

SYMPOSIUM  
SOCIAL MYTHS AND COLLECTIVE IMAGINARIES



THE COLLECTIVE IMAGINARY OF  
MODERN CIVILIZATION

BY  
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## Introduction

The English version of *Social Myths and Collective imaginaries*, by Gérard Bouchard (Bouchard 2017), appeared in Toronto in 2017, translated from the French original which was published in Montréal, Quebec, in 2014 (Bouchard 2014). The book, with courage and without useless pretense, deals with the myth and its multiple meanings within the context of modern civilisation, as well as with its centrality and indispensability in constructing every collective imaginary, regardless of historical context. In particular, the text focuses the reader's attention on the lack of a break in continuity between modern and premodern societies, for what concerns the elaboration, production and dissemination of an imaginary characterised by the symbolic logic of the myth, as a guarantor of the social order and of any historically dominant system of values. The book rightfully tends to show that there is a continuous presence of mythical-symbolic narratives which strongly influence both premodern and modern culture. As the author fittingly shows, myths are not just heritage, or, as some would have it, the simple survival of a primitive mentality one should try to overcome, but a defining trait of the *forma mentis* which

characterises our species in a universal way.<sup>1</sup> Such a rightful claim runs the risk, however, of setting aside some peculiar aspects of the collective imaginary and of the symbolic production of modernity, which, when dealing with the past, feeds itself on specific forms of narrative, on which the modern mentality and culture proliferate.

## I

### **The Sacred, the process of sacralization and the collective imaginary**

For Bouchard, the sacred is essentially synonymous with unquestionable, untouchable, intangible, inviolable and transcendent, so that it is juxtaposed to the profane both in the sense of referring to a supernatural divine order, which could be immanent, and in the sense of identifying a mere transcendent dimension at large, which can be embodied in an ideology, in a philosophical conviction or in something that exceeds the limits of possible experience in a Kantian sense.<sup>2</sup> According to Bouchard, as a matter of fact, «...sacralization originates in the search – again characteristic of the human condition, for some form of transcendence, ideal, or absolute that can bring satisfaction in various ways: in religion per se (the supernatural), but also in philosophy, art, science, celebration of nature (in the manner of romantics or ecologists). Consider here also the search for love,

1 “Myths remain a powerful mechanism in our societies, despite what is suggested by a still very influential tradition of thought that views them as an attribute of premodern societies and as having given way, as a result of progress, to the empire of reason”. Bouchard, “Introduction,” in Bouchard 2017.

2 “We will call the principles whose application stays wholly and completely within the limits of possible experience immanent, but those that would fly beyond these boundaries transcendent principles.” (Kant 1998, 385).

the cult of the family or the nation, heroism, athletic feats, and so on. It is also understood that this quest can be motivated in various ways: by need to alley fear, by yearning for wonderment and enchantment, or by a desire to achieve a higher level of consciousness or existence that belongs to the sphere of divine. More generally, transcendence fulfils the need to go beyond the limitations of daily life. This is the world of dream, of escape outside the immediate boundaries of existence. By referring to the concept of transcendence, I am therefore adopting, within the non-rational, a very broad meaning of the sacred that covers its religious and secular dimensions, but without establishing a hierarchy between them” (Bouchard 2017, “The mythification process – Sacralization”).

In such a sense, the concept of sacred takes on a very broad meaning, which tends to project itself onto a purely human and worldly dimension as a shared and inviolable system of values, without limiting itself to solely and exclusively qualifying a religion or some kind of spiritual order which refers to the deeds of supernatural beings whose goals could be concealed to the human eye (see Eliade 1959). With the term *sacred* is thus identified an ample set of phenomena which allow to apply this definition even to objects that have nothing to do with a properly divine or supernatural dimension, so that this qualifying term can be applied both to the revealed truths included in the Bible and to the fundamental principles upon which the constitutions of many countries draw inspiration.

In this regard, it is quite understandable and sustainable that the concept of sacred be used in a broad sense, since modern and postmodern civilisation tends to apply, as Bouchard clearly shows (Bouchard 2017, “The mythification process”), such a qualification to objects and facts which often have nothing to do with religious and spiritual phenomena founded on the basis of a general belief

in the existence of supernatural powers or beings. However, this consideration must not overshadow the profound differences, in shaping the imaginary and its corresponding values, between modern civilisation and all the civilisations that came before or that do not accept its fundamental premises. Here the very idea of sacred comes into play, so that if, on one hand, the need to use the concept in the broad sense we have mentioned can be understood, on the other hand it is also necessary to show how the profound difference that exists between premodern civilizations and Western modernity also depends on the way in which the sacred itself is conceived and on the way in which this concept structures the collective imaginary through the myth.

Now, if we wanted to adopt the definition of myth given by Bouchard, since the author himself reluctantly identifies different kinds of myths, the concept of social myths seems to apply to the myth in general;<sup>3</sup> hence, not taking type of myth into account, from the text can be surmised that the myth is “a collective representation that is hybrid, beneficial, or harmful, imbued with the sacred, governed by emotion more than by reason, and a vehicle of meanings, values and ideals shaped in a given social and historical environment” (*ibid.*). As it is evident, qualifying a narrative as sacred is central to the definition of myth; therefore, precisely in light of what a culture considers sacred or susceptible to becoming such, a precise shared imaginary is determined, an imaginary which may be significantly different in relation to the fact that one adopts a broader or narrower conception of the sacred itself. Therefore, to socially adopt a myth which sacralizes its own object in accordance with the deeds of supernatural beings which overcome humankind in power and wisdom or, instead, to

3 “In a durkheimian sense, and from a very general perspective, we can state that all myths and symbols are social in that their emergence is always a product of collective life,” “What is a social myth,” in Bouchard 2017.

adopt a myth in which the same process occurs without resorting to the divine means structuring the collective imaginary, as far as the object of the mythical-symbolic narrative itself is concerned, in accordance with two radically different ways. In the first case, any attempt at *performing*, transforming, manipulating or changing the object at the centre of the narrative will always be curbed and hindered, and sometimes utterly prohibited, for the simple reason that the object is the result of a creation or a decisive intervention carried out by a supernatural power; in the second case, instead, every manipulation, transformation or *performance* is potentially allowable, since there are not, in principle, any reasons or impediments which are not inherent with the very object of the narrative. In premodern civilisations there is a prevalence, as it is evident from the abundant literature on the subject,<sup>4</sup> of symbolic narratives of the first type; within modern civilisation, on the other hand, the collective *forma mentis* is characterised by narratives of the second type. A pretty clear example is the way in which modern Western civilisation tends to think about the origin of man when compared to premodern societies. In several ancient cultures, the origin of man in a mythical-symbolic sense derived from the Earth, intended, in a supernatural sense, as a primordial goddess (Plato, *Menexenus* 237d), or from a plurality of gods (Plato, *Protagoras* 320d), as in the two versions of the Greek myth told by Plato, or from one god only, as in the case of the Judaeo-Christian tradition (see Genesis 1, 26-29; 2, 7-8). Within the modern imaginary, on the other hand, except in the case of the creationist tradition (a typical belief characterised by an antimodern symbolic logic), the Darwinian evolutionary narrative is dominant, a narrative that has man descend from a long process of natural selection (Darwin 1988 and 1989), in which there is no divine or supernatural intervention. Such narratives, precisely for the different way in

4 See Durand 1999; Chiodi 2006-2010; Eliade 1963, Wunenburger 2009.

which they interpret the sacred, trigger two different imaginaries: in the first case, humankind is susceptible to a traditional process of sacralization performed by one or more supernatural beings turning them into creatures, so that their very same existence depends on one or more divine creators; in the second case, on the other hand, the human species is the precipitate of a long evolutionary process and any possible sacralization, intended as inviolability, happens predicated on the fact that man is considered the apex of a long evolutionary process. In the first case the narrative is closed, since human beings are creatures dependent on a supernatural will, which makes their genetic manipulation very difficult. In the second case, however, the narrative is open, making operations such as transformation, manipulation, improvement and/or treatment at a genetic level virtually admissible, since the inviolability tends to concern only the peculiar characteristics of what the human species has attained in the course of its continuous evolution in terms of self-awareness, intelligence, self-possession, etc. Man, thus, no longer being perceived as a creature conceived by its creator as fully fledged, therefore not manipulable except by the creator himself, becomes a natural entity whose physical and genetic structure is not inviolable at all.

It is not by chance that precisely with the success of the Darwinian symbolic paradigm, an imaginary of the cybernetic organism (*cyborg*)<sup>5</sup> – as the next step in human evolution, benefitting from the power provided by new electronic technologies and biomedical engineering, thanks to genetic modifications of all kinds, to mechanical and electronic grafts conceived both as solutions to a number of illnesses and/or adaptation processes to changed environmental conditions, or as enhancing manipulations – has vigorously developed.

5 See Bellini 2011, 55-57 and Harari 2017.

The example in question clearly shows how the modern vision of sacredness is deeply intertwined with a mythical-symbolic type of narrative which is substantially different from the myth interpreted in a traditional sense. In such a case, a supernatural and/or divine concept of the sacred produces the myth as classically intended as a narrative of the deeds of supernatural beings giving birth to the cosmos or to something in particular in the fabled time of the origins.<sup>6</sup> On the myth intended as such, a collective imaginary with limited propensity both to the manipulation and exploitation of nature and to the transformation of man and society is structured. The myth of Prometheus, in this sense, is a classic example of how the ancient and premodern mentality sees the acquisition of knowledge and technology suitable for the transformation and manipulation of reality as something problematic (see Bellini 2012 and 2001). In the modern case, instead, the dominant narratives produce the opposite effect, by structuring their objects in accordance with an imaginary dominated by the explanation of every phenomenon and entity, either historical-cultural or natural in kind, in such a way as to constitute a symbolic and conceptual device which is open to the change, manipulation, control and subjugation of reality.

These two forms of narrative, contrary to what can be inferred from Bouchard 2017 cannot be treated as equal and qualified both as Myths or Social Myths, because – due to the different configuration of sacredness they originate – they identify profoundly different symbolic structures: closed, one; open, the other. The first, the premodern one, is completely disinterested in

6 “Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the *beginnings*. In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution.” (Eliade 1963, 5-6).

the exploration of the possibilities of manipulating reality; the other, on the other hand, is inherently projected towards the transformation and colonisation of the world and the cosmos.

## II

### The concept of *Mythopia* or hybrid narrative

This kind of dominant symbolic narrative must necessarily be distinguished from the myth (*tout court*), since it includes aspects which are typical of another mode of expression of the imaginary: the utopia.<sup>7</sup>

“Utopia can be defined as a sort of reforming or flipped reflection of reality, presenting itself to an alert vision of the mind and of the active intellect, in a programmatic way (when conceived as the framework of a reality one would like to implement) or as an escape place, being desperately or ironically aware of the impossibility of its actualisation (a utopia which is always desired may indeed be such precisely because it is an absolute unreality), or even as the result of a resigned ascertainment of the miseries of reality. Myth, on the other hand, is so integrated into the fabric of the collectivity which practices it that such collectivity can become a socio-somatic expression of the myth itself” (Chiodi 2001, 280). In other words, utopia, unlike myth, does not concern itself with the investigation of the origins of its own object; it rather focuses its attention on the possibilities of development, modification, performance or transformation such object can undergo in order to be improved or worsened (negative Utopia)<sup>8</sup>. Utopia expresses,

7 “...il y a un mode utopique, qu’il est possible de définir comme exercice mental sur les possibles latéraux (There is a utopian mode that can be defined as a mental exercise on *lateral possibles*)”, Ruyer 1950, 9.

8 For a more complete discussion and definition of the utopian genres in a positive or negative sense, see Braga 2006.

at the level of the collective imaginary, the typical modern *formamentis*, which does not necessarily consider its own object fully non-manipulable and non-transformable. It rather tends to consider inviolable only some aspects or attributes of it, which are, in turn, subjected to a constant process of contextual relativisation, structuring themselves in a formal, procedural and historical way. A typical example, in this sense, is the very idea of the *Will of the people* at the origin of the political power, and what it represents on a symbolic and value-related level. In the collective imaginary of the Early Middle Ages, in the Western Christian territories, there was on the contrary the *Will of God* at the origin of power, which was interpreted by the Church, through its hierarchy, in a rather univocal way and used to structure a social and political order known as feudalism (see Duby 1980), whose approach tended, by its very own nature, to a God-given inviolable perfection. Such a high-contrast juxtaposition allows us to understand the profoundly different way in which, in relation to the concept of sacredness we are examining, the modern and premodern imaginaries are structured.

As a matter of fact, the feudal imaginary is characterised by a mythical-symbolic logic in a pure and traditional sense, where the presence of the divine makes every violation of the social and political order difficult and troublesome. By contrast, when it is replaced by the imaginary of *popular sovereignty* and *will of the people* as the founding principle of such an order, this produces a new mental architecture – while being at the same time the product of it –, which defies the conservative logic of the myth as it had been previously qualified, since the narrative sustaining it is by its nature open, fluid and, ultimately, devoid of a supernatural order that legitimises it. The example of the popular will is, in this case, particularly fitting. It is considered sacred, but neither supernatural nor divine. In a modern sense, it is certainly indisputable, inviolable and it has normative cogency, by virtue of the fact that the people,

within modern political systems, have the function of legitimising the political order, as its constituent power, expressing themselves in a binding manner on laws, through mechanisms such as referenda, and periodically electing their representatives, who are given the power originally held by the people themselves (mythical-symbolic function of legitimation of the political class).<sup>9</sup> However, the will of the people constantly depends on the ever-changing opinion of the masses. This does not generate, by its very nature, an order conceived as stable and everlasting, but a constituted power which is always perfectible, modifiable and fluid, both in its constitutional architecture and as far as ordinary laws are concerned. To understand this reasoning, it is sufficient to think about how rapidly Western society changed during the twentieth century, in accordance with the constant change in public opinion, which, thanks to its representatives and the mechanism of referenda, profoundly modified the laws that were governing its functioning, or even, in some cases, the constitutional order. Such swift changes would have been much more difficult to conceive and achieve if the dominant collective imaginary had based their sociopolitical order upon a supernatural divine will. As a matter of fact, without radically changing the religious convictions of the majority of the population, as happened during the long transition from the pagan civilisation to the Christian civilisation which was fully completed during the Late Middle Ages, it is highly unlikely to witness radical social and political changes.

Examples of this kind lead to believe that there is a marked difference between the myths that explain the origin of something or of the world in general which are based on supernatural acts, and those narratives that, by contrast, look for a foundation that does not have such characteristics. The former give rise to an imaginary which is reluctant to transformation and change, and

<sup>9</sup> See Kelsen 2013; Sartori 1973; Goyarde-Fabre 1998; Bellini 2011, 103-107.

tends to be cautious and substantially closed to everything that can challenge the divine order; the latter, on the other hand, structure a *forma mentis* which is open to change, a fluid imaginary which is ready to accept *performances*, transformations and manipulations of all kinds. For this reason, we believe that, in order to specifically describe these symbolic forms which hybridise in themselves myth and utopia, it is necessary to use a distinct definition, so that the profound differences between these two ways of expressing and shaping socially-shared visions of the world can be conceptually qualified.

We have therefore proposed, in other essays and monographs, a new symbolic and conceptual category, called, with a neologism, *Mythopia*, which aims to better describe and understand the important differences that separate the modern imaginary from the premodern one (see Bellini 2011, 39-64).

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