

Myth Project

Elizabeth Ashkinazi

The myth I chose to focus on is the myth of *rugged individualism*, which is associated with bootstraps ideology (“picking oneself up by the bootstraps”), the American Dream, and the concept of self-reliance and a lack of dependence on external assistance in an undertaking, usually in relation to the government. The term has its origins in Herbert Hoover’s presidential speeches, where he asserted that the key to becoming a “self-made man” was self-reliance, resilience and a rejection of federal relief programs in order to build character.

The myth of rugged individualism “flattens out” contingency and makes the idea of rugged individualism seem attainable while ignoring the unforgiving history that embodies the reality apart from the myth. Systemic oppression, sometimes taking the form of inequality (racial, economic, gendered, able-bodiedness etc.) is ignored, and the neglect of history as well as its transformation into nature follows. Agency is falsely assumed but covertly stripped. Knowledge is too distorted given that class struggle is conflated with laziness, success seems more within reach than it actually might be, and a false reality is created for those who believe that hard work operates in one’s favor independent of the circumstances.

For a myth to naturalize something, it “...is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden...but because they are naturalized” (130). The myth naturalizes/conceals the Protestant work ethic, ruthless competition and risk-taking, which are all byproducts of a capitalist society. Rugged individualism also naturalizes a “me vs. them” worldview, which is oppressive in that it operates against collective society and instead hyper-focuses on the actions of privileged individuals. It presents itself as a force that fosters healthy cooperative competition -- one that “builds character”, positioning itself as a desirable thing for someone to have, attesting to its supposed innocence. In today’s world, this myth manifests in the rejection of “government handouts”, the subsequent disparagement of those who do accept (“welfare queens”, etc.), risky business ventures, and grossly disproportionate income inequality and the rhetoric surrounding “merit” or the “meritocracy” -- all of these things are considered to be “healthy” and “normal” while buying into the ideas of outdoing one another, focusing on the self as opposed to the collective, and the blatant neglect of privilege, all of which are concealed by the myth.

Barthes makes the claim that myth “transforms history into nature” (128). What he means is that myth presents itself as being “just the way things are” or “how things were meant to be”. It does not factor in external circumstances, such as the sociopolitics/economy relative to a time period -- it desensitizes the viewer of the myth for them accept it as unchanging fate, or the natural order, not to be meddled with -- “Semiology has taught us that myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal” (142). This myth is so ingrained in the individualism-centered consciousness of the average American -- the fact that communism and socialism are bad is presented as an almost-fact-of-nature -- as is the idea that hard work and risk-taking surely equate to success.

Social Darwinism is often used as a justification for this, positing itself as an extension from the natural world into the social -- healthy, competitive drive is necessary for every human's survival -- "communism will crumble, it's just human nature, survival of the fittest, baby!"

Innocent consumption of a myth implies the acceptance of said myth without further inquiry. Questions will not be asked and its meaning will be presumed factual, unshifting. Those who feed into the myth of rugged individualism include those who are not aware or are ignorant of its capabilities -- basically, someone who is unfamiliarized with the concept of privilege, systemic racism, class struggle, historical revisionism and the like may fall prey to the influence of the myth. This applies to a broad category of people -- ranging from the everyday wage slave, whose ambitions are cemented through the promise of reaping the fruits of his labor, or the company CEO who, having inherited his wealth, is subject to his own worldly delusions about what it means to work, *hard*. It can be the occasional, fairly rare rags-to-riches individual, who, for his own moralistic benefit, operates as the posterchild for rugged individualism, *he swears*. The political right tends to consume this myth innocently and the ramifications of this consumption are evident in our treatment of the homeless, cuts to assistance programs, shame-oriented and denigrating rhetoric, and our idolization of business moguls, alluding to a heroism that persists in the American and Western fantasy -- which all ultimately upholds the system in place, despite its idealistic unreality.

The myth interferes with a person's ability to imagine the Other by pitting the Other against the participant -- this is visible in the speech we use to describe government assistance ("handouts"), in the way we refer to people who receive it ("freeloaders"). It presents the other as being lazy, unconcerned with self-betterment, and passive, consequently upholding the "I vs. them" mentality. This results in the inability for the participant to sympathize with the situation of the Other, causing them to remain ignorant of all the processes that ultimately govern circumstance. This is done in order to maintain the status quo, because the myth demands for this sort of hostile competition and distrust to be in place for it to operate, effectively placing yourself above the rest in order to achieve what is thought to be peak individualism, in which there is "inherent value".

The myth immobilizes the world in its facilitation of regressive attitude. Instead of striving for the progress of equality, a hegemonic relationship is maintained where certain individuals are "better than others" because of their aspirational, perseverant natures. Equality is stunted, people cannot organize and mobilize -- they are discouraged for doing so in the name of public peace because the system "operates in their benefit", which is the greatest illusion of all. They cannot even conceive of an inharmonious world in which risk/labor don't imply betterness, therefore, harmony is presently achieved in the attitudes of those who remain ignorant to the myth.

Rugged individualism functions as "a prohibition for man against inventing himself" because the myth tries to imbue a person with agency -- purporting that man is in control of his own destiny and has the ability to enact change in his life without help from the government or

anyone else, while distorting history. As much as this myth tries to make it seem like agency is something within grasp of and essential to the human being regardless of privilege, it simultaneously strips many of this agency. Man can therefore not invent himself because he is shunned and called “entitled” when he attempts to do so. Self-invention lies at the crux of this myth but this invention is illusory, since “Myths are nothing but this ceaseless, untiring solicitation, this insidious and inflexible demand that all men recognize themselves in this image” (156). Social change is impeded because the myth is a romantic one and it thrives off of the inability for true agency to exist in this system, and man cannot truly self-invent apart from mediating, harmonizing, immobilizing outside sources.

The myth functions on the political right in that it espouses inequality in all respects and spectrums. Nostalgia is roused within the right-winger -- a nostalgia that romanticizes the American cowboy, the pre-WPA era, their immigrant grandfather who came to America with \$4 in his pocket and a single pair of shoes, never taking anything from anyone -- and look at him now! House built, money earned, family man...And now, everyone is a dependent. The political right is doing the budget cutting, managing the business, maintaining the status quo, enforcing the order. No one wants to let go of the American Dream, and concern for then collective is synonymous with the left. The right prioritizes the individual; it is “Common Sense”, the classical-liberal ghosts of the Enlightenment era linger.

What Barthes means when he says that “we are plunged into a false Nature” (157) by myth is that myth is all-consuming and easy to derive assumptions from, therefore, it is easy to accept myth as fact or even nature itself. Myth has the capacity to distort and it presents an image of what is right in front of you -- “it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible...” (143). Rugged individualism participates in all of this because it distorts the ideal of success by requiring the exercise of an unrealistic means to an unattainable end goal. The nature of success is misrepresented and simplified down to “hard work” -- a concept that negates “the complexity of human acts” and “gives [it] the simplicity of essences”. Barthes responds to the idea of “being plunged into a false Nature” by illustrating the work of the mythologist, which is an isolating, ethically questionable, and difficult-to-sustain task indeed. Barthes the mythologist seems to be disillusioned, as the prospect of formulating myth for the mythologist mandates cutting oneself off from myth; he “constantly runs the risk of causing the reality which he purports to protect, to disappear” (159). When encountering myths, Barthes wants us, readers of myths to be vigilant -- “And yet, this is what we must seek: a reconciliation between reality and men...” (160). If we manage to penetrate a myth, we must aim to eliminate it, but simply acknowledging its existence restores and respects the myth.