Reflections on the Ideological Dimensions of Myth in American Culture

Zsolt K. Virágos

[1] Preliminary observations

Any group with a shared interest can generate clusters of functional ideology. There can be no doubt about the fact that, owing perhaps to the clarity, brevity, and apparent simplicity of the received version, the above statement has often been accepted as a prime contender for the role of defining ideology as a system of ideas, especially one which forms the basis of economic or political theory. In such situations of real-life control particular inhibiting factors are likely to be created by what we can most often identify as (future-oriented?) conceptual synonyms such as *belief*, *ideal*, *principle*, *doctrine*, creed, *credo* (if this last lexical item happens to mean *conviction*, *opinion*, *view*, or *worldview*). Again, one of the most challenging tasks in the study of the forms of social consciousness is isolating those large terrains and institutions of the collective human mind of those who are engaged in controlling or seeking to control a government or its principles, aims, and policies: *ethics, law*, *science*, *the arts*, *politics*, *philosophy*. In addition to this motley array of ideological-political signifiers there seem to exist two more cumulative, solid ideologically tinged constructs that appear to pervade human thinking in the largest possible senses: **M2** and **public myth.** The rest of my essay will pertain to these two, with particular emphasis on **myth**.

The study of myth has been long bedeviled by conceptual uncertainties, of which the most striking manifestation has been the misleading assumption that myth *per se* is a monolithic substance. The corollaries of this fallacy are that (1) all myths have the same kind of origin and function; and that (2) it is possible to penetrate the essence of myth via a single, all-embracing theory. Nothing could be further from the truth. The package of myth and its satellites has ended up as an intellectual property widely dispersed in a thoroughly multidisciplinary terrain. Which is one of several obvious reasons why it is essential to have to make it clear at the outset of the present discourse that the theoretical underpinnings of this discussion are fundamentally different from those of the conventional, that is, universalist—therefore reductive—understandings of myth.

The findings of the present study are predicated upon the prerequisites that (a) there exist fundamentally different and discrete incarnations of myth, and

that (b) these can be penetrated only through more than one special definition and theory. Thus I am talking of different orders—M-coded variants—of myth: (Myth1 [=M1], Myth2 [=M2], and Myth3 [=M3], with each of these requiring different explanations and applications. And definitions. M1 has been made to stand for ancient myth (most often a sacred narrative), while M3 has been chosen to identify products of mythopoeic urges triggered by the apparently ever-present, thus self-perpetuating, ontological questionings and epistemological gaps. I will not be concerned with M1 and M3 in this discussion, which will be devoted to some essential questions and dilemmas pertaining to M2.

M2 will be used in the present context as a self-justifying intellectual construct that is capable of neutralizing epistemological contradictions, thus claim truth. For a certain length of time anyway. Thus M2 is also capable of performing a pragmatic trick of authentication: if rightly packaged and adequately promulgated, through its devices of legitimation it can persuade believers to accept the untruth of a given M2-type myth as "true" (or, "useful"; perhaps "expedient"). M2 is predicated upon a we-ness versus they-ness dichotomy, thus it can never be "disinterested" or "innocent." Neither does it tend to be "historically blind." Which means that of the three M-coded variants mentioned above M2 tends to be the most supremely *ideological*; while M1 is anchored in *expressive*, M3 in *creative* concerns and potentials. This study will show how the ideological dimension penetrates and gets inscribed in all M2-type forms of ideation and patterning of thought, and it will also clarify the apparent contradiction that ideology can be operative in patterns which are not by definition ideology *per se*. M2—like many other artifacts of culture—is an ideological product, while it is also different from ideology. In addition, the concept of ideology will be variously defined here but it will be basically understood throughout as a form of power to support the social and existential possibilities of the in-group and to weaken these same possibilities in and of the out-group.

[2] Why a contestive space of signification?

In American culture, where a multitude of priorities existed but not all of them have prevailed, we are witnessing the existence of an increasingly contestive space of signification. In this space, a whole spate of oppositional frameworks have been generated between the vocal dominant and the marginalized—muted, victimized, deterritorialized, colonized, dispossessed, decentered, silenced—groups: primarily the underclass, African Americans, Chicanos, other groups within the colored multiculture, and women. The marginalized tended (or have tended) to be routinely

deprived of access to the resources of articulating and communicating their cultural priorities: their specific icons and images for the purposes of supporting their own life chances.

The very process of the institutional or semi-institutional *selection* of images for a wide public audience via the school system, the mass media, and the popular theater (e.g., the blackface minstrel shows) is strongly reflective of underlying interests and commitments, thus the selective process is and has always been—along with its concomitant: the *repudiation* and *subversion* of alternative frames of reference—intrinsically ideological. Thus, virtually all the items in image banks and other "representative" cultural/historical lists are, in accordance with Jameson's understanding of the concept, *ideologemes*, the ultimate building blocks and raw material of cultural products and ideologically attuned mythic constructs (*Political* 54).

[3] M2, public myth and ideology

This still leaves us with the task of sorting out the problem of the relationship between myth and ideology, allowing at the outset that [1] ideology is by definition inscribed in M2-type configurations, and [2] often the two—M2 and ideology—can be, or rather can be seen as, one and the same thing. I might add at this point that while a purely ideological legitimizing/justifying construct tends to be directly linked to relations of power within society (to class, a power elite, hegemony), social/cultural myths, although ideologically attuned and often tied to classbound beliefs, cover a broader variety of social, frequently in-group, uses and have a similarly wide distribution in terms of orders of magnitude. In other words, not every M2 configuration is a public myth.

Some authorities, for example Richard Slotkin, regard the latter—public myth—as the equivalent of ideology. "McNeill's 'public myth,'" Slotkin observes, "is roughly equivalent to 'ideology' as I have been using the term. It refers to a core of common beliefs, maintained by a broad social consensus, embodied in 'general statements [based more on faith than on fact] about the world and its parts, and in particular about nations and other human in-groups, that are believed to be true and then acted on whenever circumstances suggest or require a common response'" (*Gunfighter* 626).

Incidentally, it is instructive to see how in Slotkin's trilogy, which is devoted to an in-depth study of the myth of the frontier, his view of myth, ideology, and the relationship between these changed in a matter of two decades. In *Regeneration through Violence* (1973) the issue of ideology is virtually avoided and the index

does not even list *ideology*. In *The Fatal Environment* (1985) over fifty pages are devoted to discussions of ideology, and a separate entry in the index specifies *myth and ideology*. In *Gunfighter Nation* (1992), *ideology* and (public) *myth* are regarded as synonyms; although the index does list *ideology*, it immediately refers the reader to myth (ideology. *see* myth).

[4] The disparagement of the notion of ideology in the American social consciousness

Before addressing the problem of identifying somewhat more usable distinctions, a brief look at the special American attitude toward the very notion of ideology will be necessary. For the purposes of illustration, I have chosen a widely circulated and relatively recent text. In 1997, former presidential candidate Senator Robert Dole wrote an article for a political news magazine about the "Good War," i.e., World War Two, in which he himself fought. As even a brief quotation will illustrate, his statements are symptomatic for a variety of reasons:

> Although I did not fully understand it, I was fighting for another cause as well—to establish a new place for America in the world. On remote, foreign battlefields, our nation renewed its confidence and found its mission. It was a mission unique in human history and uniquely American in its idealism: to influence without conquest and to hold democratic ideals in sacred trust while many people waited in captivity. [...] We stayed true to that mission long after the war ended. As Winston Churchill stated, America stood at the "summit of the world." And yet we helped our enemies rebuild and we defended them against ideology's lingering threat until this very decade. Today the freedom America championed is the standard of civilization. At the close of history's most brutal century, America's values have triumphed— not through force but through example. (4)

The irony is obvious: Senator Dole is glorifying a central American ideology, America's "Higher Calling," and particular incarnations of the republic's redemptive task: Elect Nationhood, Chosenness, Mission, Redeemer Nation, etc., and expressing at the same time revulsion from the notion of ideology. In Dole's reasoning—which again is reflective of a wide consensus as documented in the popular magazines and in the spontaneous consciousness of most Americans today— ideology is supposed to be something "foreign," connoting at its best "European," at its worst "Marxian," "socialist," "revolutionary," or "totalitarian."

Indeed, Dole's anti-ideology stance is indirectly rooted in the predominantly pejorative sense in which the concept was uniformly used in Euro–American thinking throughout the 19th-century[1] and is at the same time directly linked to the long-held claim that American life somehow escaped, transcended ideology.[2] The drift of the logic of this claim would prompt at least two unlikely deductions. One, in the context of the nation's divinely imposed errands, whenever the American model offered itself as an alternative to the benighted nations of the world, it apparently supplanted "ideological" with something that was untainted with ideology. Two, a long chain of various historical and cultural manifestations of the American experience such as the colonial rebellion; federalism versus states' rights; creeds of national destiny and identity; doctrines of racism; the pro- and antislavery debate; Jim Crowism; the Social Darwinian, "capitalistic" and the biblical defenses of slavery; the various—Theodore Roosevelt's, Wilson's—brands of progressivism; the Muckraking Movement; the clash over "creationism" versus "evolutionism" in the Scopes trial; the patriotic creed; the various brands of civil religion; nationalism; social welfare; HUAC; the rearranged priorities of the 1960; civil rights; ethnically tinged aesthetics; the Moral Majority; right-wing conservatism; cultural feminism; multiculturalism; indeed the totality of the American political culture floated in

---

1   Actually the pejorative implications of *ideology*—illusion, deception, unreality, false consciousness, a distorted representation of reality—were most effectively promoted by Marx and Engels. In *The German Ideology*, for instance, they argue that the concept is synonymous with an upside-down version of reality; in his *Letter to Mehring* Engels used the expression "false consciousness" for it, which later reverberated in the Frankfurt School; a kindred understanding of the term is formulated in *Feuerbach* and *Letter to Schmidt*. It should be added that they also prompted a value-neutral understanding of ideology, as described, for instance, in *Contribution to the Critique of Political Philosophy* by Marx, where he identifies various forms of social consciousness ("... the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic—in short, ideological—forms...") as expressions of economic conditions of production. All in all, the views of Marx and Engels pertaining to ideology provided points of entry to two value-neutral definitions and one "misrepresenting/distorting-mirror" definition of the concept. The bare essentials of the two neutral usages are these: ideology is [1] the combination of all forms of social consciousness (such as philosophy, law, ethics, religion, art, etc.) and [2] the political ideas ascribed to a social or economic class (e.g. bourgeois ideology or, by extension, feminist ideology, Chicano ideology, etc.). The third, "false consciousness" alternative definition conceives of ideology as a form of misrepresentation that distorts social reality and seeks symbolically to resolve social contradictions that elude real solutions. The poststructural understanding of ideology has drawn upon elements from all three definitions.

2   One more reason for the anti-ideology stance may be located in the conservative view, which claims that "conservatism is the one political doctrine which eschews ideology, being based on empirical observation and concern with actual historical conditions rather than abstract principles and definitions. This view implies that there can be no such thing as a conservative ideology. In this usage ideology is virtually identified with theory *per se*" (S. Davies 134).

a very special realm, in which these manifestations remained uncontaminated by an "ideological bias." This is clearly an unlikely dream, as well as the triumph of the self-deluding tactics of contemporary ideology. Indeed, we are dealing here with a culture that has often shunned the very word itself but which is in fact, like all others, structured by deep, powerful and increasingly more conflicting ideological currents. We have to agree with Régis Durand's summative and categorical statement: "[m]en live in ideology, produce it, manipulate it and are manipulated by it" (9). Or, as R. A. Nelson observes in his study of propaganda—one of the most frequent incarnations of M2—, "[e]ach one of us has been indoctrinated since childhood, and daily we continue to be bombarded with intrusive messages attempting to inform, manipulate, motivate, redirect, and even placate us" (1011).

Even apparently "non-ideological" beliefs such as the diffuse concept of the American Dream, or the soothing and reassuring myth of American classlessness are ideological concretizations, both being outgrowths of an open-class ideology, one of the oldest and most persistent American beliefs. The idea that any person can rise to any position in society by hard work, gumption and ability, regardless of his or her family origin or present condition or status has not only been always irresistible—despite statistical evidence—but also an effective strategy of containment. Or, even a casual look at the current multicultural scene will convincingly show that it would be difficult to find a cultural terrain in the world today more ideologically saturated than that.

The curious historical fate of the concept of ideology for the past somewhat more than two hundred years (the word appeared in the English language in 1796) from Antoine Destutt de Tracy (who first used the term; *idéologie* meaning, in his interpretation, "the philosophy of mind" or "the science of ideas") through Marx, Engels, Gramsci, Mannheim, Lenin, the Frankfurt School to more recent interpretations of the concept by Marcuse, Barthes, Daniel Bell,[3] Althusser, Nüth,

---

3   Daniel Bell, together with other social scientists—most notably Raymond Aron and Edward Shils—largely contributed to the post-World War Two disparagement of ideology in the United States. Bell's collection of essays (on social theory, labor, society, and intellectual life), published in 1960 as *The End of Ideology*, although it did not champion liberal or technocratic triumphalism, served as a lightning rod for young radicals, who identified it—and the phrase the title perpetuated—with the quiescent mood of the 1950s and the liberal proposition that American society had "matured" to the point where only technical adjustments, not substantial social change, were required to meet common goals. The negative assessment of ideology, argued Christopher Lasch in 1995, "had the effect of proscribing not only politically self-serving statements but all claims not subject to scientific verification. [...] The critique of ideology had the effect, in other words, of banning from political discussion and serious study a whole range of allusive, symbolic, metaphorical, and emotionally charged strategies of communication. The twentieth-century attack on ideology echoed the Enlightenment's attack on religion, compromising the analysis of political thought (by reducing

Eagleton, Jameson, Zizek, etc. will not be rehearsed here. Why, however, the value-neutral concept of ideology in the American political culture is a relatively late phenomenon (as, for example, in "feminist ideology," Chicano or Black ideology, supporting the thesis that any group with a common interest can have an ideology) requires brief comment.

[5] Ideologies "classic" and "pragmatic"

For the purposes of elucidating this issue I will propose a distinction between the "classic" and "pragmatic" manifestations of ideology, and—even if it looks paradoxical—between *ideology* and *ideological*. My understanding of the classic alternative involves the prerequisites that ideology as a form of conceptual patterning, beyond the basic requirement of the legitimization of society's power-structure through a variety of strategies, should possess [1] a high degree of explicitness of formulation, and it [2] should have the characteristics of assertive authoritativeness, [3] explicit promulgation, and the quality of [4] insistence upon action.
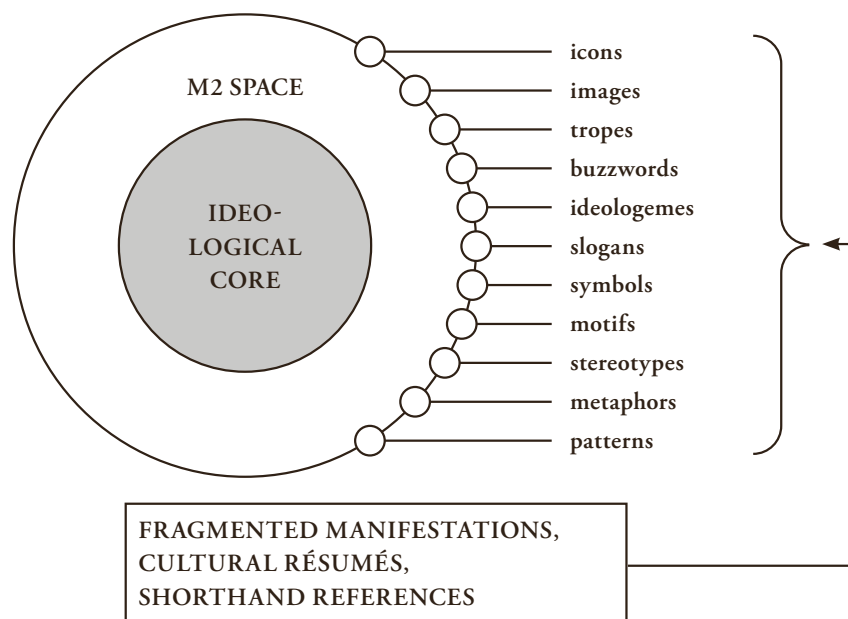

Figure 1

---

it to lies, distortions, and rationalizations) in the same way that analysis of religious thought is compromised by reducing it to superstition" (*The Revolt of the Elites* 189).

In other words, these explicit, authoritative, widely disseminated, and often *coercive* forms must be wedded, in their vital phase of operation, to an elaborate infrastructure servicing them: authoritative texts supporting and maintained by a distinct social group or, more typically, a centralized state authority, a network of institutions (each complete with its own structure, equipment and personnel) designed to realize the norms, doctrines and preferences that are considered by a social group or society politically desirable or mandatory. Obvious avatars of the "classic" alternative are the powerful institutionalized medieval ideology of the divine right of monarchs; the dominant ideas underlying the theocratic social arrangement of New England Puritanism before the end of the 17th century; the explicit inner justification and defense of totalitarian political-economic systems, as in the Italian and German brands of fascism between the two world wars, or Marxism as it was made to operate in the Soviet Union and in a dozen or so other countries in Asia and East–Central Europe; Muslim ideation in those countries— current examples are Iran, Pakistan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan—where religious laws are virtually identical with civil laws. Thus the "classic" variant is also a visibly *coercive* alternative, which involves rigid regulation of all major aspects of political, economic, and social life, strict control of the means of production, (state) monopoly of the means of communication (which has a decisive role in the dissemination or suppression of the culture's viable ideologemes), glorification of the state or power elite, and severe curtailment of the latitude in which the individual can operate.

M-CODE	CULTURAL FOCUS	CONCEPTUAL FOCUS	FUNCTIONAL CENTER	OTHER DOMINANT KEYWORDS
	expressive	authority "memory" "residue the Inquires"	contextual device, super-added potentials	paradigm prefiguration archetype intertextuality mythical correlation analogy
	ideological	epistemology iconicity conation	sense-making, justification, legitimation, projection	epistemological gap we-ness—they-ness status quo time-index fragmentation operational validity group cohesion pragmatism
	creative	mythicity, mythopoeia, metamorphic transition	radical typology, novel recreation	ontological gap the poetic superwriting vision

Figure 2

Even a casual retrospective glance will make it clear that under American circumstances, ever since the birth of the republic, the "classic" alternative has not applied in mainstream American thought, or rather, in the actual objectifications of the political culture, which can be traced back to a number of reasons. First of all, the classic liberal recipe for maintaining the ideological ecology of the American republic was to rely on a free market of ideas. By allowing dissenting views to have a voice, liberal pluralists from the 17th century onwards believed that a kind of natural selection among versions of mythicized preference models would prevail—with some help from the dominant WASPM power structure. All in all, Americans find stances across a wide spectrum of values and perspectives. Although it is possible to discern relatively distinct cultural tendencies and competing moral visions, J. D. Hunter, in his analysis of present-day "culture wars," certainly has a point in claiming that "there are no modern manifestos declaring a coherent system of programs and goals. What actually exists in public discussion are, very often, nothing more than jumbled accumulations of pronouncements, accusations, appeals, and partisan analyses" (107). Hunter's point is certainly borne out by the wide spectrum of diverse ideological positions in today's multicultural scene: radical separatism, academic radicalism, pseudo-radicalism, Eurocentrism, liberal pluralism, moral relativism, cosmopolitanism, conservatism, etc. Second, apart from the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, which describe and guarantee the four core values (liberty, equality, democracy, individualism), there is no centrally maintained and authoritatively promulgated code text outlining the ideological premises of the American nation. Indeed, even the words of the sacred documents are subject to diverse interpretation,[4] which means, among other things, that even the core values, which in theory could serve as unifying agents, can be construed to point in opposite directions and be made to encourage diversity and pluralism rather than orthodox adherence. Thus, for instance, the American concept of *liberty* is most often understood as referring to guarantees of individual protection against governmental restriction or intrusion, and *equality* as reinforcing identical political rights for the benefit of the individual citizen. It is, however, equally legitimate to construe both as an encouragement to equal rights to *variety*, the freedom of the individual to construct his or her life as they see fit, and that the target of the awoved American "associative impulse" could be virtually anything and anybody.

---

4   "There are, it is usually said, two Constitutions, not one: the written document and the unwritten usages. Actually the more meaningful second Constitution is to be found not in the usages but in the outlines of economic power and interests, of religious convictions, of ethnic loyalties, of rural and urban thinking, of attitudes toward war and peace, with all of which the President must reckon as exactingly as he reckons with the written Constitution" (Lerner 373).

A series of other factors have contributed to making American national ideology—which to most people exists as a blend of a kind of vague civil religion and affective, pious patriotism—apparently "soft," "loose," and resilient: the constitutional separation of church and state, federalism (in contrast to a centralized system of government; with the political subdivisions possessing a significant degree of political autonomy), the general desirability of limited government, checks and balances, etc., with the concomitant that there has been virtually no significant political agenda in the republic that has gone unchallenged.

There are two more extraconstitutional factors which I think have contributed to blunting the sharp edges and muting the overly ideological flavor of the political culture in the United States. One is the pragmatic bent inherent in most American political decisions. In the middle of the 20th century, Henry Steele Commager still saw no reason to doubt that pragmatism was a central theme in American life, flowing naturally out of the American experience and becoming, in the twentieth century, "almost the official philosophy of America" (97). This quality spills over into what could be best described as the means-ends construction of cultural reality. As diagnosed by P. Meadows, in American culture there has been "a structure of action which is no less notable for its ingenuity of means," "its tentativeness of purpose," and the "legitimacy of substitution and alteration." "Form is not sacred," he argues, "but process is." This pragmatic resilience is operative in "the continuing assault on the limitations of action in favor of its facilitation: in other words, an American voluntarism of ends and means, usually in the name of efficiency..." (43).[5]

The second added factor is the simple fact that in the United States governmental power remains dispersed among the national, state, and local levels. The economy, for instance, permits companies to expand, compete, contract, and expire largely on their own, and this, to a large extent, is analogous with the nation's cultural life, made up of the sum total of expressive, ideological, and creative activities. The apparent dispersal of ideology across space is also a consequence of the nation's regional, demographic, and ethnic diversity: the various manifestations of the national ethos tend to be regionalized, localized and tribalized.

When we cast about for obvious examples, the American civil religion and the patriotic creed will immediately come to mind: the former Confederacy, for instance, has produced a Southern civil religion complete with its own Southern historical pantheon, hagiography, and patriotic pressure groups. As Charles Reagan Wilson has observed, "[m]inisters and religious groups created a civil religion that tied regional patriotism and religion together so that the remembered Confederate

---

5   I looked at the formal and functional interpenetration of M2 with the philosophy of pragmatism in my "Some Observations on Myth and 'Practical' Pragmatism in American Culture."

cause took on spiritual significance" ("History" 589). Historically, the Southern consciousness in ante-bellum times also had to face the virtually insurmountable task of legitimating its own distinctive class structure and selectively applied democracy—actually *Herrenvolk* democracy: master race democracy with political citizenship limited to white males—and much energy went into the ideological—and for public consumption inevitably mythicized (M2-ed)—defense of the paradoxical and symbiotic linkage between liberty and slavery. And to illustrate how ideological priorities, in this case those of the Confederate Cause, were spontaneously—and coercively—promulgated and maintained, suffice it to cite the words of the intensely patriotic Mrs. Merriwether in Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, the novel which became part of national and regional folk culture: "Any man who does not think our Cause is just and holy should be hanged!" (231). Mitchell's own comment is even more revealing:

> These women, so swift to kindness, so tender to the sorrowing, so untiring in times of stress, could be as implacable as furies to any renegade who broke one small law of their unwritten code. This code was simple. Reverence for the Confederacy, honor to the veterans; loyalty to old forms, pride in poverty, open hands to friends and undying hatred to Yankees. (832)

Further examples could be provided, for instance, in the various incarnations of the Puritan work ethic, which became elevated to the status of ideology and, as such, widely promoted. It is an added irony of recent American development that this enduring tenet has been recently appropriated and practiced most spectacularly by the "model minorities," i.e., Asian immigrants, more specifically the Japanese, the Chinese, and the Koreans.

Thus, just like the primary and secondary levels of the American public school system, the actual terrain of ideological inculcation is the local: the family, the classroom, the church, and a large number of patriotic organizations, that is, primarily *state* and *regional* agencies, or simply *grassroots* organizations.[6] There is plenty of volunteerism, charity, and philanthropy in American society, which, together with the recent flurry of public opinion polls, may also reinforce the belief that governing institutions may occasionally reflect rather than direct popular attitudes. Historically, various reform forces, for example the Populist movement and the Muckrakers, used the media to bring about middle-class awareness and helped spur change. The operation of the various interest/pressure groups is also

---

6   Recent issues of *Statistical Abstract* count on the average 330,000 churches and 40,000 foundations currently operating in the United States.

acted out most effectively on the local and state levels, and rarely can the source of coercion, subtle or otherwise, be located in federally enforced initiatives.[7]

To offer a simple illustration of the point, I will invite the late John Updike to testify. The American writer, Updike argued over three decades ago that he "is the citizen of a wealthy, literate country where 'the freedom of speech, or of the press,' as the Constitution puts it, has been a vigorously defended right for over two centuries of national existence ... [N]o American writer, to my knowledge, has ever gone to jail for anything he has written" (19). The other side of the coin, it seems, is what may happen in local public schools and libraries, which have banned a large number of American classics from the shelves. Even a very brief sample is impressive: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, R. Wright's *Black Boy*, *The Bell Jar*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *The Fixer*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Miller's *The Death of a Salesman*, P. L. Travers' *Mary Poppins*, *The American Heritage Dictionary*, etc.

Moreover, under American circumstances, behind-the-scenes leadership—wielding influence from the closet—is not an unfamiliar phenomenon. "The hidden persuaders" (as Vance Packard called them with reference to commercial persuasion) in the political culture, however, are often difficult to spot, although they are present in the media, in the mass cultural text, or in the complex strategies of rhetorical persuasion in which the cultural consumer is offered substantial incentives for ideological adherence.[8] Again, it is worth considering at this point the ramifications of Lasch's critical statements pertaining to the decline of public debate, the "lost art of argument" in public communicative transactions:

> Increasingly information is generated by those who wish to promote something or someone—a product, a cause, a political candidate or officeholder—without arguing their case on its merits or explicitly

---

7   This understanding of how the relevant institutions are involved, as infrastructure, in generating and maintaining ideology shows some overlap with Althusser's idea of "an ideological apparatus" (168), and his distinction between the two "levels" or "instances" of the superstructure: **RSA** (*Repressive State Apparatus*) and **ISAs** (*Ideological State Apparatuses*). However, Althusser's model was not made with the American political culture in mind, where power permeates down through several filters, and the ideological significance of RSA (the federal government, the administration, the armed services, the police, the FBI, the courts, the prisons, etc.) may be offset by that of the second level: churches, schools, the family, political parties, trade unions, the media, other cultural institutions (Althusser 127–186).

8   Which segment of American society dictates likes and dislikes is obvious: corporate America. "No one challenges the rich and their corporations,[...]" Gore Vidal once observed and he also added, "[w]e're a second-world nation as far as 80 percent of our people go. Twenty percent do wonderfully well, working for the one percent that owns most of the wealth" (171).

advertising it as self-interested material either. Much of the press, in its eagerness to inform the public, has become a conduit for the equivalent of junk mail. (174)

This perverted obsession with information became especially conspicuous during the never-ending bombardment of the American public with details of the American president's private life in the so-called Clinton scandal: much of the information nobody wanted and most of it ended up as unread waste.

[6] Is there an American ideology?

It would appear, on the face of it, tempting to accept Kaplan's conclusion that "there is no such thing as an American ideology." It is true," the argument goes, "that some small subgroups in the United States may have a comprehensive pattern of cognitive and moral beliefs that constitute an ideology. [...] But the beliefs of even the extreme conservatives in the Republican party or leftists in the Democratic party come closer to being creeds or even belief systems than to being ideologies" (217). A slightly different approach to emphasizing the American freedom from the constraints of ideology is reflected in Richard Hofstadter's widely circulated aphorism: "It has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one" (qtd. in Wightman 326), another instance of fetishization for the purposes of avoiding definition by the misplacing of emphasis.

The fact remains, however, that on the federal level, ideology in America lacks the unequivocally dogmatic certainty of the "classic" variant, and owing to the structural incorporation of the multiple filters described above, the system appears to be tentative rather than dogmatic, thus, in a comparative sense, resilient, loose, and pragmatic. This, however, does not mean that the American social consciousness or—to borrow from F. Jameson—the "political unconscious" is less ideological than comparable forms of collective conceptual patterning in any other culture or nation.

The apparently pragmatic/resilient version of ideology may even evoke the concept of value neutrality in some. It should not be forgotten, however, that neutrality often is an ideological cover which can provide crucial service for the legitimation of the established political order. And, finally, because every cultural act and product is to some extent *ideological,* social myths are closely related to the process of the subject–object dialectic and that of cognition. As such, the study of M2 configurations should, in the final analysis, also be concerned both with object-cognition and the laws of motion that govern human thinking. Owing to the fact

that the ideological dimension penetrates and is inscribed in all forms of ideation and patterning of thought—and not only outlooks, creeds, social programs, belief systems, myth structures but each distinct domain of the social consciousness—ideology is operative in patterns which are not by definition ideology. Which is an added reason why the modification of the concept of ideology by adjectival means is justified.

[7] "Ideology" versus "ideological"

That is, the noun-adjective duality translates into our *ideology/M2* parallel in the following manner: myth—like many other artifacts of culture—is an ideological product, while it is different from ideology *per se*. This generates an ostensible paradox because most often it is the M2 incarnation of the ideology that is perceived and analyzed *as* ideology. This slippage is most often a not even detectable omission for the simple reason that the social content of pure ideology—which is usually not even accessible in communicated form—and its mythicized version—that is, as a given ideology appears in the guise or through the filter of M2—is most often hardly noticeable. Indeed, this metonymic shift is a pardonable inadequacy for two reasons. One, it is often difficult, even risky—because deliberately hidden—to identify the naked core version; two, in terms of content and social function, the lines of force of ideology and of the mythicized version are bound to point in the same direction. Thus, in a pragmatic sense, they are one and the same thing. However, as we shall see, they are still not identical.

Moreover, it is worth considering the fact that sometimes, depending on the social circumstance of its uses, one and the same text, narrative, or method will or will not function as ideology. The thrust of the British Antony Easthope's example will serve here to argue the point:

> Joseph Campbell, writing as an anthropologist, claims that a wide range of myth and story presents the hero on the basis of a common narrative structure: this is science, or at least counts as science if accepted by others as true. But if Campbell's views ("follow your bliss") are taken up—as they were during the 1980s in the United States—and used to provide a rationale for Reaganite consumerist avarice and entrepreneurial selfishness, then the same set of arguments become ideology. That is, they operate as forms of power to support some social possibilities and weaken others. (131)
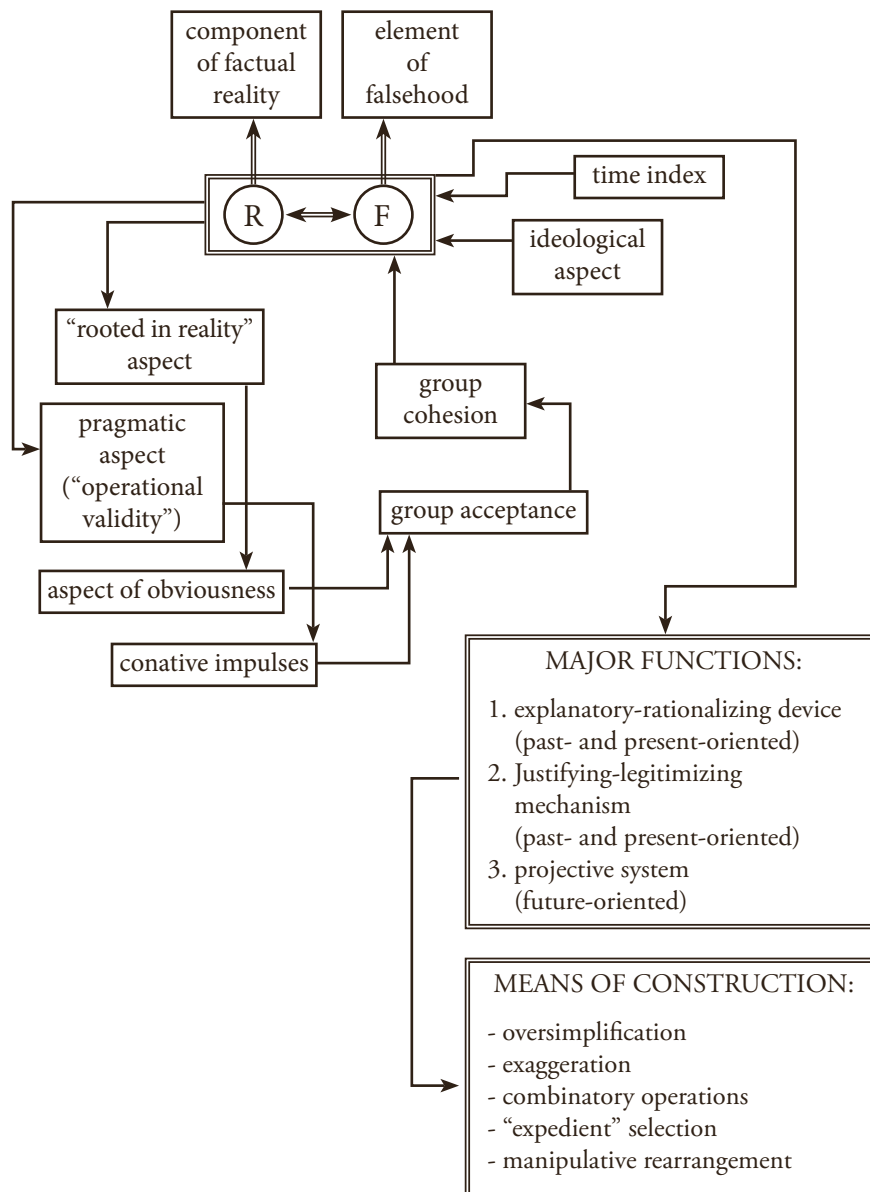
| component of factual reality | element of falsehood |

time index

ideological aspect

R ↔ F

"rooted in reality" aspect

pragmatic aspect ("operational validity")

group cohesion

group acceptance

aspect of obviousness

conative impulses

MAJOR FUNCTIONS:

1. explanatory-rationalizing device
   (past- and present-oriented)
2. Justifying-legitimizing
   mechanism
   (past- and present-oriented)
3. projective system
   (future-oriented)

MEANS OF CONSTRUCTION:

- oversimplification
- exaggeration
- combinatory operations
- "expedient" selection
- manipulative rearrangement

Figure 3

Besides, at a lower and more practical level of cultural analysis, *myth* may be used to describe a defunct or rival ideology, hereby labeled negatively as "untruth" or "bad knowledge." In this kind of sorting out, much depends on (a) who is doing the labeling; (b) which definition of ideology we are talking about. This

is almost always the case when ideology is used with pejorative connotations to refer to the thought of others.

It is primarily when we come to sorting out the functional aspects of ideology that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish M2-type configurations from ideology. In a broad sense, both constructs are focused on justification, rationalization, and legitimization of a given status quo, group attitudes, goals, or general life situation, and both can reflect, defend, support—or weaken—particular social, moral, religious, and economic institutional interests and commitments. Moreover, both can be seen as mystifying, distorting, or concealing the relations of power within society, as well as criticizing and repudiating alternative frames of reference or existing social orders.[9] In these particular functions, ideology and M2 can show significant overlaps, indeed the two words, for reasons mentioned above, are often used interchangeably.

Yet there *are* identifiable differences: while ideology tends to offer theoretical, primarily philosophical and apparently logical, often blunt, justifications, M2 is most often devoid of conceptual abstractions, or rather, its abstraction often tends to be symbolic. This latter feature of social myths does not necessarily clash with M2's aestheticizing-concretizing function, formulated by Tindall in the following statement: "[t]hey [social myths in general] tend to develop abstract ideas in more or less concrete and dramatic terms" ("Mythology" 2).

[8] Ideology into M2, M2 into iconic signifier: packaging/signifying transactions

Structurally, therefore, in elaborate public myths by ideology I mean the inner conceptual, philosophical core of M2-type myth. As the pattern of ideation moves away from the abstract center, the core content is subsequently "serviced" ("cloaked," "dressed up," "translated," "packaged") in the M2 space, that is, the ideological

---

9   Karl Mannheim's disjunction between present-oriented *ideologies* (the classbound beliefs of those who had an interest in maintaining the status quo) and future-oriented *utopias* (representing the interests of those for whom the status quo is insufficient) is legitimate in describing rival ideologies belonging to social classes caught up in an oppositional framework. But neither can a monolithic (non-oppositional) elaborate ideological system, no matter how present-oriented, do without projecting an image of "where we are going." Most ideological systems target the status quo, thus they tend to possess a marked present-oriented drift. However, the status quo cannot be conceived of without contemplating its own origins either, thus the past-oriented dimension is also an attendant quality. In terms of this triple orientation, we are bound to find yet another proof for the fact that ideology and (thematically kindred) M2 constructs are close cousins.

formulation acquires a concrete, dramatic, aestheticized, intellectually accessible format, ready for dissemination to a wide public audience. In social space, the M2 version, as has been highlighted earlier, tends to become further fragmented, iconicized, sloganized, pictorialized, visualized, etc. to serve as cultural shortcuts: reminders of the message are coded in the M2 configuration. Thus, in a sense, M2 is tied to ideology in a special functional relationship: M2 serv(ic)es ideology by *packaging* it for the purposes of making it suitable to fulfill a variety of social needs: to serve as rhetoric of persuasion, to function as a tool of concealment, but, above all, to justify. For whatever reason.
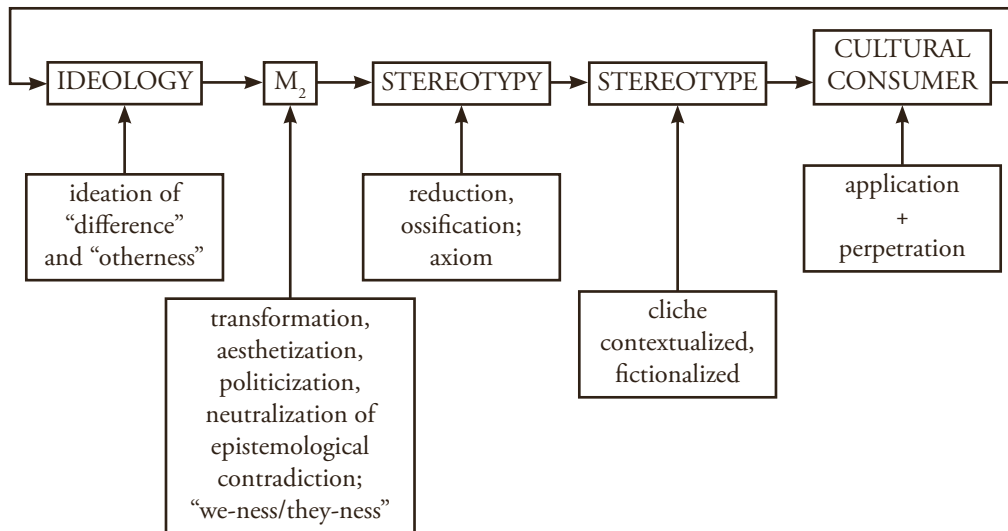

Figure 4

Let's see in two selected and familiar examples how this three-stage process actually operates. My first example will be Manifest Destiny. The designation itself shows that we are dealing with a packaged version: the concept is identified as perceived in the second, M2 (indeed, M2-ed) stage: it is in this mythicized guise that the ideology received wide circulation. But what was the "real" ideology behind Manifest Destiny? The answer is very simple: territorial ambitions. The acquisition of new territories to fulfill the nationalistic imperative of expanding the orbit of the nation's activity across the continent and building an American empire to the Pacific. Visions of a vast "Empire of Democracy from sea to shining sea" had been active at least since the Louisiana Purchase, indeed even earlier than that. This ideology was bound up with a number of support preference models: geographical predestination, world leadership, the cult of élan, what Josiah Strong later came to call "the outpopulating power of the Anglo-Saxon race," the Puritan

sense of mission, etc. Even so, however, the ideology was overly selfish, pragmatic, voluntaristic—and blatantly aggressive. Not even the crusading spirit or the notion of the white man's burden could sufficiently mitigate it to be safely used for wide public consumption.

The harsh edges of the ideology, therefore, had to be blunted. Which means that the ideological content had to be "packaged," "serviced" as it were. This crucial transaction took place in the M2 space. In the process, the core content underwent miraculous transformations. In the alchemy of mythicization, the naked ideology (naked in more senses than one) was "dressed up," packaged, made to assume a new identity as a high-prestige public myth. The reincarnation of the ideology as mythicized/packaged ideology under the alias of Manifest Destiny actually meant adding substantial cosmetic touches in the "dressing up" sequence: the mythicizing process [1] upgraded the national(istic) ambition to the level of religious discourse; [2] by transcendentalizing territorial ambitions, it shifted these strivings to the realm of sacred duty (not a particular national objective but a cosmic errand), to that of a "higher calling," thus injecting into the M2-ed frame of reference the notion of external imposition; [3] most importantly, owing to the above transactions it concealed the real (nationalistic, acquisitive) motives; and [4] hereby it shifted the locus of responsibility outside the frame of reference in which it actually resided. The nature of the procedures operative in the third stage could be best summed up by pointing to the many sloganlike clichés and literary images celebrating epic westering, the heroic quality of the relentless and providentially approved march, the triumphalist view of a superior civilization, or simply by referring to John Gast's famous painting (to be found in the Library of Congress) depicting Columbia's civilization-generating, westward march. The title of the painting is, not uncharacteristically, American Manifest Destiny. This will also make it clear why one way of understanding ideology is through looking at the repertoire of images, themes, and ideas disseminated for broad public consumption by and for a dominant culture. In this understanding, ideology is a *system of representations*.

The tripartite sequence from ideology via M2 through iconic manifestations also marks a chronological progression of operations, clearly detectable in our second example, the frontier myth. Thus, the unprecedented popularity of Turner's thesis appears to demonstrate that a core ideology, which the Turner concept dramatized and aestheticized, had been in place before the frontier thesis itself was born and widely circulated. This ideology was anchored in nationalistic expectations to find a nativistic explanation of national history, of a unique American character and creed that would shed the uncomfortable burden of the unappealing notion of European precedents: the "germ theory," "the inheritance of institutions," and

the emphasis on "the continuity of history" (Hacker 63). "Our national genius is Anglo–Saxon," proclaimed J. Strong somewhat less than a decade before Turner's exceptionalist argument first surfaced in American historiography, "but not English, its distinctive type is the result of a finer nervous organization, which is certainly being developed in this country" (217). In brief, the ideology was ready to enter the M2 space, where the right man at the right time was capable of bringing the scattered resources into focus and, having produced an improved version cloaked as a romanticized narrative, offered the final product as a "key to American development" by making the core ideology palatable and ready for appropriation to the cultural consumer.[10] In the third stage, a profusion of iconic satellites were generated, from "fountain of youth" to Marlboro man. The understanding of the three-tier mechanism described offers a practicable methodological point of entry into how the gloss of ideological "innocence" can be identified and penetrated in M2-type public myths or, for that matter, in any other cultural product, including literature, into which M2 configurations are incorporated.

Thus, in the final analysis, reversing Northrop Frye's notion that "an ideology is applied mythology" (*Words* 23), I see M2, on the one hand, as applied ideology—the particular concretization of particular core ideological content—, and, on the other hand, as a corollary of what has been outlined above, M2—as public myth—is interpreted ideology. Again, while I agree with the basic logic of Barthes' understanding of how *parole interpellative* addresses the subject to naturalize—for him—the cultural environment, and I also accept the "hailing" process described by Althusser—ideology "makes obvious" the ways in which people live their lives in society—I do not think it is always through direct interpellation that ideology addresses itself to the subject. Most often, I believe, an ideology in its naked purity is not suited to "interpellating" the cultural consumer; hence the rationale for the transactions transpiring in the M2 space.

---

10 The linguistic and textual markers of Turner's frontier "narrative" serve as unmistakable and symptomatic indicators of the conative transactions he is involved in, manifested primarily in the affective, "edifying," and romanticized flavor of the argumentative framework in a text that is supposed to be "objective" historiography.

Colonia Times

1810
20
30
40
50
60
70
80
90
1900
10
20
30
40
50
60
70
80
90

The South: A New Garden of Eden

Myth of Southern Uniqueness/ Distinctiveness

Myths about the Southern Family

Myth of the Cavalier

The Poor White Trash

Fighting South

Anglo-Saxon & Celtic Myths

Garden Myth

Plantation Myth
The Myth of the Old South

"Moonlight & Magnolias" Myth

Myth of Patriarchy

Myth of Southern Woomanhood

Myths of Southern Fatherhood & Motherhood

Myth of Southern Slavery as Patriarchy

The Myth of the Confederacy

The Myth of the Lost Cause

The Tragic Legend of Reconstruction

The Myth of the New South

Populist Myth

Rednecks Crackers

Benighted or Savage South

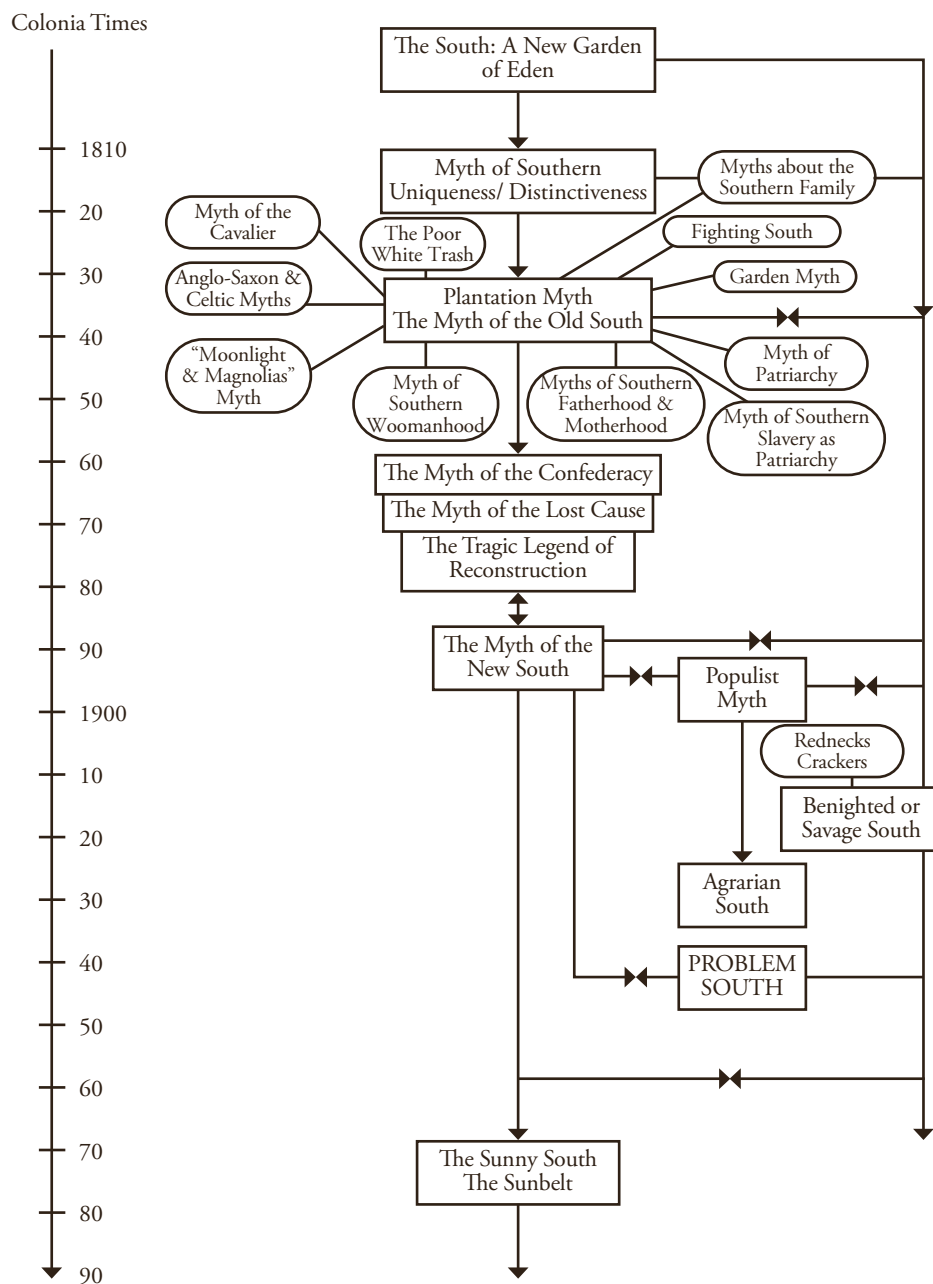Agrarian South

PROBLEM SOUTH

The Sunny South
The Sunbelt

Figure 5

It should be added, however, that it is virtually impossible to offer a general description of the level of articulacy at which the social consciousness stores the content of the ideological core. In some cases ideology is formulated, verbalized,

200

and promulgated *as* ideology. In other cases it can be programmatically hidden, and the concealed entity can only be reconstructed via penetrating the M2-ed incarnation: a rewarding exercise for the student of M2. In still other cases, as, for instance, in most manifestations of racially prejudiced stereotypy, the social consciousness may accommodate the triggering ideological deep structure—thus the conatively generated idea of otherness and difference among human beings and populations—in forms of abstracted hierarchy, difference, otherness, superiority versus inferiority abstractions, us-them (in-group versus out-group) patterns, etc., which, in the logic of our previous argument, acquire their external, packaged, public form in the M2 space. That is when ideology is ready to "interpellate" the cultural consumer, that is, through the filter of M2. It would be a large measure of self-delusion to believe that this is an "innocent" and "disinterested" game. And one last note: does it still make sense today—in the post-postmodern age—to isolate a particular kind of consciousness as "false"? It seems that the puny force of theory does not have much of a chance against the overwhelming bulk and tide of everydayness. Which is a dilemma that has to be addressed, separately, in its own right.

WORKS CITED

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review P, 1971. 127–185.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. 1957. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974.

Commager, Henry, Steele. *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character since the 1880's.* New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1950.

Dole, Robert. "The Last 'Good War.'" *Newsweek* 24 Nov. 1997: 4.

Durand, Régis. *Myth and Ideology in American Culture*. Publications de l'Universite de Lille III, Centre d'Etudes et Recherches Nord-Américaines et Canadiennes, 1976.

Easthope, Anthony. *Literary into Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge, 1991.

Frye, Northrop. *Words With Power: Being a Second Study of "The Bible and Literature."* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990.

Hacker, Louis M. "Sections—Or Classes?" *The Turner Thesis Concerning the Role of the Frontier in American History.* Boston, 1949.

Hawkes, David. *Ideology.* The New Critical Idiom. London: Routledge. 1996. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203130674

Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America.* New York: Basic Books, 1991.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981.

Kaplan, Morton A. "Is There an American Ideology?" *Ideology and the American Experience: Essays on Theory and Practice in the United States.* Ed. J. K. Roth and R. C. Whittemore. Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute P, 1986. 211–227.

Lasch, Christopher. *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy.* New York: W. W. Norton, 1995. https://doi.org/10.5840/chesterton1995211/255

Lerner, Max. *America as a Civilization.* 2 vols. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1965.

Meadows, Paul. "American Culture: A Tropological and Patternistic Analysis." *Journal of American Culture* 6.3 (1983): 38–44. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1983.0603_38.x

Mitchell, Margaret. *Gone With the Wind.* 1936. New York: Warner Books, 1993.

Schrempp, Gregory, and William Hansen, eds. *Myth: A New Symposium.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002.

Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860.* Middleton, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973.

---. *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890.* Middleton, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1986.

---. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1993.

Strong, Josiah. *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*. New York: Baker and Taylor, 1891. https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.21463

Tindall, George B. "Mythology: A New Frontier in Southern History." *Myth and Southern History.* (vol. 1: The Old South). Ed. Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1989. 1–15.

Updike, John. "The Cultural Situation of the American Writer." *American Studies International* 15 (1977): 16–24.

Vidal, Gore. "20 Questions: Gore Vidal." *Playboy* Dec. 1989: 171+

Virágos, Zsolt. "Versions of Myth in American Culture and Literature." *Hungarian Studies in English* 17(1984): 49–84.

---."Some Observations on Myth and 'Practical' Pragmatism in American Culture." *Eger Journal of American Studies* (1993): 137–145.

---."Perspectives of Myth: Dilemmas of Definition." *Papp Ferenc akadémikus 70. születésnapjára* [On the 70th Birthday of Academian Ferenc Papp]. Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2000. 38–45.

Wightman, Richard, and James T. Kloppenberg, eds. *A Companion to American Thought.* Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

Wilson, Charles Reagan. "History and Manners." *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*. Ed. Charles Reagan Wilson and William Ferris. Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1989. 583–595.