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The Persistence of Myth

Introduction

Resisting Myth

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Introduction

Resisting Myth

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- 1 Only after the end of the long 19th century has it become possible to recognise that with the emergence of modernity the mythical did not vanish but rather persisted or returned in another form. Authors from various fields and theoretical traditions have noted the persistence of the mythical in modern society. As the mythical persists, the questions remain why, how, and what role it plays. How does the persistence of the mythical relate to contemporary society and its various spheres? What is its contemporary form - what mythical figures determine contemporary life and thought? How does the mythical relate to acting, perception and thought?
- 2 An anthropological materialist perspective on the mythical may allow us to perceive it as an anthropological condition, which is nonetheless historical and as such malleable. To conceive such a perspective we start by looking at how Theodor W. Adorno in the course of an epistolary quarrel criticizes his friend Walter Benjamin for his “anthropological materialism”. By this concept he implied a naïve, romantic materialism that, like in the case of Ludwig Feuerbach, does not pay enough attention to history, class conflict and the dialectic between economy and culture (which, according to Adorno, needs much more mediation) and could succumb to the mythical. In other words, the anthropological materialist is in danger of arguing for a materialism that is not historical enough and which, by treating anthropological phenomena as “natural” or “biological” (Adorno focuses on the human “gesture” which he understands as a pure positivity in Benjamin’s work) instead of understanding them as being determined by social and economic institutions, falls into the trap of mythologising them. Myth could be characterised here¹ as the mist of time, the originary dark night, the ambiguous fog from which “man” once escaped and should not return to, but also as a misleading story “man” tells him or herself about his/her own origin legitimising the existing social order. Nazism would be, in this sense, the most terrifying political incarnation of the mythical as it sustains irrational behavior and expels rational reflection.

- 3 The question here is how to abolish the mythical completely, including the mythologies of everyday life, the mythologies of politics and even the mythologies of reason itself. This destruction of all mythologies aims at establishing a totally rationalised world (including a rationalisation of economy, that is to say a fair redistribution of wealth). To put it with Louis Althusser's first critique of ideology, we have to stop to tell stories to oneself and to lie to oneself ("arrêter de se raconter des histoires").
- 4 But Adorno's argument could also be inverted into a materialist anthropological one. While paying tribute to the Frankfurter Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault recognises the importance of extending the programme of the Enlightenment like the second generation of the Frankfurt School does, but insists on the necessity of avoiding any overestimation of the "rational discourse" that could hide the still existing human will-to-power still present in the ideal of the public sphere: the danger would be that of creating a reassuring myth and avoiding to fight the injustices which reproduce themselves behind such a screen. The programme of the Frankfurt School remains valid, but has to be true to the "masters of suspicion" (Nietzsche, Marx, Freud) in order to avoid new ways of mythologising. In a similar fashion, another materialist anthropologist, Pierre Clastres, is a good example of how the seemingly rational argument of a political progress from "primitive" to industrial, rationalised societies, is only another way of creating a myth, the one of a poor primitiveness deprived of a state, in order to legitimise an allegedly proper political order with a state and a flourishing economy.
- 5 Destroying such myths would, for example, mean showing how some societies are trying to resist the formation of a state through certain rituals and complex political structures that are made to prevent the unlimited power of only one man. In this way anthropology can help to destroy the myth of triumphant occidental reason, which sees itself as progressing from a legendary beginning (the state of nature, as Hobbes described it) to a legendary end (the resolution of all conflicts by a benevolent State). This anthropology would be materialist without being economic and without submitting to mechanical laws, cycles of forces of production or trains of progress. Such a materialist anthropology is political from the very start.
- 6 For this reason, Walter Benjamin inverted Adorno's critique of "anthropological materialism" and used the term in a polemical way: an anthropological dimension has to be included into historical materialism in order to prevent it being "metaphysical", or mechanical, i. e. focussed on some abstracts "laws of history" (like those that render history a progression from a primitive community lacking a state to an intelligent society with a state, or from the law of the survival of the fittest to consensus generated through reasonable discussion). The problem of a collective body that could act in history is, for Benjamin, too important to being left to the fascists and Nazis, and that is probably the reason why Benjamin flirts with what he suspects to be a fascist aesthetics (namely that of Ludwig Klages, Carl Gustav Jung, but also of the College de Sociology, and particularly Roger Caillois) attempting to problematise anthropological positivities such as the "collective unconscious", the "archaic unconscious" or the "archaic image".
- 7 But while one has to dive deep into the mythical, one also has to break out of it. It is as if the condition of breaking out is to dive in first. As for every materialist anthropologist, the problem of the anthropological materialist is to escape the mythical – but only after having known deeply that from which he is escaping, in order to avoid a dangerous return of the repressed.

- 8 **Rosa Eidelpes** insists on the richness of Roger Caillois’s “mythical” epistemology. One has to point out, as Adorno did, the danger of reducing cultural constructions (as children’s tales or Sade’s literature) to biological phenomena as “proto-fascist” (because it could legitimate a “biological” politics more appropriate to human *nature*). The devouring of the male by the female mantis during copulation could well be the universal source of castration anxiety, nevertheless it remains that cultural constructions are elaborating this pre-cultural anxiety into a linguistic world that escapes from the natural world. Eidelpes recapitulates the more recent and convincing critiques against Caillois’ anthropology. Not “scientific” in the strict sense, Caillois’s attempt to combine anthropology with biology transforms itself into a mythology. But, at the same time, Eidelpes illuminates Caillois’s ability to demonstrate, against all academic trends, how we are still determined by nature. And he does that by means of a “diagonal science” that, surprisingly capable to enlighten our collective imagination (from the daily life to universal tales) with entomology, ends up with a new, productive relation between science and fiction.
- 9 **Andrew Mac Gettigan**’s new translation of a famous testimony from Pierre Klossowski (a member of the Collège de Sociologie with Roger Caillois) on Walter Benjamin reveals the core of “anthropological materialism” surrounded by myth. In this text published in *Le Monde*, Klossowski draws the picture of the German philosopher when he was assisting the conferences of the Collège: while Benjamin wanted to include collective passions into a socialist organisation of work in a new form of phalanstery, he always warned members of the Collège to stay away from a pure aesthetic of the myth, a positive conception of these passions that could carry them along the slippery slope of fascism and Nazism. Benjamin here reproduces Adorno’s argument for his own sake.
- 10 As **Takaoki Matsui** and **Elise Derroite** argue, mythic fate is Benjamin’s theme from the beginning of his work. The myth in question here is the power of nature and of its gods that invades human representations and actions like a “fog”: man always has to pay retrospectively for an offense he could have made against the gods – a pattern that the patricians were able to reproduce in order to dominate the plebeians in the same way the first humans were oppressed by unpredictable omnipotent gods. **Matsui**’s article explores the role of colour in Benjamin’s aesthetics and in particular “the mythic appearance of colour” in relation to the antagonistic tension between guilt, debt and shame. The children’s blush, for example, is a sign of such prehistoric relation to guilt, debt and shame. By means of an original examination of the interlaid aspects of Benjamin’s critical reading of Simmel, Goethe, and Baudelaire on colour, Matsui underlines Benjamin’s contribution to the critique of capitalism as a system that produces debt (*verschuldend*). For **Derroite**, the task of the poet is to escape from a conformist mythology, and to articulate his own experience into a “plastic” experience of history. Through Derroite’s translation of Benjamin’s philosophy of art into a general theory of history that remains in all his work, plasticity has to be understood both as the plasticity of the historical world, as the plasticity of the poet’s subjectivity, as the plasticity of Benjamin’s criticism and, last but not least, as the plasticity of the subject making history. The “poeticised” (*Gedichtete*) is the concept of such a revolutionary creativity: it names the space where the poet becomes aware of this plasticity of the world and of his creative power upon it.
- 11 **Aujke Van Rooden** tries to actualise such a concept of myth, which is also present in Benjamin’s anarchist text *Critique of Violence*, on recent political phenomena, notably in

Holland. She defends the idea that contemporary political orders erect themselves on a *mythical circle*, which intertwines foundation and conservation. This also has to do with a *mythical violence* (not only in the sense of brutality but also in the sense of the German verb *walten*), endlessly performed in the perpetuation of the political order. There is a complete *mythical oblivion* of this violence in contemporary political orders, which is the oblivion of the contingent decision that erected political order itself, i. e. an oblivion of its historicity. Consequently, this mythical circle should be *broken*, but Benjamin suggests it can only be broken by a *Durchbrechung*, a “divine violence”. Van Rooden suggests something less radical, but maybe more practicable: as it doesn’t seem totally possible to break the mythical circle in our societies, maybe it is possible to interrupt it, by developing a non-political discourse *within* the political order.

- 12 The not thematically-based part of the current issue presents texts on various topics: an interview, a philosophical essay, ten thesis on actual political philosophy, a reply on formerly published articles and a book review.
- 13 In an interview with Susan Buck-Morss **Joanna Kusiak** discusses the contradiction between Buck-Morss's support of the Occupy Wall Street movement and her claim of the non-existence of a political ontology. Exploring the philosophical roots of her “prejudice against ontology” Buck-Morss explains the repercussions of “start[ing] from a claim of ontological position, and the limitations it imposes by means of an apriorism that bars one from the possibility of recognising his or own error”. Buck-Morss and Kusiak also debate the role of irrationality as regards the “psychological strategies of capitalism”, the reception of the OWS by the Left and the role of event or surprise in the historical process.
- 14 In the section *Materialist Experiments* **Jan Rolletschek** argues for the concept of a free association and against certain tendencies in contemporary left political philosophy to repudiate it in favour of the State. In his ten theses he defends why and argues how the free association in its ideal identity of free equality and equal freedom has to be thought against all doubts and practised as a real movement of liberation against the movement of capital.
- 15 **Stéphane Nadaud** and **Murasawa Mahoro** are using Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s anthropology – deterritorialisation, body without organs – in order to pioneer a “philosophy of the intestine” that radicalises and exceeds the Promethean myth. Abandoning the field of mythological metaphors, animals, vegetables and microbes are conceived as hungry bowels using their extremities in order to extend their digestive territories around their bodies. But humans transgressed their own boundaries by mastering fire. This event signalled not only the rise of the human mind, but also of the difference between brain and intestine, metaphysics and physics, the high and the low order of the universe. The invention of the city is itself redefined as a spatial reorganisation of bowel production.
- 16 In the *Varia*-section **Sami Khatib** responds to Michael Löwy's article on Walter Benjamin and surrealism, published in the previous issue of A+M. In his response he discusses the theme of “profane illumination” underlining its anthropological capacity in unearthing the everyday structures of life under capitalism and elucidates the relation of ideology and politics according to Benjamin’s anti-representationist perspective. Exploring how the surrealist image-space unworks the boundaries between the individual and the political collective, Khatib finally examines the concept

of “innervation” and its relation to Benjamin’s “second technology” of human-nature interplay.

NOTES

1. Not in the Levi-Straussian sense of myth, nor in the anthropological sense of myth as related to ritual, but from a critical theory perspective.