SOCIAL MYTHS AND COLLECTIVE IMAGINARIES
SOME AFTERTHOUGHTS

BY

GÉRARD BOUCHARD

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Introduction

As an intellectual and social scientist, I have been trained to think through the prestigious, classical Western canon of Enlightenment. In short, reason was supposed to be the key that unravels every mystery, the powerful tool able to redress all superstitions and follies of the mind, religious and others. At the outset, I was perfectly comfortable with this framework, until I decided to supplement my training with a Ph.D. in history.

Then, I discovered a very different vision of reality which led me away from the assumed symmetry of the social world and the mechanisms that were said to drive it. I was introduced to unpredicted (and unpredictable?) occurrences, to instances of pathological, frightening collective behaviors and to old, yet unexplained puzzling social questions. In other words, I met with complexity, disorder, even sheer chaos that bemused me and changed forever my outlook on many issues. As a result, I became more attentive to events, processes, hidden pulsions, and strange states of mind that can engender human disasters. Along the way, I saw the limits of rationality – or more exactly, of rationalism,

since I still believe in the power of reason to investigate even the realm of irrationality.

So after a long period of work as a social scientist (dealing with demography, social classes, peasant societies, and so forth), I entered the field of cultural studies as these were taking shape in history and sociology, and I embarked upon an ambitious research agenda that successively touched on the structures of social thought, the formation of national cultures in the New World and the genesis of social as well as national myths as sacralized values.[1] The latter topic quickly became my main center of interest.

Pretty soon, I became no less confounded by the relative lack of interest for this major research area among most of my colleagues, a feeling that extends to the field of sociology, including cultural sociology, particularly in North America. I had lengthy exchanges with scholars, some of them political scientists and philosophers, who appeared to be not only unconcerned but rather hostile to the reality of myths in our societies. I went to great lengths to demonstrate the outstanding power of these collective representations able to generate both the best and the worst, how they can mobilize a whole population, even to the point of drawing people to sacrify their life. I tried to open their minds, to arouse their curiosity for those uncommon features whose authority makes them often immune to critique: how do they emerge? How do they achieve sacredness? What brings about their decline? I was also arguing that my approach was not an attack on reason but an attempt to better delineate and even to maximize the conditions of its operation. To no avail.

According to their view, myths are only inferior forms of conscience to be eliminated and superseded by rationality. They

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[1] See, for instance, Bouchard 2003, 2004, 2008, 2013, 2014. See also Bouchard and Andrès 2007.

are remnants of the premodern age typical of primitive cultures that did not benefit from the great Western intellectual riches. Needless to say, those interlocutors were even more reluctant to hear about the archetypes, those primary, structuring images that underpin myths.

Still, I stood my ground. I remained much intrigued by the way some values, through a sacralization process, manage to acquire and wield an amazing power upon the minds and hearts (the latter perhaps more than the former)[2] since myths are hybrids, baffling mixtures of reason and emotion. Yet, it does not mean that they escape scientific investigation and understanding. Major parts of them are social constructs, contextually produced by collective actors and they have a history that can be reconstituted.

To be sure, the emotional component, with its deep roots in unconscious, is the most difficult to account for. But to deny the relevance of emotion and myths in the analysis of social and cultural life is a huge mistake. All societies, past and present, showcase the work of myths, the hold of values so strongly grounded in the imaginary that they are shielded from intellectual attacks and enjoy a life of their own. In most nations of the West, this is clearly the case with values such as the dignity of human life, freedom, equality, democracy, pluralism, and a few others.

As an aside, I must introduce another concept that foregrounds the central place of myths in the cultural sphere. Given their exceptional power (here I take my cue from the neo-Durkhemian sociological school), I consider myths as the cornerstone of what I call the symbolic foundation of collective life. In every society, a symbolic foundation is comprised of a common language, an identity, a memory, and a set of beliefs, ideals, norms, narratives and worldviews feeding on myths. From one society to another, it

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[2] Some scholars even assert that, at the deepest level, reason feeds on emotion.

can be more or less substantial, consistent, and forcefully inculcated. But as a rule, the more closely integrated a collectivity wishes to be, the more substantial a symbolic foundation is needed. In short, there is no social link without some symbolic asset.

I

Myths as a Staple of Collective Life:

a) The Founding Myths of the European Union

As a way to make my point with the skeptics, after the publication of my theoretical essay *Raison et déraison du mythe* (Bouchard 2014, in English: Bouchard 2017), I decided to carry out empirical research with the view of displaying myths in action. My first attempt dealt with the history of European Union (EU) and its evolving and difficult relationship with myths.[3]

The pioneers of the Union were much concerned about providing the projected body with a substantial symbolic foundation. Consequently, they made a number of choices that allowed the EU to take off and to enjoy a rapid development after the World War II. I will only recall a few of them:

1) The two world wars, along with the Shoah, were seen as the ultimate disgrace, a brutal violation of the European humanist tradition. This powerful reference sustained the powerful myths promoting peace, the dignity of human life, harmony and cooperation ("Never again").

2) Because of the disastrous display of ultra-nationalisms and atrocities that occurred during the first decades of the 20th century, nations and popular classes, in the mind of the founders, had to be

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[3] Bouchard 2016; Id. 2017 b.

distrust and kept at bay. The new Europe would be built and driven by rationality.

3) States and their political processes had failed. In particular, traditional parliamentary democracy, easily subverted by populism, had proved unreliable and it had to be kept in check. As a consequence, elites and experts should be in charge of the new Europe.

4) Giving priority to economy (to the 'functional ') over the 'symbolic' appeared to be the best way to come out of the after-War mess. Prosperity would trump everything else ("economy unites, culture divides").

5) In their state of devastation and weakness, European societies had to be protected against three big threats: a) a quick recovery of Germany and a return to its dominating and destructive dreams, b) the imperialism of the United States who had their own plan of European reconstruction, and c) the aggressively expansionist USSR.

Together, these propositions constituted the symbolic foundation of the EU at the outset. However, during the ensuing decades, European leaders showed little concern for keeping these founding myths alive. As should have been expected, they lost part of their purchase, while the three great threats were subsiding, if not disappearing. Then a series of setbacks rocked the European boat (among them: the 1970's economic crisis, a rapid expansion of the Union which in some respects got out of hand, the Greek nightmare). Along the way, the popular identification with the Union kept declining.

All those troubles sparked a new interest for the supporting myths. Over the last thirty years, a number of leaders, experts and analysts of all stripes called for a revival of the founding myths or for the promotion of new ones. Many scholars obliged and came

up with various suggestions (social equality, sustainability, gender equality, human rights, democracy, a true "European dream", reviving the Christian roots, universalism, a world moral power, and so forth). However, none of them really succeeded.

Among the many factors at play, three stand out. In many cases, the myth was already well grounded at the national level. This produced a competition that the Union could not win. In other cases, the message sounded hollow or smacked of angelism (for instance, the motto "Unity in diversity", a virtuous foreign policy, spirituality, moral power…). Likewise, widely criticized for being subservient to neo-liberalism and for its top-down governance model, the Union lacked the credibility to erect itself as a guardian against the new world capitalism and to preach the social gospel. The same holds with the celebration of democracy.

In light of this deadlock, I have suggested what might be a more promising avenue. In a nutshell, it would consist in conciling the Union with the nations and to piggyback on the myths that are already deeply ensconced in the national cultures – in other words: to europeanize the national myths. That way, the competition between the Union and the nations would be much alleviated and the two actors would speak with the same voice which would resonate at both levels (one voice, various echoes).[4]

II

Myths as a staple of Collective Life.

b) From Social to National Myths

My second attempt at instantiating the work of myths consisted in a study of the state and future of national myths in a wide sample

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[4] For a more detailed account, see Bouchard 2017 b, ch. 7.

of contemporary societies, along with in-depth analyses of a few cases, including Québec, English Canada and the United States (specially the American dream).[5] I define national myths as social myths that take shape and operate at the scale of a society, their first propriety being to transform the latter into a nation as a symbolic framework –as opposed to a tribe, a community, a City-State, a federation or any other supranational body.

The question that propels my analysis relates to the impact of globalization, neo-liberalism and ethnocultural diversification (through immigration) on old national myths. But in the course of my investigation, I also manage to exemplify the mythification process outlined in my 2017 theoretical book.

First, I address the remarkably small and stable body of archetypes which most national myths, old and new, build on. Depending on the context, the nation is depicted as a family, it is said to have been chosen by God to fulfil a mission, it enjoys a purity that is embodied in the peasantry or in "le peuple", and so forth. Archetypes also include common discursive patterns and analytical categories.

Then, through a sample of nations, I offer an instantiation of the steps and components of the mythification process (anchor, imprint, ethos, narrative…). To that end, I revisit old national myths that have unfolded in these nations past. Here are a few examples.

Serbia

In this case, the major anchor is the military defeat at the hands of the Ottoman forces in 1389, an event which has inspired a deep

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[5] I have just completed a book manuscript that is now in the hands of a publisher. It will be released in the winter of 2019.

sorrow and humiliation, as well as a longing for revenge – or a re-conquest. As a result, Serbians were and still are urged to show courage, pride and faithfulness such that the honor of the nation can be restored. Needless to say, this imaginary has loomed large during the 1990s Balkans war. As a driving archetype, one can also observe at work the millenarist cycle with its three phases: (a) the Golden age, before 1389, (b) a long period of suffering and hope, and (c) a victory, a re-conquest, that is a return to the Golden age.

Switzerland

This nation offers a different version of the same basic schema, with the exception that the millenarist cycle is missing since the anchor is not a trauma but a great accomplishment that ushers in the Golden age. This accomplishment is an act of rebellion performed in the 14th century by William Tell, the young hero who, by killing the representative of the Habsburg dynasty, freed his people. Over the years, this founding event became associated with freedom, democracy, equality, and the courageous fight of the weak against the powerful. Interestingly, this symbolic thread has combined with another borne out of the impressive Alpine environment which has inspired 'Rousseauist' ideals of harmony with nature, peace between nations, respect and compassion among citizens, along with a quest for consensus and frugal happiness.

China

The case of modern China stands apart in that the anchor is fragmented and spread out over a long period of time. It goes back to the 16th century with the intrusion of Western missionaries who sought to convert the country to Christianity, presented as a

superior religion. Then there was the Russian conquest of Siberia in the 17th century, followed by the British imperialism. The worst occurred in the 19th century with the opium wars which open the way to the "unequal treaties" and furthered the economic colonization of the country. The United States also took part in this process through a campaign designed to diffuse Evangelism in China. These episodes, along with the Japanese invasions between 1894 and 1939, have fed a memory of humiliation, briefly interrupted by the triumphant Mao era and relaunched since the 1980s.

To right the wrongs of the past, Chinese leaders now call for an outburst of energy, self-respect and pride to support a dream of re-conquest and restoration: they want the country to become the center of the world again (to restore the Middle Kingdom). Again, one can see here the expression of the millenarist schema as well as a skilful manipulation of the past.

Israel

According to a widespread and long-standing imaginary, Israel is a small, fragile, constantly besieged nation which manages to survive thanks to its remarkable resilience grounded in (a) the mission it has been entrusted by God, and (b) the painful memory of the enduring hardship it has sustained over thousands of years. Yet, with the creation of the state of Israel, a very old promise has been fulfilled and one could say that the millenarist cycle finally has been completed –history has come full circle. The resulting ethos prizes memory as a source of hope, faithfulness and courage weaved together by a culture of suffering and sacrifice. Altogether, these factors guarantee the collective cohesion and solidarity that this small nation badly needs.

Québec

Québec national imaginary has been primarily structured around two master myths. The first one stems from the 1760 military defeat on the Plains of Abraham, when Great Britain took over as the ruler of the New-France. As a defining landmark, this event can be likened to the fall of Barcelona in 1714 or to the 1746 Culloden massacre in Scotland. In Québec, the ethos derived from the 1760 defeat (paradoxically commonly referred to as "the Conquest") has generated a strong desire for a re-conquest translated into a yearning for decolonization, collective affirmation, equality, democracy, social justice, political autonomy or sovereignty. Those values and ideals, inherited from the colonial experience, have been for a long time among the staples of Québec political culture.

The second master myth emerged a few centuries ago from the realization that Francophone Québec is a very small and fragile cultural minority in North America and, in order to survive, it has to bank on an everyday commitment by its members. Over the past two centuries, the fear of disappearing has mobilized the whole Québec institutional network into winning this battle. Very early in their life, Québecers have been suffused with a strong sense of duty regarding the future of the French language and culture in this part of the world. Interestingly, the apocalyptic prospect of being assimilated has acted as a powerful deterrent, playing the role of a particularly efficient imprint.

Japan

In this country, the master myth of uniqueness gave birth to the valorization of ethnic homogeneity and purity, the belief in its superiority among Asian nations, the rejection of immigrants, the sacredness of the Emperor, and a few other features. Actually, the

major Japanese virtues that have enabled the spectacular development of this country since 1945 are said to be relying on the homogeneity myth.

I could go on and on with this overview, each case replicating the parts of the mythification process. However, in most cases, the pictures that I have presented are no longer valid nowadays. So in subsequent chapters of the same upcoming book, I present another survey of nations showing how most of them are now destabilized by immigration and features of modernity, especially the democratic nations which reject assimilation. Old symbolic structures and equilibriums are now threatened, which creates a lot of insecurity and triggers contrasted responses by the national elites. Finally, I also devote a chapter to a reflexion about the future of national myths in a context where even the future of nations is on the line.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I draw the attention to another criticism directed at social myths by some scholars who question their relevance as a significant factor in the evolution of a society. They simply deny social myths any form of causality.

This is a tricky issue since causality can be defined in several ways. If it is understood as a factor whose action can be quantified, social myths are obviously disqualified as well as all other collective features that escape quantification, such as religion, ideology, tradition, identity, memory, arts and literature, emotion, and so forth... But if causality is understood as the capacity of a factor to bear on other factors, as a capacity to alter a course of action, to influence a decision making process or to motivate individual and collective behaviors, then it is difficult to discard social myths as irrelevant.

History testifies in the same way. Suffice it to think of the horrors world wars, genocides and dictatorships induced by derailed myths. In addition, how come that societies are so much anxious about creating and perpetuating powerful myths and why do they dread situations of symbolic emptiness?

That being said, the study of myths face a real methodological difficulty. In regard to their construction, diffusion, and utilization by social actors, they obviously belong to the macro level of analysis. But one also assumes that they permeate the micro level by fostering individual worldviews, motivations and identity. However, the mechanics of this linkage is not easily unpacked empirically. This is an important area that calls for more research.

Finally, more attention should be given to social (and national) myths as producers of deep and lasting meanings. This matters all the more since we are living in a time of great instability where myths and the symbolic foundations of many societies are destabilized, in a world rocked by powerful forces of change that operate without a clear direction and far away from the grip of unsecure and powerless citizens. Finality, frightful forms of irrationality are on the rise under the garbs of religious fanatism, ultra-nationalism and populism.

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