

CULTURAL FICTIONS: THE FUNCTIONS AND DYSFUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL MYTHOLOGY

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SOCIOLOGISTS HAVE FROM TIME TO TIME NOTED THE TENDENCY OF members of a society to hold beliefs, and even to implement such beliefs, though they know such beliefs to be untrue. Indeed, they know them to be obviously contrary to reality. Robin Williams, an American sociologist who studied such patterns of beliefs and behaviour, called them "cultural fictions"; and he argued that they could be highly "functional" (i.e., contribute to the ongoing-ness of the society).¹ Although he did not stress the point, it would also follow that such patterns might prove "dysfunctional" (i.e., disrupt or threaten to disrupt the ongoing-ness of the society), if such beliefs were too contrary to objective reality, or were too zealously believed, or were too discredited in the eyes of too many members of the society.

In this paper, I propose *first* to illustrate these patterns in their simplest form with respect to crime and society. After the reader grasps the nature, functions, and possible dysfunctions of such fictions, I shall turn to a specific and profoundly American cultural fiction which has ensured the continuity of American society for nearly two hundred years. Crucially, this American fiction was even more functional for Europeans and Afro-Asians *in the past*. Continued subscribing to this peculiar American fiction by Afro-Asians now can be and has proven highly dysfunctional to Afro-Asian progress and liberation.

Since all of the limited literature on the phenomenon of cultural fictions was done by American sociologists, I shall draw my examples from American criminology. The Filipino reader can readily relate these examples to Philippine society.²

Americans believe, and their novels, television, cinema, and newspapers affirm: (1) crime does not pay; (2) there is no such thing as a perfect crime; and (3) the policeman is your friend. These beliefs are so manifestly contrary to reality that one can only be impressed by the persistence of such beliefs.

First of all, crime pays fantastically well in America. I refer not merely to organized crime (e.g., the *mafia*), which has been described as "bigger than General Motors," but to major business irregularities, corruption,

¹ Robin M. Williams, Jr., *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation* (2nd ed.; New York: Knopf, 1960), pp. 391-95.

² A cynical awareness of this situation was once summed up by a Filipino colleague who once observed, "Nothing here is impossible—particularly if it is illegal."

bribery, tax evasion, etc. (termed "white-collar crime" by sociologists).³ Second, all criminologists agree that only a small proportion of illegal activities are ever reported to the police. A still smaller proportion ever leads to any arrest. A yet smaller proportion leads to trials, and, finally, an even smaller proportion yields convictions. This does not necessarily imply that the convicted actually were the guilty parties. What, indeed, could be more "perfect" than a crime never noticed? Finally, in America no Negroes, no poor people, not even upper-middle class white college students would support the view that the policeman is one's friend. Studies have indicated that policemen in many societies possess characteristics much in common with the criminal elements. It has even been argued that an effective policeman must possess certain sadistic elements.⁴

How, then, could one explain the persistence of such beliefs? The question may perhaps better be answered by another question: What would society be like if the majority of its members actively rejected such beliefs? To the extent that the members of a society can be persuaded to believe and to implement such fictions, the stability of that society can be maintained. In recent years in America there has been a deterioration of "law and order" partly because ethnic and class differences between the police and the inhabitants of the central cities have intensified the old basic animosities. Clashes between Black Panthers and the police, and between college students and the police, increasingly reflect the breakdown of these old cultural fictions.⁵

Now let us turn to the role of fictions in societal mythology. History has been described as a joke we play upon our ancestors. All the peoples of the world are forever busily rewriting their histories to suit the contemporary scene. Thus, the "Japanese" cherry trees in Washington, D.C. became "Korean" cherry trees during World War II — a far better fate than an alternative proposal that they be chopped down! With the improvement of American and Japanese relations, they reverted back to the original classification. Similarly for Americans, the Russians and the Chinese were once "good guys," but have now changed places with Germans and Japanese as "bad guys." Jefferson, the great slave-holder, becomes the great libertarian. Americans remember the Alamo, but it is forgotten that the Mexican Army was fighting to abolish slavery and the Texas whites were fighting to preserve Negro servitude. Lincoln, a manic-depressive racist, becomes The Great Emancipator. Jack Kennedy, who manipulated the Bay of Pigs Disaster and the escalation of the war in Vietnam, becomes a man of peace. His brother, Robert, who was a protege of Senator Joseph McCarthy and who was the Master Wiretapper, becomes a champion of

³ This conceptualization has been most fully set forth in the writings of the criminologist, Edwin H. Sutherland.

⁴ In a community near Manila, the area near the city police station is deemed an undesirable residential area.

⁵ Similarly, student-police clashes in the Greater Manila area reflect the same phenomenon.

civil rights. And so it goes everywhere. I have given only American examples, but the British, Russians, Germans, Israelis, Filipinos *et. al.* have been just as resourceful and imaginative.

A national history, thus, provides a field day for sociologists intrigued by such cultural fictions. However, I am particularly intrigued by one myth (another term for a cultural fiction) in American history profoundly important for world development in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is the myth of what Jack Kennedy (that master-manipulator of world public opinion) called the "continuing American Revolution." Related tenets of this doctrine hold that the "American Revolution" was the first victory for liberty and equality (thus an inspiration for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe)⁶ and the first colonial war for independence (thus a promise and a hope for Afro-Asia in the early twentieth century).⁷

And now we can perceive the ironic significance of such a fiction. Without such beliefs, hopes, and expectations, the French and later European struggles against absolute despotism might not have prevailed. Without such rhetoric and inspiration, Afro-Asians in the earlier decades of this century might have faltered, and yet — it was all an illusion. The American War for Independence was *not* anti-colonial war, *nor* was it a struggle for liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness for all. Though, so the Americans came to believe. More crucially, they eventually got everybody else to believe so, too.

The true colonial struggle for independence was being waged and ultimately lost by the Indians against the white colonial settlers determined to exterminate them. England, for purely economic self-interest, eventually decided to protect the Indians in the old Northwest Territory and, in the famous "Quebec Act," sought to prevent further white settlements in the area. The American Declaration of Independence, which eventually followed, bears profound parallels with the White Rhodesian unilateral declaration of independence in recent years. Extreme rightists in America openly admit this and warmly support the white settler regime in Rhodesia.⁸

Similarly when the "Founding Fathers" affirmed that "we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal . . ." they meant white men, not Indians or Negroes. From its very beginning America has always been what sociologists term a "Herrenvolk democracy" — a democracy only for the chosen. European writers in the nineteenth century, who sought a dream and believed they saw it in America, discovered slavery and the treatment of the Indians. They had to believe that such things were

⁶ See especially the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville and James Bryce.

⁷ This cultural mythology was generously imposed during the American colonial period in the Philippines. Probably no other people have been so saturated by the American mythology of freedom, despite its juxtaposition with economic exploitation and racism. Indeed, many Filipinos seemed to have convinced themselves that "little brown brother" was a desirable status.

⁸ See especially *The National Review* and the candid remarks of senators like Barry Goldwater.

aberrant behavior, departing from the ideal. They could not face the fact that racism is a keystone of American political, economic, and social life. Similarly, and later, came Afro-Asians seeking aid and hope in their colonial struggles. Again, they, in order to ensure their dreams, had to close their eyes to the treatment of the conquered peoples (the Indians and the Mexicans) and the Pariahs (the Negroes).

But, as I noted earlier, it was functional *in the past* for both radical Europeans and restive Afro-Asians to embrace the illusions of the Americans. They could create an Utopia — an El Dorado which did not exist, but they could believe it existed and hope to create a true anti-colonial state with equality for all. But woe to the Afro-Asian, who would think the true racist, imperialistic American to be the champion in the struggle for human dignity and equality. It is bad enough that the American people believe that when they rain down napalm in Vietnam, they are bringing peace, freedom, and salvation from Communism. Often, Afro-Asians complain that America falls short of its principles, its dreams, and its true nature. Nothing could be farther from reality, and if Afro-Asian societies wish to ensure their ongoing-ness, they must dispense with such illusions no matter how functional they may have proved in 1910, 1920, or even 1945.⁹

⁹ Jean-Francois Revel in his new book, *Without Marx or Jesus: The New American Revolution Has Begun*, provides a classic example of the functions of the myth of the continuing American Revolution. Revel's bitter attacks on both De Gaullism and Communism required him to offer some satisfactory and inspiring alternative. Indeed, as European and a few perceptive American critics have stressed, Revel's book concerns itself overwhelmingly with what is wrong with 1971 France, not with what is beginning in America.