Myth as Model: Group-Level Interpretive Frameworks

Commentary on Sijilmassi et al. "'Our Roots Run Deep': Historical Myths as Culturally Evolved Technologies for Coalitional Recruitment"

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Abstract:

I argue that while recruitment might explain some of the design features of historical myths, origin myths in general more importantly provide shared narrative frameworks for aligning and coordination members of a group. Furthermore, by providing in-group members with shared frameworks for interfacing with the world, the contents of myths likely facilitate the selection of belief systems at the group-level.

Text:

The account proposed by the target article argues that the design features of historical myths are cultural tools primarily for facilitating coalitional recruitment in the context of nation states. While such an account makes sense in light of some design features of historical myths, I question why recruitment might exapt myth in particular. I argue that the structures of myths themselves serve a role beyond recruitment, serving as meta-heuristics for coordination and that this primary function can be found not only in modern nation-states, but in the smaller structure of fictive kinship groups, world religions, and even scientific traditions.

Given that the account presented by the authors must be exaptive, as the origins of the modern state occurred only some 6,000 years ago, a challenge for the framework is identifying the cognitive ur-mechanisms which lend humans towards constructing historical myths. The universal cross-cultural presence of myths, particularly origin myths, and their attestation through history in all of the world's major religions and societies at all scales indicate that the employment of myths in group-specific contexts must predate the origins of nationalism, itself only a 200-year-old phenomenon, and, indeed, states themselves (Gottshcall, 2012). A core question then is why human groups possess origin stories in general, external to their use in the context of state-building.

The proposal I defend is that group-specific myths serve not primarily as recruitment mechanisms, but as coordination mechanisms for members of an already assumed in-group. By providing group members with a shared attentional framework, origin stories create scaffolding for the construction of common and shared interpretive frameworks (Polanyi, 1952). Hence, myths and origin stories themselves are not content neutral nor invariant across societies, but instead in their culture-specific formulations serve as scaffolds for ideating shared models of the world, in ways that have both individual and, more importantly, group-level fitness outcomes.

In a general light, myths can be viewed as providing meta-heuristics for ensuring that members of a common group follow the same norms, envision the world with a shared ontology, and respond to new problems in the same way. One strong objection is that if this framework were correct, why would group members not simply tell a true, non-mythical story rather than generating a myth (Dubourg & Baumard, 2022)? The answer is that the contents of myths generalize *across* contexts by providing tacit, specifically

inarticulable assumptions about the world. As famously written by GK Chesterton in his now-famous appeal to irrational thought (1925), “Father Christmas is not an allegory of snow and holly; he is not merely the stuff called snow afterwards artificially given a human form, like a snow man. He is something that gives a new meaning to the white world and the evergreens, so that the snow itself seems to be warm rather than cold.” By providing vague frameworks and bracketing our interpretation of events in the same ways, mythical narratives, taken not literally, but nevertheless shared as common frames of reference, allow groups to “fill in the gaps” in out-of-context situations in the wider world, either in the form of tacit knowledge generation (Miton & Dedeo, 2022) or by referring to them in the form of explicit analogies (Brand, Mesoudi, & Smaldino, 2021). In this way, old stories serve as common guides to new problems by narrowing the space of possible solutions and providing groups who employ them with common cultural attractors (Sperber, 1996).

Foundational stories then provide not only the individuals who are convinced by them with groups, but group strategies to the groups which have adopted them. It is not just selection on individuals to join groups, but on the content of shared stories, which allow for their survival (Smaldino, 2014). It is non-trivial and relevant to consider, for example, that the flags of the nascent Continental Navy during the US Revolutionary War were embroidered with the quotes of John Locke and that the flag of the nascent Islamic State was inscribed with the *shahada*, as each flag represents completely different frameworks, mythologies, ontologies, and ideologies relevant to the bannerman hoisting it. An alternative framing of the author’s question, “why stories about the Gauls are relevant for French solidarity today,” posed by historian Bryan Ward-Perkins (2005), is why the annual prize awarded for service towards European unification by the European Union is the Franks-inspired *Prix Charlemagne* and not the Latin-inspired *Corona Civica.* It is perhaps because one inspires imagery of diverse confederation and another of militaristic imperialism.

In addition to the case of modern nation states, the framework provided by the authors can be extended to any wider context where group coordination is necessary and recruitment desired. Religions, corporate mission statements, and bespoke political coalitions of all kinds possess shared foundational narratives which align the behavior of in-group members. The names of our Young Turks, Tea Parties, and Green New Deals carry in them almost complete mission statements in the broadest details of their aesthetic choices alone. More controversially, I would contend that shared narratives are present and constitute the core of what we refer to as *theory* in scientific practice, which is comprised of largely implicit assumptions for aligning the research agendas and shared interests of otherwise independent researchers (Polanyi, 1958; Kuhn 1962).

Recruitment, therefore, I argue, is only part of the story of why groups, such as states, possess origin stories and may be a more recent part of the story than the more critical role of facilitating group-level coordination. As noted by the economist FA Hayek (1983), “Only traditions which succeeded in making whole to certain symbolic truth would be led to maintain moral rules whose advantages they never understood… we owe civilization to beliefs which in our modern opinion we no longer regard as true, which are not true in the sense of science, scientific truths, but which nevertheless were a condition for the majority of mankind to submit to moral rules whose functions they did not understand, they could never explain, in which indeed to all rationalist critics very soon appeared to be absurd.”

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