goldberg 113).

Still, anomalies (to borrow Kuhn’s terminology) continue to unsettle the paradigm of American virtue. The U. S. government refuses to sign treaties to ban cluster bombs and landmines. It continues to obstruct action on global warming. The U. S. military uses water torture, sleep deprivation, and stress positions on prisoners. Tens of thousands of Iraqis have died as a result of the U. S.-led invasion of Iraq – the exact number is a matter of debate. Several million more Iraqis have been injured, left homeless, or forced into exile, even as American and British oil companies stand poised to regain control of Iraqi oil.

We must delegitimize myths and paradigms which have condemned us to ecological destruction and war without end. In their stead, we must rediscover redemptive myths such as *The Rainbow Warrior*, which prophesies that when the Earth is sick and dying, after its land, air, and water have been poisoned, the races of humanity will unite like the colors of the rainbow to save her (McFadden 4, 9-10).⁹ Perhaps then we will discover the sacred dimension of our lives and nurture a poetry of existence that coaxes the objects of a living universe to reveal their secrets.

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⁹ This prophecy was fulfilled when Greenpeace named its first ship *The Rainbow Warrior*. The ship was involved in protests against nuclear testing in the Pacific and was destroyed in an explosion in Auckland Harbor in 1985. The French government was found responsible for this act of terror (McFadden 43-44).

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