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Book Review: Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries by Gérard Bouchard

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Bouchard, Gérard. *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries.* **University of Toronto Press, 2017. 176 pages. Paperback, $24.95.**

Gérard Bouchard's *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries* is a timely work for readers hoping to examine the contentious socio-cultural political environment of the twenty-first century. The interdisciplinary nature of the text is displayed in how it could be used to study topics in and across multiple disciplines. Bouchard takes a sociological perspective and analytical approach to the examination of myths in the collective imaginary (premodern and modern) to create a model to examine myths theoretically and empirically. The collective imaginary connects with the mental psyche and consists of the symbols and representations of society. Bouchard's focus is on how myths develop and become sacralized—how they become part of the subconscious of culture and society.

Bouchard explains that myth is a collective representation that is made up of six features which include an archetypal foundation; hybridity, where the myth can shift between dichotomies; driven by emotion, sacredness, instrumentality, and narrativity. "In light of these statements, the beginnings of a definition emerge: rooted in the psyche, strategically produced and used, social myth is a collective representation that is hybrid, beneficial, or harmful, imbued with the sacred, governed by emotion more than by reason, and a vehicle of meanings, values, and ideals shaped in a given social and historical environment" (p. 25). For Bouchard, sacredness is the most definitive of the foundations and is what distinguishes myth from other representations.

Bouchard provides a loose typology of myth with categories that are based on how the myths are constructed rather than on their substantive content or their uses and include the following: religious, philosophical, allegorical, and scientific. Bouchard differentiates myth from ideology by explaining that myths are engines of ideology, in that the underlying myth is the basis for an ideology's ability to mobilize people, where ideology is connected to reason and myth is connected to emotion and symbols. Bouchard then differentiates myth from other concepts such as stereotypes, clichés, evolutionary vision, and rituals.

Myth is produced by social actor(s), and it takes time for myths to go through and influence society. Bouchard provides an overview of the definitions of myth found in scholarship which provides the reader with a useful tool by which to conduct further research on how to define myth.

The most in-depth portion of the text, and what seems to be the heart of the material, is Bouchard's explanation of the mythification process which is essential to delivering the message and instituting the myth. Bouchard discusses eight elements he believes constitute the mythification process, focusing on the social rather than psychological or archetypal facets.

The first element is the construction of the subject and is the basic who of the myth—on whom is the myth focused and to whom is the myth directed. The second element is the anchor

and refers to the experience or event that anchors the myth and is often traumatic. There are dormant anchors which are events that cannot be exploited or are waiting to be developed, and there are active anchors that are already in high use, such as the *Mayflower* landing in the United States. It should be noted that the anchor does not establish itself but rather is chosen by some social actor out of various potential anchoring events. The third element, imprints, refers to the lasting, socially constructed, collective emotion left in the psyche of the subject due to the anchoring event/experience. Imprints can result from both negative and positive experiences.

The fourth element is ethos and refers to "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" (p. 53). The fifth element is sacralization and is the element Bouchard considers especially important in that it is what aids the myth in being able to develop, such that it can stand up to contradiction and opposition. Sacralization is where a cognitive shift occurs and emotion overtakes reason. Narrative is the sixth element and bolsters the ethos through practices of commemoration, where ritual and use of symbols play important roles.

The seventh element consists of techniques of persuasion. A range of techniques are used to persuade the message targets including visualization, rhetoric, figurations, argumentative mechanisms such as polarization and scapegoating, and forms or structures of thought. Bouchard looks closely at concepts of contradiction and dichotomies and discusses how reason is connected to myth and repertoires of discursive patterns, which Bouchard argues are especially useful in understanding ideology and public debate. The final element, social actors, refers to common public actors such as government, political parties, churches, media, etc. "These actors, often leaders of social movements, instrumentalize the messages to establish their legitimacy, to better serve their interests, or to advance their agendas. It follows that, to a large extent, the fate of social myths is a matter of power relations" (p. 80). The myths spread by the social actors may contain truth or not and may or may not be morally questionable, but powerful social actors may be able to convince their targets of truth and morality in any case. Bouchard explains this is the reason why it is important to examine the motivations of social actors and of the way the mythification process operates.

After explaining the mythification process in detail, Bouchard devises an idealized model of four components that constitute a collective dynamic of which social myths are a part and can be used as an analytical framework in understanding the creation, reproduction, and decline of myths. The components of the 'mythical square' include collective imaginaries, collective social actors, target population, and power relations and struggles.

Bouchard goes on to discuss how the decline of myths can occur when the myth no longer synchronizes with elements of the social arena and explains how myths are criticized and challenged such as by an attack on the symbols of the myth. However, this does not destroy the underlying structure of the myth. Rather, using a different myth to combat the existing myth is more effective in that the sacredness embodied within the myth can be transferred to other

targets. Bouchard explains that the creation and establishment of myth is unpredictable, and it cannot be assured that a message will turn into myth. In addition to the conditions of the mythification process, Bouchard provides a set of factors that increase the effectiveness of the message turning to myth which include but are not limited to consistency, empirical basis, adaptability, relevance, and nature of the messenger.

In concluding the text, Bouchard reiterates that the study of myth should not be relegated to past and/or primitive societies and explains that myth can be used in different ways and for different purposes. Examination of myth can help in understanding culture and thought, not only in the past but in current time as well.

As a professor of public administration and political science, I find *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries* poignant in its examination of current issues facing governance and politics in the United States. A prime example where I find this text particularly useful is in the arguments surrounding Confederate statues and memorials notably in the Southern United States. Calls for the removal of these statues and memorials have led to numerous protests and political battles on the local, state, and federal levels. The mythification process outlined by Bouchard provides an analytical tool to understand the divisive myths that underlie the symbols of the Confederacy, the losing side of the United States Civil War. While Bouchard's text can at times be repetitive and somewhat disorganized, the overall concepts are engaging and offer readers from a variety of academic disciplines and areas of practice a way to break down and examine how their state of affairs came to be.

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