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The Care and Repair of Public Myth  
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Myth lies at the basis of human society. That is because myths are general statements about the world and its parts, and in particular about nations and other human in-groups, that are believed to be true and then acted on whenever circumstances suggest or require common response. This is mankind's substitute for instinct. It is the unique and characteristic human way of acting together. A people without a full quiver of relevant agreed-upon statements, accepted in advance through education or less formalized acculturation, soon finds itself in deep trouble, for, in the absence of believable myths, coherent public action becomes very difficult to improvise or sustain.

Myths, moreover, are based on faith more than on fact. Their truth is usually proven only by the action they provoke. In 1940, for example, when Hitler had defeated France, the British public continued to support war against Germany partly because they "knew" from schoolbook history that in European wars their country lost all the early battles and always won the last. This faith, together with a strong sense of the general righteousness of their cause, and fear of what defeat would bring, made it possible for them to persist in waging war until myth became fact once more in 1945.

Clearly, without British actions in 1940, World War II would have followed a far different course. Russian and American resources might never have coalesced with Britain's to create the victorious Grand Alliance of 1945. Germany, in short, might have won. Yet no merely rational calculation of relative strengths and military capabilities in June 1940 would have supported the proposition that Great Britain could expect to defeat Hitler. Action, irrational in the short run, proved rational in the longer run. Myth is what bridged the gap, remaking the reality of June 1940 into the reality of May 1945.

On the other hand, Hitler and his followers, too, were guided by their own set of myths. But their belief in Germany's racial superiority, no matter how firmly embraced and enthusiastically acted upon, brought only disaster. So belief by itself is not enough. Complex constraints operate in human affairs, only

partially understood even by the wisest. Consequently, human hopes are never fully realized, and unforeseen side effects continually throw up new problems that redirect action even in the most routinized situations. It is in directing and redirecting action that myth comes into play. Conversely, when actions undertaken in accordance with accepted ideas fail to achieve anything like the expected result, it is time to reconsider the guiding myth, amending or rejecting it as the case may be. As a result of this process, the British national myth survived World War II with little amendment, whereas Germany's suffered a wrenching discontinuity.

Liberalism, Marxism, and the various technocratic ideals of social management that have proliferated so remarkably since World War II all constitute living myth systems, subject to amendment or rejection in the light of results, just as Nazism was. But the feedback between myth and action proceeds smoothly and effectively only when destruction and reconstruction of agreed-upon general statements about the world remain more or less in balance. Discrediting old myths without finding new ones to replace them erodes the basis for common action that once bound those who believed into a public body, capable of acting together.

How can a viable balance between myth making and myth breaking be assured? How can a people know what to believe and how to act? How indeed?

## II

The classical liberal recipe for the care and repair of public myth was to rely on a free market in ideas. The United States is committed to this principle by law and to quite extraordinary degree also in practice. By allowing dissenters of any and every stripe a chance to express their views, liberals from the seventeenth century onwards hoped and believed that a kind of natural selection among myths would prevail. When, as is commonly the case, inadequate evidence obstructs fully rational choice, the upshot of action based on tentative or provisional belief would still suffice to permit the people to choose-eventually-what to believe and how to act.

The efficiency of such a free market obviously depends on how long it may take for the process of testing and confirmation-or rejection-to work itself out. In rapidly changing conditions, when more and more dimensions of social life are in motion and become subject to deliberate manipulation, there may not be enough time to test new formulations before they must again be altered to match newer and ever-changing circumstances. Worn-out old myths may then continue to receive lip service, but the spontaneity and force attainable when people truly believe and hope and act in unison will surely seep away.

In some fields, the free market in ideas works very well. This is conspicuously the case in natural science, where myth, tested by action and revised in accordance with results, continues to achieve spectacular success. It may seem whimsical to equate scientific theories with myth, but if one accepts the definition of myth offered at the beginning of this article, surely the shoe fits.

Scientific theories are statements about the world, believed to be true, and many of them also provide a basis for action, as our extraordinary technology attests. Moreover, no scientist any longer thinks that any actual theory fits reality so closely that revision and amendment will never be needed. No formula, whether mathematical or verbal, is immune from correction. Thus Newton supplanted Aristotle and Descartes, and was in turn corrected by Einstein, whose reign may soon be coming to a close if contemporary physicists succeed in formulating some new synthesis among the strong and weak forces their experiments have discovered.

Continual and fertile interplay between myth making and myth breaking in natural science stands in striking contrast with human affairs, where successful myth making is in short supply. This is not simply because effective social myths must go beyond observed facts. That is just as true in physics and the other natural sciences, where theory regularly runs beyond observation, guides perception and, frequently, directs experiments as well. For it is only where they have a theory to test that scientists can know how to filter out the various background noises that obscure experimental results when such guidance is lacking. Thus fact and theory interact in natural science in almost as strong a way as in human society.

Yet the natural and human worlds are not the same. Their great difference arises from the sensitivity of human behavior to symbolic stimuli. Physicists, after all, need not concern themselves with how particles of matter or energy will react to general statements they make about the world: whereas anyone describing human behavior knows that if what is said seems to be true, it will make a difference in how human beings who believe it will act. Such reflexivity therefore makes social myths different. They are more powerful to create and to destroy what they purport to describe than the formulations of the physicists, whose myths affect only the observation of behavior, not the behavior itself.

In human society, therefore, belief matters most. Evidence supporting belief is largely generated by actions undertaken in accordance with the belief. This is a principle long familiar to students of religion. In Christian terms, faith comes first, works follow. The primacy of faith is equally real for the various civil religions that since the eighteenth century have come to provide the practical basis for nearly all of the world's governments. Democratic elections legitimate governments when enough people believe that periodic elections are the right and proper way to choose who shall rule. For the same reason, divine-right monarchy, caliphal leadership and submission to the Son of Heaven were once effective too. But when assent becomes halfhearted or is actively withheld from such myths, obedience becomes irregular, the predictability of human action diminishes, and the effectiveness of public response to changing conditions begins to erode.

This, it seems to me, is our situation today around the globe. Democratic myths confront the reality of organized private interest groups operating in the interstices of empire building among rival branches of vast and ever-growing governmental bureaucracies. This makes the electoral process increasingly irrelevant to encounters between officials and citizens, even in countries like

our own in which elections are not affected by armed intimidation at the polls or limited to candidates approved by a single party.

The audio-visual mass media, by opening a path into private homes where aspiring candidates may sell themselves to the voting public, do even more to insulate the electoral process from administrative realities. In the United States a candidate who secures access to TV has already won half the battle; subliminal empathy does the rest, slightly affected by the plausibility of promises to satisfy everyone, dismantle the bureaucracy, fight crime and safeguard peace. In other countries political salesmanship takes less extravagant forms. There, party organizations or governmental officials set more severe limits on access to mass media, and on programmatic statements attacking constituted authorities. In poorer lands, where TV screens have not yet spread into private homes, political campaigns are still likely to focus in the old-fashioned way on public meetings and private deals with locally based leaders of whatever sort—party functionaries, tribal chieftains, employers, landowners or whoever else matters in getting things done. But everywhere TV acts to undermine the electoral process, tending to reduce it to a popularity contest among tinsel personalities.

Communist countries have restricted the political impact of mass media by limiting what can be said in public to a narrow party line. But that policy runs into difficulties of its own. Apart from a widespread loss of credibility, the heavy weight of the police regimes that enforce restriction on public debate blatantly contradicts the anarchic brotherhood promised by Marx's vision of post-revolutionary communism. Consequently, as revolutions recede in time, the gap between reality and expectation becomes more difficult to explain away.

### III

Political institutions are therefore not working well on either side of the Iron Curtain. Inherited political faiths are in danger of losing their credibility. The incipient stage of such a change is difficult to recognize or measure accurately; yet withdrawal of belief may suddenly come to matter more than anything else in foreign and domestic affairs. Revolutionary situations, like that which recently boiled up in Iran, register the collapse of old belief; but a successful revolution, like every other collective action, must invent or revive its own myths. Stability, predictability, control are otherwise impossible. The body politic cannot endure without agreement on truths that can be used to guide and justify public action.

To be sure, the United States is not in a revolutionary situation. Nonetheless, discrepancies between old myths and current realities are great enough to be troubling. They seem to widen every day, yet serious effort to revise inherited public myths remains largely the province of revivalist sectarians.

In times past, such situations have sometimes given great leaders the opportunity to reshape a nation or to remodel a state in response to a new vision of what was right, proper and possible. World War II and its aftermath

gave this kind of scope to such diverse figures as Charles de Gaulle in France, Konrad Adenauer in Germany, Mao Zedong in China and Tito in Yugoslavia. Before that, the depression of the 1930s called Franklin D. Roosevelt and Adolf Hitler into action. Maybe our current difficulties will find a similar resolution in one or more of the most deeply affected countries. What is needed is a suitably charismatic figure with a vision of past and future that millions will find so compelling as to make them eager to join in common action to achieve newly articulated purposes.

Nevertheless, though the niche may be empty and waiting, no one can count on its being filled. Great public figures do not arise in a vacuum. They personify and give voice to ideas and ideals already scattered about and accepted by at least some segments of the public that responds to their call. The great leader's role is to put a coalition of new ideas into action, often by dint of overlooking logical discrepancies. When the resulting mix commands enough support to generate effective common action, logical shortcomings scarcely matter. The people who follow the great man's lead have, in effect, revised their mythical system and can therefore persist as an effective public body for as long as the new myths and action based on them continue to yield acceptable results.

But where do political leaders' new ideas come from? Tito and Mao drew on Marxism, Adenauer revived a Catholic, corporatist tradition that had suffered near total eclipse in Bismarck's Germany, while De Gaulle combined Gallicanism, technocracy and a personal sense of mission that perhaps derived as much from his name as from anything more tangible. Such traditions are themselves human creations, of course, being largely the work of intellectuals and men of letters, packaged by historians for use in schools and other public places and then transmitted and sustained by educational, religious and other cultural institutions.

In a time such as ours, when inherited myth systems are in disrepair and no great political leader has yet emerged, historians, political scientists and other academics who are paid to educate the young and think about matters of public importance ought to feel a special responsibility for proposing alternatives to accepted ideas. Only so can they hope to trigger a successful reorganization of public myths that could command the support of informed and critical minds. To leave the field to ignorant and agitated extremists is dangerous. That, after all, was how Hitler came to power. Yet American historians are doing so today with clear conscience and from the best of motives.

Pursuit of truth has been the overriding ideal of our universities ever since the professionalization of research in academic institutions began about a century ago. Challenging prevailing myths without regard for the costs arising from the disintegration of belief therefore became professors' special calling. Intellectual honesty required as much, and methodological rigor demanded special attention to anything that failed to conform to mythical prescription and expectation.

Hence the enthusiasm for revisionism. Careers have been made and schools of historians have flourished on the strength of their discovery of flaws in received notions about the American nation and its government. By uncovering the sufferings of the poor and oppressed, revisionists discredited older ideas about the unique virtue and perfection of American society. They showed that liberty and democracy did not assure equality after all. Assimilation to a Yankee model of behavior did not guarantee happiness either, even for the most enthusiastic converts from other cultural backgrounds. Still other iconoclasts challenged the belief that foreigners differed from us simply because they had fallen behind the progress of the United States and only needed a little capital and know-how to become as rich, free and fortunate as Americans were supposed to be.

No one is likely to reaffirm these discredited notions today, even though public rhetoric often assumes the reality of such myths without expressly saying so. Politicians and journalists really have little choice, since suitably revised national and international myths are conspicuous by their absence.

Instead, the main energies of the historical profession have gone into detailed research, often focusing on the experience of groups formerly excluded from historians' attention, i.e., on one or another of the ethnically, sexually and occupationally oppressed segments of society. Frequently, the effect of such scholarship is to substitute a divisive for a unifying myth, intensifying the special grievances of one group against others.

Truth and intellectual honesty are no doubt served by noting the yawning gaps between democratic ideals and social practice. They would be even better served if historians found it possible to fit their new data and sensibilities into a wider perspective in which weak and strong, oppressor and oppressed would all find a place. In such a history, of course, the things that unite human beings would have to come to the fore. This might even provide a matrix for mutual understanding and more effective public action. Yet macrohistory is commonly deemed unscientific, and this despite the example natural scientists have given of how to react to new, discrepant data by revising theory to embrace old and new in a single formula believed to be true.

The main reason for eschewing macrohistorical synthesis is the mistaken notion that generalization inevitably involves error, while accuracy increases with detail. Getting at the sources and staying close to them seemed a sure way to truth a century ago when academic departments of history were set up. Industrious transcription of dead men's opinions therefore became the hallmark of historical scholarship. It still provides a convenient substitute for thought, despite historical quantifiers and other methodological innovators. Yet an infinitude of new sources, each of them revealing new details, does not automatically increase the stock of historical truth. More data may merely diminish the intelligibility of the past, and, carried to an extreme, the multiplication of facts reduces historical study to triviality.

The truth about foreign affairs, for example, does not reside solely or chiefly in the texts of diplomatic notes filed away in foreign offices. Search of

supplementary sources like newspaper files, TV scripts and private papers will not do much to remedy the defects of diplomatic history based on faithful transcription and comparison of official documents. The reason is that all such research assumes that the situations within which human beings act are obvious and unchanging, so that only operational details that passed through the consciousness of the actors at the time need to be attended to.

But this is not the case, and historians actually know better. States are not eternal; nations emerge and pass away. Alterations in communication nets change the way governments and peoples interact, and patterns of power transform themselves all the time in ways of which contemporaries are only dimly aware. Yet changes of this kind commonly matter more for understanding what happened than anything that can be discovered by consulting additional past opinions as recorded in sources hitherto unexplored. Industriousness in archives may merely obstruct vision of the larger patterns whose evolution matters far more than new details of particular transactions.

To move from detail to perception of larger patterns is not achieved by accumulating more and more instances. Appropriate concepts are needed. Each change of scale requires its own vocabulary to direct attention to the critical thresholds and variables. Finding the right things to lump together and the right words to focus attention on critical transitions is the special work of human intelligence-whether applied to history or to everyday encounters with the world. Nearly everything is done for us by the language we inherit that generalizes and organizes the flow of sensory experience with every noun and verb we employ. But myth makers and myth breakers are entrusted with the task of adjusting and improving received ways of understanding and reacting to the world. As such, they are supposed to think more persistently and perspicaciously than others, making whatever change may be needed in inherited words and concepts so as to take account of new experience.

Finding the right vocabulary to focus attention efficiently is a difficult matter. The history of human thought records some of the more successful efforts that have been made. As a result of centuries of struggle to come to grips with the complexity of things, we now have many separate sciences, each with its own vocabulary. These actually describe the same reality at different levels of generalization. Thus, for example, no one doubts that atoms, molecules, cells and organisms simultaneously occupy terrestrial landscapes, and we have appropriate sciences for each. We also know that complicated ecological relationships exist among the separate organisms and populations of organisms that share any particular part of the earth. However complicated the relation may be across these diverse levels of organization, it is not the case that small patterns are automatically truer than large patterns, or that error inheres in a description of the ecosystem but is absent from formulas that apply to atomic interactions. Indeterminacy extends to the atomic and sub-atomic level too, as twentieth-century physicists agree.

Historians, however, through their idolization of written sources, have commonly allowed themselves to wallow in detail, while refusing to think about the larger patterns of the past which cannot be discovered by consulting

documentary sources. They have consequently undermined inherited myths that attempted to make the past useful by describing large-scale patterns, without feeling any responsibility for replacing decrepit old myths with modified and corrected general statements that might provide a better basis for public action.

#### IV

If historians persist in dodging the important questions of our age in this fashion, others are sure to step into the breach by offering the necessary mythical answers to human needs. The question then becomes what groupings will take form and gather strength around such myths. So far, sectarian fissiparousness seems the dominant trend. Religious syncretism and revival, whether Muslim, Christian, Hindu or Buddhist, achieve success largely by cutting true believers off from the corruptions of civil society around them. Secular forms of sectarianism seem at a low ebb by comparison, thanks to the wearing out of both the Freudian and the Marxist faiths.

Tides in myth making and myth breaking are, of course, unpredictable and have often taken sudden, surprising turns. Recent events in Iran remind us of how precariously old and new systems of ideas coexist. Yet I, for one, am not prepared to abandon a secular and ecumenical faith in the power of human minds to decipher the world.

Several points seem clear to me. One is that troubling encounters with strangers constitute the principal motor of change within human societies. Ecumenical world history ought therefore to be specially sensitive to traces of past cultural interactions. This has the immediate effect of escaping the Europe-centered bias we have inherited, for any plausible view of the human adventure on earth quickly discovers that the dominance of European civilization is a matter of recent centuries. European expansion since 1500, indeed, appears to be analogous to what happened before when Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, Indian and Chinese civilizations each in turn attained skills superior to those known elsewhere, and for a few centuries were therefore able to influence others within the interacting circle of the Old World.

Whoever admired or feared the skills in question set out to acquire them or else sought to strengthen local society against their threat. Either way change resulted, often of a far-reaching kind. Comparable but less well-established patterns of cultural efflorescence and outward flow can be discerned among pre-Columbian Amerindians. African history, too, begins to become intelligible—though still dimly—in terms of diffusion of skills of the kind recorded more fully by the literate civilizations of Eurasia.

A second obvious proposition is that the national history of the United States fits into the pattern of world history not as an exception but as a part. More specifically, the rise of the United States was an important segment of the global phenomenon of European expansion that dominated most of the earth from shortly before 1500 to shortly after 1900. The U.S.S.R., too, is a monument to the same process, having been built by pioneers who moved



eastward and overland rather than westward and overseas as in the case of the United States. This geographical difference had important consequences for the fashion in which the repertory of European skills and institutions was altered and adapted on the two frontiers. But such differences ought not to obscure what was common to all European frontier societies, East and West, and also in such diversified places as South Africa, Australasia and South America.

Placing our national experience within the panorama of world history will require us to give up both the original Puritan vision of creating a "city on the hill" uniquely pleasing to God, and its variously secularized versions that continue to dominate our national self-image. Manifest Destiny, translated into an aggressive, hard-nosed pursuit of national advantage in the tradition of Theodore Roosevelt and his successors, is as unsatisfactory a guide to action today as is the universalistic legal-moralism associated with Woodrow Wilson and his political heirs. Limits to our national power need to be recognized more clearly than either of these traditions admits. The plain fact is that the wealth and power of the United States vis-à-vis the rest of the world have diminished since 1945, and we must get used to this elemental fact. The best way to start is to recognize that the American way of life is no more than one variation among many to which humanity adheres.

This need not diminish personal and collective attachment to inherited values and institutions. Recognition of humanity's cultural pluralism might, indeed, allow us to react more intelligently to encounters with other peoples than is likely to happen when we are either aggrieved and surprised by their persistent, willful differences from us, or else remain self-righteously impervious to the possibility of learning something useful from people who diverge from us in enduring, conspicuous ways.

Finally, it seems no less evident that currents of cultural interaction have, since 1914, begun to run in new directions from those that dominated the world during the preceding four centuries. How to understand the contemporary scene requires more detachment from everyday events than we can easily achieve. For a while after World War II, the bipolar diplomatic pattern of the cold war seemed to ratify the existence of rival and opposing Soviet-U.S. spheres of influence. But Japan's economic rise, together with heartfelt Third World aspiration toward a more perfect emancipation from imperial tutelage, and complex cross-currents within old Europe that extend, sometimes, to Russian and American societies as well, makes that simple bipolarity now seem inadequate in spite of President Reagan's efforts to make it the key to all else.

Perspective arising from the course of future events may be necessary before observers can discern the pattern of our time as clearly as we can recognize past patterns of interaction among the peoples and cultures of the earth. Nonetheless, seeing contemporary foreign affairs as a continuation of longstanding processes of cultural encounter will surely teach us not to expect the various peoples of the earth to wish to be like us any more than we wish to be like them. It should teach us also to expect local variation in the expression

of even the most universal human aspirations. The fact that nearly everyone prefers wealth and power to poverty and helplessness does not therefore assure any uniformity in the way different peoples will choose to pursue the common goal. Nor are material goods everything. Beauty and holiness are also widely disseminated ideals, and the desire for membership in a supportive community of comrades is an even more universal and, often, passionate desire.

V

The most problematic of all these human aspirations is how to define the limits of comradeship. This, indeed, is where humanity's myth-making and myth-destroying capacity comes elementally and directly into play by defining the boundary between "us" and "them." Broadly inclusive public identities, if believed and acted on, tend to relax tensions among strangers and can allow people of diverse habits and outlook to coexist more or less peacefully. Narrowed in-group loyalties, on the other hand, divide humanity into potentially or actually hostile groupings.

The choice is awkward because advantages do not lie wholly on one side. Sectarian groups, their faces set firmly against the larger world, are far more supportive to their members than variegated, pluralistic societies can be. Nations, for the same reason, provide their citizens with more vibrant public identities than transnational and global organizations will ever be able to do. What humanity needs is balance between a range of competing identities. A single individual ought to be able to be a citizen of the world and hold membership in a series of other, less inclusive in-groups simultaneously, all without suffering irreconcilable conflict among competing loyalties. But that could only occur if conventional limits to jurisdiction somehow stabilized relationships among all the multitude of possible in-groups. Such stability has perhaps been approached in times past when some territorially vast empire brought order of a kind to parts of the globe, but it is no recipe for our foreseeable future.

Instead we must do the best we can to survive in a world full of conflict by creating and sustaining the most effective public identities of which we are capable. Cultural diversity is and always has been characteristic of the human species. No sensible person would wish or expect to see uniformity instead. Ordering diversity is, nonetheless, difficult. Violence played a large role in times past, by defining geographic boundaries and modes of interaction among diverse communities. Violence is sure to remain among us, heirs as we are of hunting bands that became the most skillful of all predators. But wisdom can sometimes restrain violence, or channel it into less damaging forms of behavior than preparation for atomic war.

Apart from the practical value which serious myth making aspires to, the reality of world society in our day constitutes an intellectual challenge that can be met only by rising to the grandest mythical plane of which we are capable. Only so can the world we live in become intelligible. Inherited ideas-whether dating back to pagan Greece, Christian Europe, 1776 or 1848-are simply inadequate,

and there is no use pretending otherwise. There is still less sense in pretending that all we need is more detail. What we need is an intelligible world, and to make the world intelligible, generalization is necessary. Our academic historians have not done well in providing such generalizations of late. Thoughtful men of letters ought therefore to try.

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