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Robert Wuthnow: American Mythos

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INTRODUCTION



The deep narratives that shape our sense of national purpose and identity are so firmly inscribed in our culture that we usually accept them without thinking much about them. These are the stories we tell ourselves about the moral responsibilities of individuals and about success and failure, about immigration and diversity. Through them we find easy ways of believing that the enormous privileges we enjoy as Americans are privileges we deserve. The deep meanings of these stories provide us with common ways of thinking about who we are. At the same time, they bias our perceptions. For instance, they encourage us to think that we are more religious than we really are. They result in ideas about how to escape from materialism and consumerism that are usually more wishful than effective.

This is the first premise of the book. The second is that we would be a better nation if we paid closer attention to these stories, understanding their effect on us and how they constrain our efforts to be better as a nation—to adhere more closely to the ideals we profess.

How do we identify these stories? Thoughtful observers have had much to say about them and—from Alexis de Tocqueville to David Riesman to more recent observers such as Robert Bellah, Herbert Gans, and Robert Putnam—have produced a long tradition of scholarly inquiry. Beyond this literature, though, stand the stories of recent immigrants, which are particularly illuminating. Through their distinctive voices, immigrants make the familiar strange. The stories they tell come with different accents and valences, but they are thoroughly American. They reveal anew why we think America is good and why we are so often unable to move beyond the shortcomings of its past.

That we ignore these deeper stories isn't to say that we don't reflect at all. Far from it. Much of our public discourse is devoted to examining

the state of American democracy. In many ways, the United States has gotten better. Take, for example, the fact that since 1965 approximately 22 million immigrants have entered the United States legally (perhaps 7 to 10 million more if all immigrants are counted). The American population is consequently much more diverse than it was. The number of Latinos has risen threefold, the number of Muslims and Hindus fourfold, and the number of Asian Americans fivefold. During the same period, we have undergone a major shift in values. We have become more accepting of diversity. Prejudice against Catholics and Jews has dropped dramatically. Racial discrimination has declined; interethnic and interracial marriage and friendships have increased. Gender equality has expanded. The number of women in the paid labor force has risen. We have also become a society in which individual rights are championed on an unprecedented scale.

In view of these changes, it would be appropriate to say that American culture has undergone the kind of democratic renewal that observers from Plato and Aristotle to Thomas Jefferson and Alexis de Tocqueville imagined as necessary to keep democracies strong. This period of reinvention has brought us closer to our ideals. We are a more inclusive nation, a nation that more nearly upholds the rights of minorities, and that more actively pursues equality and justice for all.

At the same time, a quick look at newspapers, magazines, and blogs reveals observers at both ends of the political spectrum arguing that American democracy is in danger. The threat is not just from foreign powers or terrorists. It is internal. It stems from complacency, from declining civic participation, and from self-interest.

Culprits are not hard to find. Some blame traditionalists dragging their feet. Or the untutored, the bigots, and fundamentalists, who have managed to avoid enlightenment. Others argue that reforms were too idealistic in the first place or carried unforeseen consequences that caused people to think twice. Other culprits share the spotlight: political gridlock, a sluggish economy, poor planning, partisan polarization, and diverted resources, such as those poured into national security. A case can be made for any and all of these. Yet to focus only on explanations such as these is to miss the most essential consideration.

That consideration is the deep character of our culture itself—what we might call the American mythos. The reason our best efforts to become more inclusive, more diverse, and more democratic have fallen

short, I argue, is that our collective thinking is grounded in widely accepted narratives that almost always go unexamined. These are the deep meanings of which our culture is composed, the tacit knowledge we use to make sense of our worlds. They are fundamentally about *morality*. Not a list of dos and don'ts but rather one of expectations, of rights and responsibilities. They are seldom spelled out explicitly in rational arguments. They are instead stories—stories about individual success, about why immigrants flocked to America, about ethnicity and religious pluralism, and about how to divert our attention from materialism. They are the stock of political rhetoric but also of our private understandings of our nation. They vary among different ethnic groups and from one region to another, and yet they provide us with common narratives about our shared existence. They tell us what it means to be Americans, how America is good, and why some people are more successful than others. They reassure us that our privileges as individuals and as a nation are well-deserved. They tell us how to worship and how to identify ourselves ethnically and racially. They help us understand our love-hate relationship with material possessions—and keep us from doing much to change this relationship. On the surface, there is a lot of talk about these issues. Such talk, though, tends to remain on the surface.

There are also deeper assumptions implicit in these stories that merit closer examination. For better or worse, these assumptions keep us from changing quite as much as we wish. They keep us from realizing our ideals as a nation and as a people. This is the focus of *American Mythos*.¹

Cultural narratives and collective mythologies play such a powerful role in the shaping of social life that we must be more reflective about them. This idea differs from one standard way of thinking about democracy. In that view, the deep symbolism of which narrative and myth are composed is a kind of sideshow—the focus of cheap political rhetoric, television, and uninformed public opinion—while the real work of democracy is carried out in enlightened circles, presumably by canny bureaucrats and legal experts. Proponents of this view seldom give serious attention to the way ordinary people think about their lives. In the alternative view suggested by the term “reflective democracy,” it becomes important to bring the two forms of public discourse together. The mythic dimensions of culture need to be taken seriously enough for us to reflect on their meaning. In doing so, we gain the chance to decide

whether these are the assumptions we want to govern our lives. We can more effectively seize opportunities to renew our nation and ourselves.

My discussion of the deep narratives of American culture begins with an examination of what it means to engage in democratic renewal. Chapter 1 traces the history of calls for democratic renewal and shows how these calls necessarily raise questions about the basic cultural assumptions that come into play when people try to renew their society. Chapter 2 examines the changing arguments that have been made about the role of the individual in American culture. Social scientists and other social observers are conflicted about how much and what kinds of attention to focus on the individual. For instance, Robert N. Bellah and his associates argued in *Habits of the Heart* that there is an overweening emphasis on the individual in our society. In their view, we need to pay a great deal of attention to the role of the individual, if only to demonstrate in the end that we should de-emphasize this role and focus more on groups, communities, and institutions. Robert Putnam takes that perspective a step further, focusing almost entirely on communities and the attachments of individuals to their communities, rather than dealing very much with the individuals who make up those communities. Yet in the final analysis, he reveals that it is impossible to escape making the individual central: he argues that the renewal of communities will happen most basically through moral decisions made by individuals (such as deciding to watch less television).

Other social scientists take quite different approaches. It has become common in my discipline, sociology, to argue that social arrangements matter much more than anything done by individuals. If people buy widgets, it is not because they choose to do so, but because there is a market for widgets and this market is embedded in social arrangements. Through similar logic, inequities in job opportunities and income between African Americans and white European Americans are not the result of racism or anything that individual decisions might influence; rather they are macro processes evident only in patterns of residence and job location and thus remedied only through public policy. Still, there has been a rebirth of interest in questions about human agency and the self in recent years, and social scientists who propose policy solutions to the macro problems they study implicitly acknowledge that policies are made and supported or opposed by individuals.² My discussion of the individual aims not simply to show that individuals are im-

portant but also to suggest that our culture is imbued with certain understandings of the individual. These enduring understandings constitute one of the reasons that efforts to renew and improve the society often turn out to reproduce the status quo.

In chapters 3 through 6, I take as an extended case study the ways in which new immigration has renewed—and failed to renew—American culture. Immigration is oddly similar, in terms of its potential effects on a society, to the birth of new generations. Just as new cohorts of citizens need to be socialized into the society's ideals and yet bring fresh ideas of their own, so do immigrants become absorbed into the dominant culture and at the same time challenge it by bringing in new perspectives. As a society of immigrants, the United States has been especially influenced by thinking about how and to what extent American democracy was renewed by the inclusion of immigrants. "I have heard people say that the reason for America's greatness, in fact probably the reason for America's greatness other than the founding values, is the immigrants," says a Muslim immigrant from Pakistan. He subscribes to the long-held belief in American culture that new blood brings added vitality. He goes on, "The constant influx of people who take the risks and are resilient and bring in new challenges with them challenges the rest of the society."

The inevitable downward trajectory that Plato imagined is, in this view, a function of people's becoming too complacent or lethargic. Just as large business firms become lazy and need to be challenged by upstart competitors, so, too, does the general population. Its members become soft and begin to think too much alike, as Tocqueville predicted. The comforts of middle-class life and the opportunities provided by democratic government eventually become so commonplace that people no longer work as hard to attain them or preserve them. Immigrants have experienced hardship. They renew the culture by appreciating it more. "When you become comfortable," the man from Pakistan says, "you just start taking things for granted. You need the new blood to keep it going." Immigration is thus a challenge, as some argue, because it brings in new people who have not been exposed to the same values as native-born Americans. To an even greater degree, it represents possibilities for renewal because of greater diversity and fresh ideas. Recent immigration to the United States also offers chances to get it right, so to speak, by transcending the nativism of the past and by providing greater opportunities for inclusion and upward mobility.

The sheer act of coming to America, I argue in chapter 3, is rich in cultural connotations about renewal. Coming to America represents a decision to leave something behind in the hope of finding a better life. The transition itself is sometimes a passage fraught with danger and accomplished at considerable cost. American history is of course filled with narratives about immigrants who undertook such trips, and these narratives have become the basis for myths about the deep meaning of our nation. They tell us why people sought to become citizens and what hardships they were willing to undergo in order to live in the United States. As such, these stories are capable of functioning like the sorts of renewal rituals that interested Émile Durkheim, one of the fathers of modern studies of society. Through the telling and retelling of these stories, we remind ourselves that America is a place that attracts newcomers. Such stories offer a way to examine in some detail how narratives are constructed and to see how tacit understandings are embedded in these narratives. I rely on interviews with immigrants and children of immigrants, as well as on published accounts, to examine the content of such stories. These sources provide a rare vantage point from which to see the cultural assumptions about America that we so commonly take for granted. The question is whether these accounts, which are often rich in imagery of renewal and new life, replicate old patterns, leaving the meaning of America much the same, or whether they include significant new elements. One clue, for instance, is the fact that journeys to America in recent decades are (with some notable exceptions) seldom as dangerous as they were a century ago for immigrants who crossed oceans in steerage. Does that difference, though, result in significantly different narratives?

The stories immigrants tell about success once they are here provide another way of understanding how culture influences our efforts to be a good society. We may have grown familiar with such stories, reading about them through historians' accounts or the legends fictionalized by Horatio Alger a century ago. But now we can consider them afresh through the words of Muslims and Latinos and Korean Americans who have come to the United States in recent years to make their fortunes. Newcomers' ability to achieve their dreams is an ideal that has long been associated with the meaning of America. People who work their way from rags to riches demonstrate that America is an open society, a place that rewards hard work and moral virtue. At least those were the conno-

tations of rags-to-riches stories a century ago. If even some of the millions of immigrants who have come to America in recent decades can be the subject of such stories, then we can collectively reassure ourselves that America is still a land of opportunity. Or better. Perhaps America is now more accepting of racial and ethnic diversity than in the past, less fraught with discrimination, and more willing to embrace cultural pluralism. Both the fact of upward mobility and the stories that can be told about it, therefore, are ways of renewing our society. But what happens if the path to success is different now from in the past—if, for instance, those who make it into the upper echelons of their respective fields were already successful in their countries of origin? Or had special advantages? Or prospered by virtue of education instead of moral luck? Are we in the process of inventing new myths about American prosperity?

Religion is the vehicle through which many Americans achieve personal transformation. This is especially true of those who say they are spiritually reborn. In other cases, religion serves as a source of hope or provides role models. The vitality of American religion is, in other ways, widely assumed to be a beneficial feature of American democracy. When religion flourishes, it suggests that separation of church and state, guarantees of religious freedom, and the resulting spiritual marketplace are all working effectively. When immigrants come to America and start new churches or temples or mosques, it reaffirms our faith that religious vitality will continue and that this vitality will probably benefit civil society. New congregations provide a more diverse space in which citizens of many faiths and ethnic backgrounds can meet. People overcome isolation in these places and learn how to be good citizens. In those ways, religion is reinvented to be more inclusive than in the past. But is this picture quite as rosy as it seems? Religion among native-born Americans is often a means of retreating from civic responsibilities. It is so highly personal and so deeply private that it fails to generate the frank give-and-take in the public arena that is probably necessary to enrich the culture. Examining the religious beliefs and practices of new immigrants is thus a way of seeing whether the prevailing culture of spiritual privatism is being transcended or whether it is simply being reproduced.

Ethnicity itself is another important dimension of what it means to be an American. Our understandings of ethnicity are, by many accounts, the part of our culture that has changed the most in recent decades. An earlier model of ethnicity assumed that American democracy would be

preserved to the extent that immigrants abandoned their ethnic identities and became like everyone else. More recent understandings have championed pluralism instead of assimilation. According to the pluralist vision of America, we are living closer to our ideals of inclusiveness than ever before. The shift from the older perspective to the newer one amounts to a significant reinvention of America. In addition, evidence suggests, as I show in chapter 6, greater ethnic diversity. Immigration and new understandings of diversity have both contributed to this increase. Yet there is also resistance to diversity. It comes not only from nativists but also from assimilationists. The pressures to assimilate to the point of abandoning ethnic loyalties are quite powerful, especially among those who gain educational and occupational success. I consider the idea of symbolic ethnicity as an example of how we have moved toward a more pluralist understanding of America without abandoning the past quite as much as we may have thought.

The other question about renewal that I consider (in chapter 7) concerns our love-hate relationship with material possessions, a theme that goes back to the country's founding. There is a deep strand in American history that pits materialism against democracy. It does not deny that marketplace economics and economic prosperity are compatible with—perhaps even conducive to—democracy. But this critique suggests that materialism erodes civic virtue, or at least replaces it, and in the extreme leads to the kind of least-common-denominator culture that worried Tocqueville. Materialism, along with its critique, is more about culture than it is about economics. Over the years, we have invented many kinds of ideas about who or what would save us from materialism. New immigrants have been among those saviors. Coming to America from the outside and supposedly bringing with them more authentic values, immigrants symbolize the possibility of cultural rebirth. This hope has again been voiced in recent years. Yet there are other understandings of materialism that prevent these hopes for escaping it from making much difference at all. This part of our culture is, I suggest, a clear instance of cultural drag getting in the way of our desires to achieve higher values.

I conclude in chapter 8 by considering what I refer to as reflective democracy. The unreflective background assumptions that guide behavior are, by definition, ones that we do not pause to think about very often. I suggest that culture as deep meaning is sufficiently powerful that we can transcend it only by focusing more intentionally on it. De-

mocracy has never worked well simply because people came out to vote or took part in civic organizations. Nor has it worked well only because of good laws and responsible policy makers. Democracy requires deliberation, as political theorists are prone to say. Even more, it requires deliberateness. We need to reflect on the cultural assumptions that hold us back when we aspire to be better. Our best efforts to do better do not fall short only because we lack material resources or qualified leaders. They falter because we are creatures of our culture—a culture that not only elevates ideals but also constrains our attempts to realize those ideals. There are, nevertheless, venues in which cultural criticism routinely takes place. We need to understand these venues and encourage greater participation in them.

The evidence I present in support of these arguments comes from a variety of sources. Some of it is new. It comes from in-depth interviews with recent first- and second-generation immigrants. They spoke candidly and at length about their experiences coming to America, their careers, their families, and their values.³ I selected new immigrant elites because they provide a particularly interesting informational context in which to examine ideas about cultural renewal. Successful immigrants have stories to tell, if anyone does, about why it was good to come to America and how America helped them to succeed. They are thoughtful, articulate, and in most cases well-educated people with potential for revitalizing the culture through their own leadership and work. Their numbers include artists and leaders of ethnic organizations who aspire directly to cultural influence, as well as professionals in government and business who serve as role models in their respective fields. Raised in other countries and often deeply dedicated to religions other than those traditionally represented in the United States, these elites do contribute to an expanded vision of American ideals. Yet they also reveal the enduring power of the prevailing assumptions that have characterized American culture in the past. In addition to the evidence from these new interviews, I draw extensively on published literature in the social sciences, on polls and surveys, and on historical and journalistic sources.

This book is less about the mere presentation of evidence, though, than it is about cultural interpretation. Social scientists sometimes argue that we who work in these fields should refrain from making normative arguments because we are not very good at it. They see the purpose of social science as the accumulation of information—information that is

personally interesting and that may prove useful to someone else, although a scholar should not be unduly concerned with those uses as long as the information is vetted by specialists in one's discipline. I reject that argument. Not because I think we social scientists are better at making normative arguments than my peers acknowledge, but because I think we have an obligation to try. After all, we devote our professional lives to collecting and analyzing evidence about social activities and conditions. We claim to know more than the average journalist or policy maker about the underlying factors that influence human behavior. If this knowledge amounts to anything other than fact gathering, it should have bearing on our thinking about what constitutes a good society.

To my fellow social scientists, then, my argument is this: Consider the ways in which social programs, policies, or movements fail to achieve their stated objectives. One possibility is that they fail because of resistance from their opponents. This possibility is widely acknowledged and even more commonly studied. It occupies a central place in the literature on social movements and countermovements, and in the literature on social conflict. A second possibility is that well-intentioned efforts fail for lack of planning. This is a possibility that social scientists like to entertain. It says, in effect, if you knew what we social scientists now know, you would have been more effective. I hope that there is truth in this argument. At least it is the reason much of social science is concerned nowadays with policy analysis. A third possibility focuses on unanticipated consequences. According to this argument, efforts that appear to have succeeded may in fact have failed once we recognize the full range of their consequences. There is a kind of supersleuth mentality to this approach. It is attractive because it again shows that social science can uncover things that people on the front lines may have missed. My argument is different from any of these standard approaches to explaining social failures. I do not deny the validity of any of the other arguments. I claim, however, that our best efforts typically fail to be quite as effective as we had hoped because there are unexamined assumptions in our culture that prevent us from exploring as many possibilities as we should. The implication of this argument for scholarship in the social sciences is that we must recognize the power of culture, as well as culture's durability. The stabilizing aspect of culture may prevent us from realizing some of our aims, but stability itself is something societies need.

For policy makers and other interested community leaders and fellow citizens who may not be social scientists, my argument is that we need to be more reflective about the stories we tell to make sense of our nation and ourselves. Too often, in my view, when we hear public officials and broadcasters tell stories about success or failure, about newcomers or old-timers, and about social problems or social triumphs, we simply accept these as sweet, familiar stories. We take them at face value, rather than questioning their implicit messages. Fortunately, we have cultural critics who do examine these underlying messages. I say, hooray for these critics. Let us give them more space in our newspapers. Let us also more often be critical ourselves. If an examined life is good for an individual, it is also good for a society.