SOCIAL MYTHS AND COLLECTIVE IMAGINARIES
NEW DIRECTIONS

BY

GÉRARD BOUCHARD

[THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK]

Social Myths and
Collective Imaginaries
New Directions

Gérard Bouchard

Introduction

First, I would like to thank the editors of *Philosophy and Public Issues* for inviting me to take part in this reflexion on my book. I am also deeply grateful to the scholars who have been kind enough to offer generous and insightful comments that enrich my understanding of myths and collective imaginaries and open new horizons for my own research. In the following pages, I will join this effort by briefly commenting on intriguing ideas, extending some lines of thought and, perhaps, clear up what appears to be some misunderstandings.

Given the diversity of the reflexions, I have found convenient to address each author's contribution separately (in alphabetical order).

I

Paolo Bellini (PB)

Both of us agree on the presence of myths in premodern as well as modern societies. We also share the idea that a form of sacredness lies at the heart of any full-fledged myth, although

sacredness assumes a different form in premodern and in modern societies. In the former, the sacred relates to "supernatural beings which overcome humankind in power and wisdom" while in the latter, the sacred is also prevalent but "without resorting to the divine means structuring the collective imaginary." In other words, one could say that the first case is associated with transcendence, the other with immanence. So far so good. Yet, from there, PB asserts that this difference creates two very specific symbolic narratives and imaginaries. The first one precludes any form of transformation or change at the center of the narrative because it arises from "a creation or a decisive intervention carried out by a supernatural power." The second type of narrative is said to escape this constraint since, here, "every manipulation, transformation (…) is potentially allowable." The explanation lies in the fact that "there are not, in principle, any reasons or impediments which are not inherent with the very object of the narrative."

Here, PB implicitly assumes that, regarding the contents of the narratives, the transcendent form of sacredness is more constraining than the immanent one. I am not comfortable with this sharp dichotomy. There are scores of examples instantiating the immense restricting power of modern social myths and of their supporting narratives. On the one hand, as we know, many people are ready to sacrifice their life for their nation or for values and ideals such as democracy, freedom, and the like. On the other hand (and quite consistently), narratives that undergird modern social myths can be strongly averse to manipulation and change affecting their 'centre.' Just think of the history of the Serbian 1389 defeat at the hands of the Ottomans, an untouchable reference (or an 'anchor' in my language) arguably as strong as a Biblical text, even though its empirical basis is considered shaky by many professional historians.

The same could be said about the American Independence war as the pillar of the national imaginary, the 1789 French Revolution as the culmination of a millenary fight, or the narrative of the Apartheid as the symbolic backbone of racial emancipation and equality in South Africa.

One must also keep in mind that modern social myths are wrapped up in taboos which operate as an immune system and confer to social myths a significant normative power (as PB acknowledges). Violating a social myth (for instance, rejecting freedom, racial equality, human rights or democracy) entails various sanctions such as public denunciations, dismissals, various forms of exclusion, fines, losses of grants, even prison sentences. Therefore, I question the relevance of a sharp contrast that would characterize the premodern narratives as 'close' and the modern ones as 'open'.

Perhaps the bottom of our disagreement lies in the extent of the power that we associate with the two kinds of sacred. In PB's mind, the sacred rooted in supernatural surpasses the power of the immanent sacred. I believe this is not always the case.

To strengthen his argument about the modern narratives being widely open to change and manipulations, PB draws attention to the fluidity of public opinion, a sign that it is not firmly grounded in lasting beliefs and narratives. First, I would not conflate public opinion and myths, master or secondary. Besides, I would recall the distinction I make between what I call master myths as opposed to secondary or derivative myths. The former are characterized by their stability, their impressive capacity to endure through historical changes. They operate as basic, comprehensive matrices. The second, rather restricted in their reach and agency, are more prone to changes. Both myths, however, carry the same values, share the same spirit. The function of the secondary myths

is to relay the 'message' of the master myths and translate it so that they remain aligned with the ever-changing contexts.

This is a fascinating dynamic that can be observed in all nations. In Québec, for example, the master myth of social and political re-conquest has been translated three times into different sets of derivative myths since the 18th century. A similar phenomenon occurred in English Canada with the master myth of collective morality, etc.

I admit, however, that all modern social myths are not that strong and commanding. We will probably agree that gender equality, for example, has not yet reached the same level of sacredness as the love for one's nation or the devotion to close blood relationship. The same goes with other modern myths (pluralism, sustainable development, transnational solidarity...).

Having made this point, I realize that PB and I may not be talking exactly of the same thing. Indeed, I notice that in another paper (Bellini, 2015), he defines myths as narratives that either account for the origin of the world (or part of it: an animal, an institution…) or tell its story and justify it. Yet, according to my approach, a social myth is not a narrative *per se*. It is a collective representation that carries and promotes a sacralized value. But it always resorts to a narrative as a supporting device. It is the function of the narrative a) to give shape to the anchor, the imprint and the resulting ethos, and b) to carry through the sacralizing process.

That would explain why he opposes the Darwinist evolutionary theory as a modern narrative to the premodern ones. In my view, indeed, Darwinism is not a myth. It is a scientific theoretical construction intended to account for empirical phenomena. Myths entertain a much different relationship with 'reality.' Intrinsically,

myths are not expected to mirror reality, they are better seen as a bet on the future.

So, I maintain that social myths (as I define them) were prevalent in premodern societies. I am referring specifically to their major components: a power structure that sets up a man or a privileged group of men as embodying and guarding the myth, a social hierarchy that must be reproduced and protected against internal and external enemies, a strategic, powerful discourse that captivates the minds, a set of values and taboos derived from a sacredness (whatever form it may assume), a narrative centered on an anchor, a body of rituals that re-enact the anchor and the imprint, a collection of symbols that stimulate the underlying emotions (usually fears, hopes, hatred, and so forth).

II

Fabrizio Sciacca (FS)

First, Professor Sciacca recalls my views of master and derivative (or secondary) myths and he appropriately characterizes both of them. Then he proceeds to oppose the former and the latter: according to him, master myths would create consents and derivative myths would create divisions. I do not go that far in contrasting those two categories of myths. Master myths are certainly more consensual that their counterpart. But they too happen to harbor divisions. In Québec, for instance, the national imaginary has been traditionally made up of two master myths that often collided: the first one (the craving for a political re-conquest and collective emancipation) used to push forward and promote bold endeavours; the other (the fight for the survival of the fragile Francophone culture in an adverse environment) used to inspire self-doubt, inhibition and restraint. Another kind of division occurs with the American dream which has often been

controversial, Democrats and Republicans pushing their own version of the myth.

Conversely, we know various cases of converging secondary myths. One of these configurations is what I call an archemyth wherein all myths, master and secondary, combine to strengthen the same set of values – which does not happen often.

Other than that, as FS rightly asserts, derivative myths are more prone to change but these usually take place within the spirit or the basic meaning of the master myths. If derivative myths contradict the master myths, it means that the former are no longer fit to drive a society and a change is about occur at this level as well. As a principle, derivative myths periodically change such that master myths, through successive 'translations', remain aligned with the ever-changing contexts and keep their reach on a society. Therefore, the relationship between master and derivative myths should be viewed as functional, not intrinsically negative.

This being said, I tend to agree with the suggestion that secondary myths are to master myths what conception is to concept. The example provided by FS relating to democracy is quite convincing.

On another note, as regards the relationship of myths with time and space, FS engages in a fascinating discussion that calls up major scholars in the field, from Frazer and Cassirer to Wittgenstein and Eliade. I can only say that this opens many avenues for my own reflexion and provides a rich epistemological and theoretical background for my next research project (about the deep meaning and future of national myths).

I think, however, that there may be some misunderstanding here that I wish to clear up for the sake of the present exchange. When I say that myth as a social mechanism enjoys a universality and is not compressed into a time frame, I want to underline that

social myths are not prevalent or operating only in so-called primitive or premodern societies. But I stick to my view that for a social myth to be efficient, it must be closely articulated to a specific spatial and historical context. Then it can cater to a population needs, hopes and anxieties. Besides, social myths are always promoted and perpetuated by collective actors in pursuit of their interest. So, in that sense, I see social myths as fundamentally "intra-storical" (or "intra-historical"?) – assuming that I correctly grasp the meaning of this concept.

In connexion with the foregoing, the reference to the concept of archetype also deserves some comments. I postulate that archetypes are truly universal and, for that reason, "extra-historical" in that they are not reducible to or contingent on historical events or contexts. Following Jung's clue, I see them as answering only to the unconscious. They have, however, the power to impact and even structure collective representations, whether they be ideologies, beliefs or myths. Indeed, myths owe part of their authority to their close relationship with powerful archetypes such as renaissance, the purifying power of exodus, the search for origins, the strength of blood bonds, the scapegoat, and many others. The capacity of myths to maintain this linkage between the universal and the historical is one of its most striking singularities. So, I would agree with FS that law (as an expression of human rights) is an interesting figure of this linkage.

Professor Sciacca closes his paper with a pessimistic note about the state of our societies. He mentions a process of desacralization, a "dissolution of human creative energy" and the situation of human rights ("inhuman because they are not within everyone's reach"). This is a diagnosis that must be taken seriously since it is shared by a number of intellectuals in the Western world – I will come back to this issue in my conclusion.

Relying to Cassirer, he also deplores the force of myths and of "mythical thinking." And he concludes that "Cassirer's perspective is certainly very far from that of Bouchard." I object to this assertion that defines myths as lies, as a mystification device that operate at the expense of rationality. I obviously do not endorse this definition, although I admit that myths often happen to assume this debased form of thinking, specially in political life driven by power relations. Then, myths are regularly used as a mechanism of alienation. Again, I hold that myths, through the values and ideals that they promote, can be a powerful factor of progress. This is the case with the founding myths of Europe such as freedom, equality, democracy, tolerance and human rights.

III

Natascia Villani (NV)

NV begins her paper with a brief and interesting genealogical overview of the concepts of collective imaginary and myth, making room for their social component. It seems that we both fully concur on the relevance of these topics today and the need of an in-depth scholarship. I also credit her for giving a very accurate account of my approach to social myths and the mythification process.

Besides, she is right about the "paradox of origin." A part of myths is indeed invented by social actors who promote and suffuse them with values that, thanks to this very act of assertion, acquire an existence along with a future and a past. The actors then proceed to select an anchor and an imprint, to build an ethos and to wrap up all the preceding in a narrative – a narrative that is "performative" and not only "descriptive" (NV's words). That being said, another part of myths does not partake of invention but relies on structural and universal features: this is the realm of

archetypes that are activated to bolster a new myth. Therefore, at least in that sense, myths are both a construct and a given.

NV is also right in raising the huge, thorny question of the future of myth: "What happens now in the network society, in the so-called infosphere?". She mentions new technologies, new expressive attitudes, new aesthetic forms, and most of all, the "collapse of authorities and hierarchies, of the credibility and reliability of the classical sources." We should all be deeply concerned about that major and sudden shift that affects the future not only of myths but of all kinds of familiar knowledge accreditation mechanisms, criteria and channels (family, school, church, media, politics, literature…).

The influence of the classical symbolic agents, so to speak, has also declined accordingly (parents, teachers, priests, etc.). As for the social media, those "echo chambers" (John Scruggs) with their "filter bubbles" (Eli Pariser) and like-minded audiences, they have been pictured as just the opposite of loci of collective reflexion, healthy deliberation and knowledge sharing. On top of that, they have been characterized as a hotbed of intolerance and even fanatism. Rather than expanding the room conducive to consensus, they fragment and destroy it.

To sum up, the "void" in our societies (*infra*) is created both by a shortage of beliefs and ideals, a disenchantment, and by a collapse of the old communication apparatus. What will come out of this is anybody's guess but the reasons to worry are plentiful. As a remedy, NV renounces the idea of rebuilding comprehensive myths, consistent grand narratives and collective imaginaries. Instead, she invites "a bricolage" of fragments that, taken together, through storytelling (in lieu of narratives), would "form the consistency of a new imaginary." I will only say that if this is the best bet, I am afraid that we should brace for a deep cultural impoverishment.

Yet, I have no better, realistic alternative in mind and I like her last sentence which sounds like a not-so-depressing fallback option: whatever happens, we will always be able to do what we have always done: "deflate the tales of the powerful, tell other stories"...

IV

Jean-Jacques Wunenburger (JJW)

This distinguished scholar has devoted all his professional life and has tremendously contributed to the promotion of collective imaginaries as a research field. His paper echoes both his knowledge and intellectual authority. The first part is a timely and sound reminder of how social myths have impacted societies in the past and still do today, specially in the political sphere. Hence the question: how to explain the intellectual resistance of contemporary social sciences to embrace this topic as an area of research? The close link between political myths and religion as well as well as the rise of empires – including Napoleon's – testify to the power of myths. The constant need of narratives about the past (e.g., founding myths) and the future in modern, democratic nations is another piece of evidence, and JJW provides several other similar examples borrowed from the history of France and United States.

According to him, the resistance of the academia first comes from the fear of pathological drifts of myths and collective imaginaries. This argument is well documented but cases of abusive, 'morbid' rationalism also exist as shown by several totalitarianisms (see Hannah Arendt) or monstrous scientific experiences, notably in genetics. The other source of resistance lies in the belief that irrational thinking belongs to the past, that the postmodern age is now firmly established. JJW shows how this

view has led to a deconstruction of old myths, especially the symbolic apparatus which used to underpin the nation. On this topic, the paper offers a strong rebuttal along with an insightful suggestion as to how to move forward.

According to him, the way out of the present situation (imaginaries without "superstitious beliefs and obscurantist dogmatisms") could reside in the promotion of a symbolic approach. From this, he proceeds to outline how a political imaginary can avoid pathological drifting, secure a fair, non-instrumentalized exercise of power, a restrained definition of identity, a safe use of political rituals, and so forth.

Yet, he goes further by pleading for a paradigm that extends beyond the sociological functionality of the myths (which is the main horizon of my book). Here, the perspectives are as huge as promising. Gilbert Durand is called up as one of the pioneers, as well as Gaston Bachelard and a few others. The fascinating goal is to capture the whole of collective imaginaries with a particular focus on archetypes and adjoining deep symbolic structures down to the associated representations that govern daily life. Durand's work on the cultural history of Europe is conjured up as an impressive testimony. It offers a spectacular, wide-ranging view of macro-cultural areas (or "cultural basins") that have metamorphozed a few times over many centuries. One hopes that so rich an agenda would appeal to the young generation of researchers from various scientific horizons.

Finally, the readers should pay close attention to JJW last statement, emphasizing that the goal of these studies is not to fight rationality but to make room for other powerful forces that drive human consciousness.

Conclusion

By way of a conclusion, I would like to submit a few thoughts about a difficult question: how is a myth created? Or, more specifically: is it possible to create a myth? It is a question that is not usually raised by researchers who conceived of myths as very old narratives whose origins are virtually impossible to locate. Yet, as regards social myths, not only the question can be asked but there is some urgency about it.

Indeed, across the Western world over the past decades, who has not heard about the dark diagnoses of a cultural crisis, a symbolic void, a spiritual deficit, the end of the great narratives, a civilization decline, a moral decay, and so forth? For instance, in various European countries, these depressing views, disseminated by eminent intellectuals, are widespread and still gaining ground. The European Union itself is presently in search of a new symbolic foundation. It is widely believed that it has lost much of its appeal, specially among the youths (Bouchard 2017). And in North America, the United States are in the middle of a deep crisis of their most powerful national myths (American dream, exceptionalism, frontier, world mission, etc.). This situation has led a number of prominent intellectuals to call for new narratives, new sources of hopes, or new myths. Hence the big question: how to go about it?

First of all, and contrary to a quite common thinking, it is impossible to create a myth from scratch. It is not the kind of task that can be entrusted to a group of great minds with the expectation that they will come up with a few working proposals after a few months or even a few years. The creation of a myth is much too complex since, most of the time, it is made up of many pieces woven in a way that can hardly be predicted or planned.

Let's take as an example the American dream, arguably the most influential myth within the old American national imaginary. When reduced to its core, the myth looks quite simple: if a citizen works hard enough, he/she will be rewarded by society through social mobility (better wages, improved living conditions, more respectability, and so forth). By breaking down this myth, however, one gets a sense of the plurality of its components and the intricacies of their sewing together. Here is a list of its major parts:

- A belief in individual, human capacity to be dynamic and creative;

- An incentive to fully develop one's talents;

- An emphasis on individual responsibility so that his/her success or failure cannot be blamed on society;

- The celebration of a work ethics that may tap into various sources, including religion;

- For the sake of fairness and justice, the promotion of social equality, at least at the outset of a career; thus everybody has the same opportunities; of course, it is expected that inequalities will appear along the way but they are legitimate since they will mirror the inequality of talents, virtue and sacrifice;

- Wide freedom and other rights which allow individuals to choose their occupation and shape their career as they wish;

- A contract between citizens and their society: a) if they work hard enough, they will be rewarded, b) as a counterpart, the elites (political and others) must make sure that society provides fairness;

- According to the same contract, all citizens should do their utmost to contribute to the advancement of their society such that nobody lives off the work of his/her neighbours;

- Finally, as the outcome of an efficient combination of collective and individual input, both citizens and the society will grow.

What is intriguing is the way those components happened to get connected to each other over a long period of time. Some of them origin in the Puritan religion at the very beginning of the settlement. Others stem from subsequent political and cultural choices. Others emerged from a recycling of older symbols suffused with new meanings. And finally, some were the products of ever-moving contexts and random occurrences that have exacerbated old anxieties or given birth to new hopes.

In other words, there was little invention *stricto sensu* and there is no name that can be attached to this complex story (except for the writer who coined the word, but only after the fact). Nobody could have captured what was brewing and engineered the subtle arrangement of the numerous components that came to undergird the myth. Here again: no intelligent design, so to speak.

Moreover, there is the obscure process through which sacralization occurred along the way such that the American dream emerged as arguably the backbone of the national imaginary. Needless to say, one would be at pains to replicate this shift.

Does it mean that, as cultural and social scientists (and citizens), we should adopt a fatalistic stance and let it go? Not at all. First, though I think we must give up on the ambition of creating the whole of a myth as complex and multifaceted as the American dream, it is still possible to promote values and policies that, eventually, could combine in an unpredicted way and generate an added comprehensive value. Besides, the example I have used is a compound (or polymorph) myth that relies on many components. There exist other myths less complex (at least apparently) such as racial and gender equality, democracy, solidarity, tolerance, and the

like. Yet, they are still the products of many contextual and historical contingencies and the big challenge of accounting for the sacralization shift is still to be overcome.

The truth is that cultural and social sciences are not prepared to shed light on these issues. The field of social myths in contemporary societies has been neglected. The majority of scientists still seem to operate on the assumption that the Western world is governed by rationality, that only premodern societies remain under the yoke of myths. They are rejected on the grounds that they belong to an inferior, primitive form of knowledge that, thanks to the Enlightenment, our societies have gotten rid of.

As to a possible move forward, I think that a promising way to start is to turn to the past and reconstitute the formation of a sample of social myths that are prevalent today: when and where the involved value was expressed for the first time? What was its connexions with the immediate past of this society? How did it progressively gain attention and traction? In what circumstances, what context did it enjoy a wide dissemination? Who spearheaded the operation and what were their motives? What accounts for their success? What fears and anxieties was the new myth expected to alleviate? What predicament did it promise to suppress? What new hopes did it ignite? How all the preceding combined to generate a social movement, a power game and, finally, a new rule?

As far as I am concerned, I now intend to focus on Québec between 1945 and 1980, an intense period of change that witnessed the waning of old social (as well as national) myths and the emergence of new ones. Thus, I would also be able to analyse the process of myths substitution and, hopefully, understand a few things about the life of social myths.

Professor emeritus

Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (Canada)

References

Bellini, Paolo. 2015. "Le langage de l'imaginaire entre mythe et utopie." Paper delivered at the 2nd International Congress of the CRI2i in Porto Alegre (Brazil) under the theme: "La théorie générale de l'imaginaire 50 ans après: Concepts, notions, métaphores" (29-31 October, 2015).

Bouchard, Gérard. 2017. *L'Europe en quête d'Européens. Pour un nouveau rapport entre Bruxelles et les nations*. Bruxelles: P.I.E. Peter Lang.