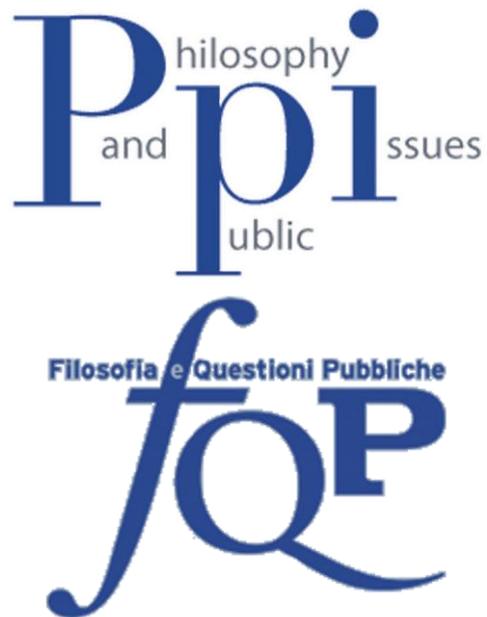


SYMPOSIUM
SOCIAL MYTHS AND COLLECTIVE IMAGINARIES



SOCIAL MYTHS
AS
NORMATIVE FRAMES

BY
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Social Myths as Normative Frames

Fabrizio Sciacca

I

Social Myths

The collective imaginary is to be understood as referring to all the symbolic elements and above all from the bond that it establishes between familiar realities such as norms, traditions, narratives, and identity on the one hand, and the deepest symbolic structures on the other. According to Gérard Bouchard, the collective imaginary does not coincide with the concept of culture because it does not refer to everything that a society produces and through which the members of a society give meaning to their lives (Bouchard 2017, 13) In essence, the concept of collective imaginary is less generic and more demanding for Bouchard than, for example, Charles Taylor, according to whom social imaginary is referred to as the way in which individuals live their lives.¹

¹ “By social imaginary, I mean something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper

Myths are key elements of the collective imaginary. “All myths and symbols are social in that their emergence is always a product of a collective life.” This means that social myths can be, in particular, better understood “emphasizing not the overall societal dynamic but, more specifically, the role of the actors, their motivations, the power relations in which they are involved, their strategic operations, and the concrete, immediate issues associated with them. To better highlight these particular features of the social myth, it can be useful to situate it in relation to other types of myth” (Bouchard 2017, 27) (religious, philosophical, allegorical, scientific...). Certainly social myths are part of a collective dynamic between four components: collective imaginaries, the social actors, the target population and power relations and struggles (*ibid.*, 84).

My contribution comes about from the problem of social myths faced by Bouchard. Linked to this structure is the distinction between *master myths* and *derivative myths*. Master myths have a strong consensus, whereas derivative myths are often subject to division and controversy. Master myths serve to make societies stable and change slowly, take the form of fundamental symbolic devices that act as matrices, structure the culture of a society, and govern the formation of other myths. The derivative myths change faster, have a propulsive structure and allow society to transform itself. The social myths would thus have a paradoxical capacity to be both enduring and ephemeral.

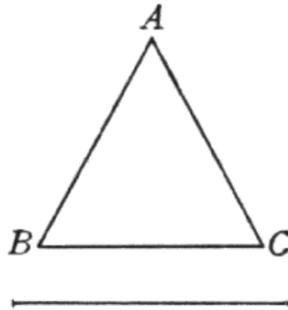
In this sense, the collective imaginary is appropriately defined as a *pyramidal structure* “comprised of a stable layer of master myths and a layer of secondary and derivative myths periodically redefined in accordance with contextual changes” (*ibid.*, 114).

normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor 2004, 23).

The idea according to which the myths, as functional to social transformation, generate energy rather than lethargy is also acceptable (*ibid.*, 118). In this sense, the myths have the power to generate emotions that serve to consolidate shared social equilibria.

Thus, if master myths can concern social projects such as collective emancipation or a dream of national independence, they may well consist of tendencies towards justice, democracy or equality. Already David Kertzer had supported the importance of a symbolic-ritual structure as a strategic assumption for national myths (Kertzer 1988). On the other hand, as Bouchard himself observes, since the derivative myths are subject to division and controversy, they can incorporate *different* visions of democracy, justice or equality (*ibid.*, 115).

By logic, Bouchard's reasoning should imply that, in this pyramidal structure, for every master myth (A) there exist at least two derivative myths (B, C).



A first point is therefore the following: between master myths and derivative myths there could be the same difference between myths that create consents and myths that create divisions. In

essence, it seems to me that the difference between master and derivative myths incorporates that between *concept* and *conception*. And in this regard, it could be as valid as that between concept and conception of democracy, justice, equality. Whereas democracy as a concept is a master myth, a founding myth of society and therefore with an original symbolic potential aimed at aggregating consensus, democracy as a conception is instead a derivative myth, which serves to nourish the differences of worldviews and thus to allow social changes. Examples of derivative myths of democracy could be the overlapping consensus of John Rawls (Rawls 1993), the maximization of the utility of Jeremy Bentham,² democracy as a minimal state and respect for negative freedoms according to Robert Nozick (Nozick 1974, 26). Basically, I think that that between concept and conception is a distinction between stable and changeable, between principles and interpretations, which can

² “Of an action that is conformable to the principle of utility one may always say either that it is one that ought to be done, or at least that it is not one that ought not to be done. One may say also, that it is right it should be done; at least that it is not wrong it should be done: that it is a right action; at least that it is not a wrong action. When thus interpreted, the words *ought*, and *right* and *wrong* and others of that stamp, have a meaning: when otherwise, they have none [...]. Not that there is or ever has been that human creature at breathing, however stupid or perverse, who has not on many, perhaps on most occasions of his life, deferred to it. By the natural constitution of the human frame, on most occasions of their lives men in general embrace this principle, without thinking of it: if not for the ordering of their own actions, yet for the trying of their own actions, as well as of those of other men. There have been, at the same time, not many perhaps, even of the most intelligent, who have been disposed to embrace it purely and without reserve. There are even few who have not taken some occasion or other to quarrel with it, either on account of their not understanding always how to apply it, or on account of some prejudice or other which they were afraid to examine into, or could not bear to part with. For such is the stuff that man is made of: in principle and in practice, in a right track and in a wrong one, the rarest of all human qualities is consistency.” (Bentham 2014, 15).

be applied to that between master myths and derivative myths. This analogy can be grasped by quoting John Rawls himself: “The concept of justice I take to be defined, then, by the role of its principles in assigning rights and duties and in defining the appropriate division of social advantages. A conception of justice is an interpretation of this role” (Rawls 1971, 10-1).³

Another question is whether the myths are positive or not. Frequent changes to the level of derivative myths are a cause of tension, conflict, instability and insecurity. In this case, relatively frequent changes at the level of the derivative myths (i.e.: of *conceptions* and not of *concepts*) should only be negative. Therefore, the conception of justice as stability is a derivative myth that would be good to hold firm. Some master myths are clusters closely integrated with myths, similar to mythemes, in the same way as constellations. So, for example, the American Dream, a complex assembly of auxiliary myths such as freedom, property, equality, individualism, competition, entrepreneurship, merit (see Bouchard 2017, 116). Other clusters are the myth of the chosen people of Israel, Republican France – the myth of ethnic identity as belonging to a symbolic order (see Fabietti 2013, 14). These myths, like all master myths, are renewed from time to time in the form of derivative myths, which reproduce in their own modalities the structure of an aggregate. I think the idea that myths have a mutually positive function is plausible. It rarely happens that a myth is so powerful as to have repercussions on others in a synergistic way. In this case, Bouchard talks about ‘archemyths’. This would work on a larger scale than the aggregate myths (clusters). However, the distinctions proposed by Bouchard

³ Rawls’ aim is “to present a *conception* of justice which generalizes and carries to a high level of abstraction the familiar theory of the social contract as found, say, in Locke, Rousseau and Kant.” Rawls 1971, 10-1.

between archemyth, aggregate myths, master and derivative myths are very refined and they also sound appropriate. However, a doubt remains. Faced with a *myth* (without other specifications), it is not clear what tools give the interpreter security to make a sufficiently objective classification⁴. In this sense, the motto invoked by Bouchard “Masters in our own house” about archemyth that took shape in Quebec at the time of the Quiet Revolution reminds us too much of the motto adopted by the Northern League (*Lega Nord*) in Italy (*Masters in our house*). In opposition to the archemyths, antinomial situations can arise. “Cultural minorities in the Americas works in the opposite direction of the myth of the reconquest”. Another famous example is Israel, “currently divided between its globalising and secular aspirations and its identity as the chosen people”(Bouchard 2017, 118). Finally, the last case recalled by Bouchard is that of conflation: confluence, fusion of the new in the old social myths. He recalls the cases of sustainable development or pluralism, “ideals conveyed by globalization that have not been forged in the course of the Quebec past. This phenomenon can be observed in the recent history of many countries” (*ibid.*, 119).

With respect to what has been said so far, I shall make two observations.

⁴ “The archemyths thus has much greater range than the aggregate myth and operates at a larger scale, for it is based on an alliance of many myths, some of which may themselves be aggregates. However, myths that take the form of aggregates are integrated much more closely and in a much more enduring way than archemyths” (Bouchard 2017, 117).

II

The Intra-historical Nature of the Myth

The first observation concerns the *intra-historical nature* of the myth. Bouchard's theory of social myths is in keeping with a critical revision of the dichotomy between primitive cultures and modern culture. If taken in a non-dynamic way, this dichotomy is unproductive, because it postulates the existence of two radically different regimes that are difficult to identify for the purpose of a clear comparison. Rather, Bouchard invokes a general approach capable of highlighting social connections without reference to place, time and discursive channels (Bouchard 2017, 121). In this sense, the myths are intra-historical. Cesare Pavese recalls how the myth has a *normative structure* but does not consist in its poetic narration: it precedes, it is not the expression that it gives. The myth "draws its value from this absolute uniqueness that lifts it out of time and consecrates it to revelation" (Pavese 2017, 150). Mircea Eliade wrote that the myth is, in this sense, an *exemplary model*, passed down in sacred history, reveals a mystery (Eliade 1965, 84-5). In this sense, the sacred is the real par excellence. For Bouchard, the myth is a type of collective representation that, unlike positions such as those of Sir James Frazer or Ernst Cassirer, is completely independent from the rite. This position is consistent with, for example, the case of Ludwig Wittgenstein against Frazer and Hans Kelsen against Otto Neurath: or against a scientific attitude that is too persuasive and reductive, pretending to incorporate the myth to the logos. The aim of Wittgenstein and Kelsen was to overcome the trap set by Otto Neurath's unified science doctrine. In *Soziologie im Physikalismus* Neurath had asserted that the only ascertainable datum is an operative field placed in a space-time system, corresponding to that of physics, to arrive at valid "predictions" (Neurath 1931, 397). This is evident in the scientific position they both assume in the epistemological field: starting from the criticism

of Sir James Frazer. Kelsen does not agree with Frazer in defining magic as a science, although erroneous. Frazer raises an objection: defining magic as “erroneous science”, the distinction between magic and science is blurred: and this, only one consequence. “Erroneous” is the approach of evolutionary theory, which, by favouring an anthropology of *results*, has excluded every possible anthropology of the *method*. Frazer proceeded with continuous *explanations*, using terms of comparison drawn from Western civilization. Kelsen criticizes for the first time Frazer in the *Exkurs I. Das Wesen der Magie, of Vergeltung und Kausalität* (Kelsen 1941, 335-53).⁵ This criticism confirms Wittgenstein’s observations contained in the *Bemerkungen über Frazer’s the “Golden Bough”*: “Even the idea of trying to explain the practice – say the killing of the priest king – seems to me wrong-headed. All that Frazer does is so to make this practice plausible to people who think as he does. It is very queer that all these practices are finally presented, so to speak, as stupid actions” (Wittgenstein 1991, 29 1e).

The misunderstanding reported by Wittgenstein is the same one that Kelsen will first detect in *Vergeltung und Kausalität* and then in *Society and Nature*: that of a scientific interpretation of magic, typical of the “anthropology of results”. To formulate a scientific judgment on magic means to express a value judgment; since Frazer, referring to magic, will inevitably speak of *erroneous physics*, *erroneous medicine*, and so on.⁶

⁵ This work also contains *Exkurs II, Die Vorstellung von unpersönlichen Kräften*, 353-65; *Exkurs III, Die platonische Ideenlehre und der primitive Mythos*, 430-73; *Exkurs IV, Das Überwiegen des Strafmomentes in der Vergeltungsidee*, 474-8; *Exkurs V, Die soziologische Bedeutung der Vorstellung vom «Neid der Götter»*, 478-87.

⁶ Kelsen 1941, 349 (*Exkurs I*): “It is unlikely that such a knowledge of primitives is oriented towards the laws of nature, the pre-hypothesis is not in fact due to these if not as a paradoxical consequence. Nothing more senseless when Frazer, in the *Golden Bough* [...], speaks of ‘magical laws’, and certainly defines magic as a

The whole of *Golden Bough* is based on a *theory*: a theory of *explanations*, or – scientifically – a *comparative* system. An exegetical system, in which errors are collected to be *narrated*. What are the explanations according to Wittgenstein?

Frazer would like to make it the measure of discernment of the *truth/falsity* categories: what is *possible* for nineteenth-century English is also *true*. But, for Wittgenstein, “every explanation is a hypothesis” (Wittgenstein 1991, 3e). And what brings Frazer’s *truth*? For Wittgenstein, and also for Kelsen, it does not lead to a scientific analysis of the myth: and *interpretation* is no longer possible. Scientific interpretation of magic: for Frazer, means *explaining* the behaviour of primitives as if it were ours; and it also means judging according to a value, arriving at reductive conclusions, like the premises from which they descend. If there is a difference between magic and science, it can be this: *there is progress in science, not in magic*. Wittgenstein’s effort is also to reiterate that the concept of progress, typical of Western culture, is inherent in the anthropological theories of Frazer, Edward Westermarck, Marcel Mauss and others. Closing the circle, you go back. Formulating a *scientific prediction* on the basis of scientific laws meant, for Neurath, applying an identification rule within the *Einheitsprache*. Thus, the propositions composed in a set that

science, although ‘false’, in which he believes to recognize two fundamental laws: ‘the law of similarity’ and ‘the law of contact or contagion’. The first states ‘that similar produces similar, or that an effect resembles its cause’; the second, ‘that the things that have once been in contact with one another, continue to affect each other at a distance, after the physical contact has ceased’. Thus, he explains the magic of primitives: ‘Thus, their fundamental conception is identical to that of modern science; at the basis of the whole system is faith, firm but real and rooted, in order and in conformity with nature. The magician does not doubt that the same causes will always produce the same effects’ [...]. This means that the wild – and indeed even before arriving at an animistic interpretation of nature - holds on this point an attitude identical to that of modern science”.

would like to give a system to science are compared with other propositions: and on science, it should place the burden on “transforming everyday life statements” (Neurath 1931, 403). Expressing itself with the “statements of everyday life”, *Einheitsprache* was “the language of predictions, which are the core of physicalism” (*ibid.*, 402). Of course, a non-artificial language because “not new”: it is “the language familiar to children and certain primitive peoples” (*ibid.*, 403). And Kelsen and Wittgenstein also look to primitive peoples. Not with a *predictive* language, not with a system based on *explanations* - but with a *method*: whose propositions, composed in a set that *gives* science a system, are no longer confronted with other propositions. They compare themselves with *experiences* and with the *world*. An *archetypal* method: not tied to the thread of a *theory*, to the need for an *explanation*, or even to the comparison between propositions. Not a comparison between *things*, but between *facts*. And, as Wittgenstein said, “the world is the totality of facts, not of things” (Wittgenstein 1922, 1.1. 25).

III

Archetypal Structures and the Myth of Law

The second observation concerns the relationship between *archetypal structures and the myth of law*.

This consideration seems to me to be compatible with the idea that the structures of each society are archetypal structures, constant elements in the history of culture. And if so, the concept of law as a positive right to me today seems a *myth*, a myth of modernity that in today’s society, which we can also call technological, sounds like a legend of very remote times. The positive right does not hold today to the test of the so-called technological society, but at the same time it becomes necessary to

turn towards those principles that can be registered in universal categories: if it is not possible to historically divide the principle of imputation from that of causality, it is possible (and useful) to preach, of these principles, the universality. It is possible to grasp these universals by not remaining in a certain philosophical space: not in metaphysics, ontology, phenomenology, but through them. The scope of epistemological research today and tomorrow *must* therefore, in my opinion, go beyond the idea of positive law, *overcoming* the theoretical limit of legal positivism, placing itself beyond the peculiarity of the *ius positum*. But even beyond the false promises of a globalized and happy world without borders and without taboos, where everything and the opposite of everything seems possible. It is not in fact the single *ius positum*, rather the *ius in civitate positum*, that we need to look at: since it is not the contents of the individual positive rights that give an explanation of the nature and the essence of the normative order. Such research cannot look at the transcendental forms of law: universals are not born, in Immanuel Kant, from experience; nor are they placed in an a priori, pre-historical, foundational dimension. The categorical principles of law, as universal, are placed in an immanent and intra-historical dimension: archetypal. The theory of positive law, working with historical categories, also comes to the elaboration of concepts and general principles, but in an imperfect manner. To arrive at the identification of the categorical principles of law, history must be kept in mind: contain it, *without* stopping at it. As we said at the beginning, it is necessary to put oneself in an *intra-historical*, transcultural dimension, being the universals independent of the singularities of the *ius civitatis*. The categorical principles do not change with the change of history: they do not change with the changing of the regulations and the disciplines adopted from time to time.

If on the one hand there is no connection of dependence of universals with positive law, the opposite is given: it is the positive

right to tie contingent eventualities, to universals. In this sense, the *juridical subjectivity*, which in a juridical relationship presupposes the subjective imputation of active and passive situations, is a *universal* – and the *imputation*, as the responsibility of the acts individually ascribed to the individual, a *categorical principle* of the right. On the other hand, universals are not the norms and the juridical rules that define the conditions and the modalities of explication of the centres of imputation of such situations. This perspective allows us to overcome the limits within which the interpretation of the pure theory of law has been wrapped up for a long time, in a context that today seems to be mythological.

It seems to me, therefore, that today there is a conformist and conforming process taking place which, at first glance, presents itself as the negation of the characters of modernity. It is also a process of *desacralization* - in the proper sense, so a process of emptying the energy and power of man and also the sense of his boundaries, his limits and his possibilities, because if the boundaries and limits and the possibilities are not known, there can be neither courage nor desire. This emptying is in my opinion the most devastating effect of an imperfect and malformed secularization. The risk, which has already come to pass in practice, is that of the dissolution of human creative energy and its *spatial desertification*. A space without boundaries has not changed the false promise of an open and total juridical space, but its nullification: an absent space and without vital energy.

A space in which pacifism and juridical triumphalism are flaunted, in the name of human rights that are actually inhuman because they are not within everyone's reach, is a space that is even less liveable, and even less possible, for man. So what right can be born in the technological society? A right that we weigh in the sacral dimension of the human individual. With a musical metaphor, what we risk losing today is the harmonic dimension of

music: everything runs the risk of being reduced to a series of mechanical melodies without harmony. The absolute as a search for simplicity through the knowledge of the *last things*, as Otto Weininger would have said (Weininger 1904). Only apparently moving away from the things of the world, intrinsically in the search for the human dimension of the sacred also through the idea of a sacredness of music, as a message pervaded by an ethical totality to be delivered to humanity itself rather than to worldly circles. Simplicity has always been and is more than ever today the last and most difficult goal of man. To trivialize this idea is the most comfortable way of the performative, dehumanizing and desacralizing processes of political power.

The myth certainly has a compact deontic force. Not surprisingly, Cassirer saw with concern the fact that political myths could not be destroyed by philosophy and ultimately by culture. If the forces of myth are not subjugated by superior forces, mythical thinking begins to assert itself and prevail over the social and cultural life of man (Cassirer 1946, 298). Cassirer's perspective is certainly very far from that of Bouchard. The fact remains that the central problem of politics is recognizing the myths operating in the present and being able to control them.

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