

Marx's tempered criticism of Hegel (he refers to him in the same breath as a "mighty thinker") sees his own dialectical method as "exactly opposite," where "the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man" (1990a, p. 102). Marx thus sees himself standing steadfast against the complicity of a German idealist legacy that abetted the legitimacy of the state and empire: "in its mystified form, the dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and glorify what exists" (1990a, p. 103).

Marx's materialist legacy continues to be a subject of much debate in the social sciences. Regardless of its merits or shortcomings, there is an extensive tradition of scholars (beginning prominently with György Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, and here also with elements of the Frankfurt School) concerned methodologically with outlining the development of ideology through theories of practice. Scholars such as Gramsci (and later Michel Foucault) maintain that mystification enables forms of domination based on social and cultural institutions that inculcate and naturalize inequitable social relations, rather than domination legitimated by force. Of course, such works tend to be more critical and radical in their approach but nonetheless recall writings by Émile Durkheim, Weber, and others on religion and the origination and maintenance of social order. Others are unabashed in their appreciation of the benefits of mystification. The American political-philosophical movement known as neoconservatism (fomented mostly through the work of Leo Strauss) extols the virtues of mystifying a self-destructive public through articulated deception (a "noble lie") by a vanguard elite. Still, among the vast majority of social scientists, mystification remains a troublesome social process around which conversations about deception, hegemony, and social justice occur.

SEE ALSO *American Dilemma*; Cox, Oliver C.; Gramsci, Antonio; Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich; *Ideology*; Lukacs, Gyorgy; Marx, Karl; Marx, Karl; *Impact on Anthropology*; *Marxism*; Myrdal, Gunnar

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## MYTH AND MYTHOLOGY

In educated circles, myths or mythical materials can be concepts, images, symbols, and narratives. They may be regarded variously by different persons, within specific sociohistorical contexts, as being more or less important at different stages of biosocial development. Accordingly, adolescents may deconstruct mythic heroes during the transitions from the sixth to the twelfth grade.

Myths have often been labeled as "sacred," or at least as essential parts of the religio-ritual-scriptural complexes of religious institutions. This has been the dominant position within myth studies, as represented in the title of a collection of essays edited by the American folklorist Alan Dundes (1934–2005), *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (1984). Dundes begins his introduction on page one of this collection: "A myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form," which now seems as at least a doubly limiting definition, linking the sacred to a creation myth.

The concept of "the secular" is established precisely as "the profane" (literally *outside* the temple walls) in highly religious societies. Yet increasingly, less-religious Western peoples have begun to notice that "the religious" actually represents, at most, some selective enclaves, and that "the secular" (the term means, etymologically, only "of this age, contemporary") is the primary source of experience for most people in our era. And it has become all too obvious that quite apart from holding "sacred" status, hundreds of hardly religious mythic figures and images are more influential today than traditional religious ones: Pop culture has become the major source of experience in our societies, one in which the ironically self-named singer Madonna or rappers such as Eminem are referred to far more frequently than figures and stories from traditional religious repertoires.

Of course, myths remain "sacred" within explicitly religious organizations. Recent decades have witnessed strong growth of fundamentally restrictive puritanisms, and there, to be sure, "mythical" connotes false, sacrilegious, or heathen. Even highly educated persons may equate myth with any religious institution's attitude that they oppose. Demonstrations of the problems that primitive Christians had with their Jewish compatriots and forebears (the New Testament has several equations of "myth" with "Jewish concepts") generally help more neu-

tral audiences to understand some of the hostility that led to early-Christian burning of the great Alexandrian collection of all remaining Greek manuscripts because they were mythic and hence "anti-Christian."

#### OTHER CLASSIFICATIONS OF MYTH

Modern and contemporary anthropological evaluations of the mythic include Bronislaw Malinowski's (1884–1942) emphasis upon myth as an active social force and Claude Lévi-Strauss's proposals that myths represent attempts to resolve philosophical dialectics between—ultimately—being and nonbeing. Yet it is perhaps an open question whether or not myths really resolve the ancient Zoroastrian dichotomies reflected in the Hebraic prophetic contrast between human inclinations toward good or evil. The issue was posed by the Talmud no less than in the Christian Didache's ethical teaching about the "Two Ways"—itself an echo of the Greek image of Herakles at the crossroad having to choose between plain-Jane virtue and gorgeous vice. What is more obvious than resolving this particular ethical-intellectual dichotomy is that mythic orientations can be understood as ultimately responsible for long-range positions that can lead to military aggression and racism or, on the other hand, to utopian planning, multiculturalism, and pacifism.

At some point in the development of mythological studies (mythography), issues of form/structure versus content/ideological dimension appeared. Formally, many myths (although certainly not all, as assumed repeatedly) seemed to be strongly related to rituals, especially those associated with life transitions and communal festivals. And likewise it has become evident that myths ought to be less readily regarded as coherent narratives than as fragments, whether in ordinary discourse or in displayed works of art (see especially Danser 2005, pp. ix–x, p. 14, and chap. 3).

Alive within a mythological universe, then, myths are less scriptural monoliths than segments of memories, portions of wholes that may or may not cohere as "religious" systems, yet have a flavor of mythicity that identifies "the American dream," the Western hero monomyth, rock and roll, or a political plank. "Mythicity" usually seems naively natural, although it is certainly difficult to parse in technical language; we may be least aware of those mythological perspectives through which we cipher importance and significance in culture.

Myths reinforce ancient educative values, as Plato (c. 427–347 BCE) notably realized. But one might look also at contemporary Navajo myths that, in their entirety, project an amazingly exact geographical gazetteer of their native nation's boundaries. Such mythological performances (and later texts) are also evocative scenarios—the

metaphors by which societies elect to follow this or that projected sociopolitical choice as well as various hermeneutical-interpretive-moral alternatives.

Here the mythological and the ideological-political spheres overlap, because myths model moral choices (positively or negatively). They are often ways the individual learns how to adjust to social roles and statuses—one's own and those of peers with whom one chooses to associate. Mythological materials can be seedbeds of new metaphors for comprehending and changing societies, providing perspectival ways of seeing that are constantly changing images of possible realizations of communal, artistic, and individual growth and fulfillment. Martin Luther King's 1963 "I have a dream!" speech, for example, had a powerful mythico-political force.

#### FORWARD-LOOKING MYTH

Notably, myths can fund prospects for the future derived from the traditions of the past, as they lubricate the transitions and initiations that fine-tune social interactions and provide the symbols of communication. It is easy to note their afterlife in language, as is seen in English-language adjectives originating from the Greeks: hermetic, mercurial, Apollonian, Dionysian, narcissistic, oedipal.

Many of these figures reflect the central roles of creativity and development that somehow always recur as an important dimension of the mythological. Such a dimension represents various options in cultures that are seldom still regarded today as formative and revisionary, yet continue to ferment like dreams and visions, revolutionary modes of imaging. Hence, there are so many instances of mythical stories of transformations and changes, metamorphoses and apocalyptic endings, as well as recourses to originary energies of beginnings, the recountings of which still have the affective-effective power to motivate and stimulate change.

#### TRADITIONAL CATEGORIES OF MYTHS

Two important categories of myths that remain very much alive in American schools are those from classical Greece and Rome, and world mythologies. The former were simply part of the worldview and diction of antiquity, not at all a matter of coherent pantheons, as it would appear from modern textbooks and lists of mythical symbols, but instead a situation where deities and heroes were respected primarily as the powerful figures of specific cities or locales. Any one of them had various ritual epithets, according to how the figure had manifested locally (the Zeus of such and such a town). Later handbooks and catalogues appeared only as earlier Greek culture was waning and Roman adaptations of many of the Greek figures threatened to replace them. The polished, famous

accounts of Apollodoros (c. second or first century BCE and Ovid (c. 43 BCE – 17 CE) become the models for medieval and Renaissance rediscoveries of long-latent mythological resources.

Thanks to Plato and then subsequent movements within Greek thought, the two basically identical terms for “word, saying”—*logos* and *mythos*—were differentiated. The “mythical” came to be considered less important than the “logical,” and the history of Western science was off and running with Aristotle (384–322 BCE). In the Roman period, largely due to excesses of allegorical interpretation, *mythos* had become so disdained that the Latin equivalent of the Greek *mythos*, *fabula* (as in *fabula fictiva*), named such traditional mythological stories—and then later the Christian apologists sought to show that the Christ myths were superior to the traditional Western stories (even though their artists repeatedly created early Christian images using the traditional heroic models).

Certainly biblical folklore and mythology presents a third most important source of Western mythological traditions, but today “world mythology” has become yet more central in most educational contexts, even at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York, where the English department is responsible for the humanities education of the plebes. The Academy has found world mythology to be an excellent way to inculcate tolerance and receptivity to other world cultures (primarily using one of the many widely available collections, such as Donna Rosenberg’s *World Mythology* [1999]).

#### NEW MULTIDISCIPLINARY FOCUS

Mythological studies in itself provides a convenient canvass of the history of scholarship: the study of myths and rituals has become a focus of many analyses in literature, anthropology, and religious studies. Attitudes toward the mythological today are less “monotheistic” than in the past—but few scholars would argue for earlier models that presumed that myths merely constituted primitive attempts at science, or reflected interpretations of astrological models. Rather, a multidisciplinary approach acknowledging several factors is widely accepted: psychological functions, sociological applications, even philosophical dimensions are now considered relevant.

Myths and mythologies are like the lenses in our now variously tinted spectacles: we see through them. Even today, we code our universe with mythic figures and stories, and our psyches still echo them at night. In popular culture, ideological implications arise when myths are reified in such ways as to reinforce political or religious values, or when certain sets of mythological figures are considered a society’s primary models for gender or power relationships.

In such monocultures, whole bodies of mythology may be suppressed or ignored; it is remarkable how few of the general U.S. population today are aware of the complexity of American Indian or African American mythologies, or how uncritically people regard stories about or from other times and cultures.

#### COMMUNICATING AND INCULCATING CULTURE

Yet, beyond the aesthetic beauty of stories, myths have important communicative functions as they are put to corporate use in shaping communities or individually in forming self-identity. Hence Plato’s concern that the primary stories (myths) told to young Greeks were told by their uneducated childhood nurses; but, on the other hand, he was quick to devise his own mythical stories to convey sophisticated philosophical teachings (Brisson 1998 and 2004 are exhaustive in their scope).

Particularly when myth is employed in politics or for inculcating religious moralities, it readily assumes claims of being a “truth” that would never be attributed to other types of stories. While secondary or tertiary mythical influences may not excite the faithful, the primary myths soon attain canonical or scriptural force, and may even be considered absolute, closed to analysis or criticism. Monotheistic “literal” interpretations have become suspect in a postmodernist world, due to the fact that they are naïve and untheorized.

Beyond romantic effusions of admiration, contemporary appreciations of myth can at last include ancient appropriations while realizing that they garner ancient wisdoms at their own risks—even while developing contemporary realizations and reapplications of what seem to remain long-lasting (one may no longer say “eternal” or “universal”) cultural inheritances. Myths and mythologies resurface repeatedly because of the long history they trail as representing important sociocultural values, seldom figured explicitly in popular culture expressions, yet all too often lodged beneath the glitz and glamour of popular films, television shows, and advertisements.

SEE ALSO *Magic; Religion*

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