

SYMPOSIUM  
SOCIAL MYTHS AND COLLECTIVE IMAGINARIES



SOCIAL IDENTITY  
BETWEEN  
NARRATIVE AND STORYTELLING

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# Social Identity Between Narrative and Storytelling

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**T**he notion of the collective imaginary entered into common language in the 1990s, following upon the wave of two major strands of interpretation in the human sciences developed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the late 1920s, a group of intellectuals, despite their different backgrounds,<sup>1</sup> was united by the idea of finding in myth and mythology a social dimension, endowed with an authority powerful enough to organize society, order history and command everyday life. Another movement of scholars starting from the sixties directed its attention to the forms of imaginary, and the different types that took shape in contemporary society immediately after the war and economic recovery.

Of these full-bodied and authoritative studies, the essential traits remain that have woven the ‘classical’ theoretical framework, a point of reference for the research that followed. Collective identity emerges as a model of behavior and values, based on the sharing of narratives and metaphors, “fictions of humanity,” (Le Goff 1992) learned and replicated through the institutions of family, education, religion, and work, or through the media (see

<sup>1</sup> One might recall the seminar of the Collège de Sociologie with Georges Bataille, and the group of intellectuals that included Roger Caillois, Pierre Klossowski, Michel Leiris, Alexandre Kojève.

Morin 1962). Historians are more inclined to understand it as a set of more or less cohesive memories, of an experience lived or mythologized by a living collectivity, whose identity is an integral part of the spirit of the past (Nora 1978). Anthropologists privilege archetypal aspects such as myths, rites and practices (see Girard 1981 and Geertz 1988). For ‘systemic’ sociologists such as Luhmann, the focus centers on the relationships between collective memory and the norms of social institutions, in a continuous negotiation, redefinition and collective construction of the identity processes in which individuals are involved (Luhmann 1995).

But today? Does the passage of time, and the shift in the economic and cultural paradigm – from the industrial to the information society, from the world of the media to that of the networks (see Castells 1996) – undermine the classical model? What place does myth occupy in contemporary societies and cultural relations? How do collective imaginaries take shape? Where does their strength come from? How do they respond to contextual shifts? These are the questions that the sociologist Gérard Bouchard sets out to answer in the book *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries* (Bouchard 2017). As he explains in the introduction defining the outlines of a study on myths and collective imaginaries, the book revolves around five key ideas:

1. Myths are commonly associated either with illusions or with deceptive, dangerous discourse; but these are oversimplifications that prevent us from understanding the true nature of myths – a nature that goes far beyond these two familiar notions.
2. 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.
3. The functioning of this social, symbolic mechanism, which is universal in character, has been insufficiently studied by the social sciences in recent decades.
4. There is an urgent need to examine the factors and processes that govern the birth, reproduction, and replacement of

myths, which play a role today that is perhaps all the more important given that it often goes unnoticed. 5. I want to fill this gap by proposing an original model for analysing social myths, one that works at the intersection of theoretical reflection and empirical investigation (Bouchard 2017, 5).

Once we disregard the common misconception of myth as mere illusion relegated to the irrational sphere, and understand the force it still has in contemporary society, we rediscover the urgency of the topic. This requires in-depth scholarship and elicits the need to propose new pathways for research.

These ideas constitute the warp of the book on which Bouchard constructs a weft of investigations, insights, and historical references relating to what he as defines the “process of mythification.” Particularly in the third chapter the author concentrates on the social aspect of myth – that of actors, contexts, power relations and change – as opposed to the archetypal or psychological aspect, that of constants and universalizing forms. According to the model proposed by Bouchard, “social myths are usually the product of a mythification process—not to be confused with mystification—that involves no fewer than eight elements that contribute to shaping a powerful message” (*ibid.*, 48).

It seems that the first five elements could be defined as structural. In the constitution of a myth, in fact, there is a supporting structure, a framework whose parts are necessary so that we can speak of myth in general. The first is the subject. It necessary to construct a subject, to identify who the recipient of the mythical discourse is intended to be. The second element is constituted by the event or by a sequence of events that occurred in the past and which form the point of reference from which to start and to lean on: an anchor. The experience that served as an anchor leaves an imprint on the collective consciousness, taking the form of a profound emotion that leaves a lasting mark on the

subject's soul. “The fourth element of the mythification process consists in the translation of the imprint into an ethos, understood as a set of aspirations, beliefs, principles, values, ideals, moral standards, visions of the world, and attitudes, or deep predispositions” (*ibid.*, 53). For a message to take root in the collective consciousness, it must not only be formulated in the right way and by influential actors, but must also resonate as a meaningful and emotional experience in the shared past of the population involved.

And is an ethos deliberately constructed? Again in this case it is a matter of perspective. In fact, the author claims that “the construction of a myth, therefore, cannot be a one-way operation, initiated solely by the powers that be” (*ibid.*, 56). It could be said that the problem (or perhaps the illusion?) of origin reappears. It seems again to reintroduce, in other forms, that paradox of origin, that vicious circle of deliberation: “those who get together to constitute a new government are themselves unconstitutional, that is, they have no authority to do what they have set out to achieve” (Arendt 1963, 184). Every mythification process fails to escape Sieyès’ ‘vicious circle’. *We hold these truths to be self-evident*: the famous and paradoxical preamble to Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration. The *we* of the declaration – as Derrida comments – speaks in the name of a people that does not exist as such beforehand. The declaration is a sign, a performative linguistic act that produces the subject itself. It is not just a simple event, but an original event that plays an active and productive role. The signature invents the petitioner in a sort of “fabulous retroactivity” (Derrida 1986, 10).

In this vicious circularity we find Bouchard’s elements: subject, anchor, imprints, ethos. These, for the author must be sealed by a fifth element: sacralization. This element acts as a protective shield, effectively the myth’s immune system; thanks to sacralization, the myth can endure and survive opposition and contradictions. It is a

search for transcendence, the need to go beyond, the need for absolute (Arendt 1963), which coincides with the recourse to something capable of authorizing from outside.

To these five structural elements in the definition of the mythification process Bouchard adds three more. These latter concern the transmission and preservation of the myth: the narrative, the techniques of persuasion, and social actors.

An interesting interpretive approach to contemporary society, I believe, lies with the element of narrative. Narrative – intended above all as a practice of commemoration and memory construction – “brings to the fore the historicization of values that has taken place in the past of a society and that lies at the heart of its symbolic heritage. Historicization designates the process of appropriation through which a value permeates an imaginary” (Bouchard 2017, 60). This definition opens us up to an understanding of narrative that goes well beyond commemorative practice. As Bouchard reminds us, myth and social imaginary remain powerful symbolic mechanisms in our societies. According to Taylor, the social imaginary makes society's practices possible by providing them with meaning (Taylor 2004, 19).

In the human sciences we cannot ignore the principle that human identity, both individual and social, is not given, it is not a positive fact, but is constructed through an auto-interpretation that has an eminently linguistic character. The knowledge contained in an imaginary has not only a descriptive but a performative value: it is a knowledge that often remains implicit, which operates within the main institutions of a society and its common practices (Maletta 2012, 157).

This is actually what both Rousseau and Hegel had described. The well-known Hegelian phrase “what is real is rational” does not imply a passive acceptance of the empirical reality, a flattening of

reason on the existent, but the “awareness of something that *wirkt*, which acts producing effects over time, until it perishes, that is to say something current” (Bodei 2012, 37). The family or the State are *Wirklichkeiten*, born thousands of years ago, but as they evolve, continue to exist and produce their effects. And before that Rousseau:

It was the same spirit that guided all the ancient legislators in their work of creating institutions. They all sought bonds that might attach citizens to the fatherland and to one another; and they found them in peculiar usages, in religious ceremonies which by their very nature were always national and exclusive; in games which kept citizens frequently assembled; in exercises which increased not only their vigour and strength but also their pride and self-esteem; in spectacles which, by reminding them of the history of their ancestors, their misfortunes, their virtues, their victories, touched their hearts, inflamed them with a lively spirit of emulation, and attached them strongly to that fatherland with which they were meant to be incessantly preoccupied. (Rousseau 1772, ch. 2).

These images of the good (what Taylor defines as “the constitutive goods”), embodied in heroic figures, exemplary stories, and memorable events come to constitute the individual and community identity that is articulated and takes shape through paradigmatic narratives. Indeed, identity, precisely because it cannot be *remembered*, must be *told*. This is the fable of origin: at the same time in which it understands, justifies and legitimizes it opens up new horizons of possibility (Arendt 1963).

These narratives not only help us to define who we want to be and what we want to do, but by inspiring and moving us, they push us to desire and love our identity. In this way, identity is rebuilt each time anew in the narrative that claims to recover it as if from the depths of memory. The narrative draws from the past as a



reservoir of definitive experiences (positive or negative) from which feelings, aspirations and ideals are forged.

What happens now in the network society, in the so-called infosphere? Are there still any paradigmatic narratives? Are myths not feared as the source of all evil after the horrors of the previous century? The transformation of living conditions, the advance of new technologies and their availability, bring out new expressive attitudes, ever new aesthetic forms that are stratified and spread by incorporating images and audiences: from the mass media, to the network society, to the infosphere. The amount of data and information produced by digital humanity has reached relevant dimensions. Generations Y and Z already spend most of their connected time interacting in an environment in which artificial agents and hybrid interconnected information bodies (*inforgs*) are present. The collapse of authorities and hierarchies, of the credibility and reliability of the classical sources has left a void. The space left empty by the official narratives has been occupied by a process whereby individual users choose their information and values *à la carte*, by the revenge of the individual imagination on the public dimension, by the proliferation of secret fantasies and the multiplication of private aspirations. We talk of creating *echo chambers* where discussions are held between like-minded individuals, effectively masking the fear of confrontation. There is a widespread privatization of the future in which each seeks to cut a slice of heaven for himself. This general crisis of identity has weakened the certainties of the past, and the links between the imaginary/collective memory and the collective identity have loosened.

Moreover, this “accelerating mediamorphosis involves sudden structural changes in the processes of memory and imagery, and forces us to describe movements that are much

more complex than simplified frameworks” (Ragone 2015, 73). Some scholars speak of the ocular public, of the network public, of *homo videns* (Sartori 1997 and Urbinati 2014) whose mind is no longer formed by abstract concepts and mental constructions, but by images, by splinters of memory, by narrative spots that sell and excite. “This is precisely the mechanism that has that broken down. That form of embodied rationality which seems no longer to work and which re-proposes the problem of an unsecured history in the face of the unexpected. With the abandonment of such a ‘vertebrate’ history, riddled with utopia, we find ourselves in front of a vacuum of orientation and a weakening of social directionality” (Bodei 2012, 41). According to Bodei, this depends on that dullness of the faculty of judgment that hinders the ability to build a bridge between thought and action, and thus the ability to build an imaginary that is anchored to the real world. From the imaginary of novels to comics to genre literature, from epic films to TV dramas and the most recent digital TV series, and today with the viral dimension of social media – the Facebook page, or the Twitter account, Instagram etc. – our world, our thoughts and our culture are permeated by this new mythological dimension. There is the risk of no longer being able to read the present and to understand it because the right to judgment has deteriorated and therefore the ability to distinguish good from evil is undermined.

The structural repetition of the news and its formats, the tattered images of memory, splinters of communication, public or private, replace history, stories, *mythoi*. More or less refined products of what is called *storytelling*, travel throughout the network and exert an irresistible grip on the cognitive and emotional levels, to the point of being the most widespread practice in all areas, from politics to the economy.

What to do? Pretending to be immune to all of this would be a dangerous illusion. For we limit ourselves to a critique of the

system that goes no further than writing tirades of indignation on social media or demystifying fake news (or in a more refined manner *debunking*) which, however, being conveyed through the network for the use and consumption of the network itself, only reconfirms it. If intellectuals think they are completely out of it, they risk being condemned to silence, no longer listened to because they are not understood.

“Mythocrats of all countries, let’s tell stories!” This is the call to action that closes a text by Yves Citton (Citton 2010), analyzing the way in which a story can guide the behavior of the public. It is not a matter of denouncing capitalist society’s use of the media to convey stories and myths that put consciences to sleep. The author's invitation is to grasp the emancipatory power of the story and to use it. We must not attempt to reconstruct a coherent and all-encompassing system of ideas, but rather a bricolage of fragmentary images, vague insights, crazy hopes and broken myths that, taken together, form the consistency of a new imaginary.

A story has its own strength; it is a device capable of capturing desires and convictions. Each *storytelling* is similar to a stage machinery, more or less successful or effective; it is an operative and strategic mechanism which, as a structure of integration of the individual into a cultural and economic system, is essentially an *endowment of meaning*.

The cultural industry, increasingly sophisticated thanks to the *big data* and the algorithms of our digital services, is reconfirmed as one of the main manufacturers of the myths in which people reflect themselves. In fact, we are faced with the difficulty of imagining the future and of understanding such an elusive present, so empty of forces that seem to be decisively affirmed. "We are all emigrants over time [...] All of us, since we are born, we go from a relatively known past to a future by definition unknown. We therefore need to move forward more sensibly, with more

imagination and less reverie, with a memory that connects us to the past but at the same time an audacity that opens us to the new” (Bodei 2012, 42). We need stories that lead us back to that need for absolute and that preserve their exceptional nature. We need stories that help us to reconfigure life plans and projects with more alternatives, opening our lives to their exciting possibilities.

“Stories make us move and emotions, far from infecting it, are instead an essential ingredient of reason. Without anger, passion, sadness and hope we would not be able to ponder the smallest choice. [...] It is not surprising then that power has always been based on myths and legends. And perhaps, in response, it would be enough to continue doing what we have always done: deflate the tales of the powerful, tell other stories” (Wu Ming 1 2013).

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