The Reality of Myth:
Tracing the Signifier Beyond Barthesian Formalism

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James Palermo takes on a formidable challenge: to dismantle the still persisting sociopolitical myth of equal opportunity for all by using a cultural studies method derived from Roland Barthes's structural analysis of production of myth. The importance of undertaking such a task is clear: the message of historical sources that have originated in the rhetorics of Horace Mann and Elwood Cubberly is being currently carried on; it is resilient and, as Palermo says, "dies hard." What is not totally clear, however, is whether a Barthesian critique is adequate for the purpose of fulfilling this task. My assessment will focus on three areas: first, I will clarify several of Barthes's concepts so as to identify some contradictions implicit in a purely formal method; second, I will question Palermo's treatment of nature and culture as oppositional terms; and third, I will address the possibility of, as suggested by Palermo, applying Barthesian technique — or, I would add, any critical discourse for that matter — in a classroom.

Barthes's diagram introduced in *Mythologies* purports to present the signifier-signified relation as a sign which, within a multileveled sign-system, may become a signifier "empty" of meaning despite being "full" of cultural significance at some other level of signification.[1] That is, what is a sign at the first level becomes a signifier for other signs functioning at the higher order of signification, called by Barthes the level of connotations. Palermo refers to this order as the level of connotation — missing the plural. At this level a sign-system, as Palermo rightfully acknowledges, encounters the prevailing set of cultural codes. However, as just indicated, the notion that signs, for Barthes, are polysemic has been omitted by Palermo. This polysemy accounts for the signs taking on — often simultaneously — various values of meaning.

To illustrate this point I suggest another one of the Barthes's classics examples as applied to Palermo's diagram: 1. Signifier = a physical image; 2. Signified = the concept of the bald eagle; 3. Sign (or I signifier) = photo, at the level of *denotation*, of an eagle as such; II signified which connotes, at the higher-order level of *connotations*: a) patriotism, *or*: b) a symbol of American flag, *or*: c) endangered species, *or:* d) whatever else might be associated with it in a given cultural code thus producing a sign called by Barthes an associative total.

In principle, the diagram may be extended indefinitely, indeed with each sign becoming the signifier for yet another connoted signified. But that is exactly where the contradiction between the form and the content of a structuralist approach enters the picture. The form remains the same; the content is polyvalent and only more or less motivated. The message encoded in the sign may mean "patriotism" but might as well stand for "endangered species." By the same token, were Mann, Cubberly or Walter Parker fluent in semiological analysis, they might have said that it

happened to be Palermo's arbitrary connotation that he had assigned to the single meaning denoted by the sign, thus having built up a myth of his own in conformity with a set of ideological assumptions.

In other words, a sign that would connote "patriotism" for Mann would mean "endangered species" for Palermo, and the fact that "nature replaces history" (see Palermo's diagram) would indeed belong to the level of objective reality for Mann, while justifiably manifesting the creation of myth for Palermo. The Barthesian image turns upside-down once again, and the Myth becomes hyperreal, thus paradoxically reinforcing its own stability.

I borrow the notion of "hyperreality" from the poststructuralist critique of Jean Baudrillard who asserted that the power of image may amplify itself in the multitude of its own simulations, extending eventually to the level of reality and starting to permeate it so as to become even more real than reality itself.[2] My point in invoking Baudrillard here is not to contradict Palermo's optimism. Rather, I would like to show that not only "the historical promise of the public school…continues to have a ready audience and dies hard," as Palermo has in all fairness indicated, but also by virtue of its multiple repetitions, it may rise up to the level of political slogan.[3]

Interestingly enough, in one of his earlier papers, Palermo himself acknowledged the hyperreality of "the depiction of the ideology of equal opportunity for all regardless of race, sex or gender…[as]…an imagined, fictive real, seemingly more real and more appealing than reality itself."[4] The often cited, yet dubious, term "reality" brings me to the second area of my criticism, that of a dichotomy stemming from Palermo's opposition of the universality of nature to that of the particularity of culture.

In his current essay, Palermo, continuing Barthesian critique, is keen on revealing the mythology behind "the leveling factor…that all men and women display the same archetypal behavior the world over, [and] there is an identical human essence shared by all." However, the posited equivalence between the philosophical conceptualization of some substantial human nature — that is, a certain ontological question of being or the infamous metaphysics of presence — and the sociopsychological, or behavioral, level of analysis, is problematic.

While "an essential description of human nature" is no doubt questionable, there remain matters that are "universally important, complex, and demanding."[5] Feminist theorists, for example, recognize — albeit not on a prescriptive but a descriptive level — certain "universals…describing the human condition: the commonality of birth, death, physical and emotional needs and the longing to be cared for."[6] I too have cautioned against the apparent temptation of easily downgrading an activated archetype — manifesting itself as the field of material, social forces interacting in the world — to the level of ideological construct.[7]

As illustration of a certain universality let us turn to John Dewey. Reality, for Dewey, exhibited practical features;[8] as for experience — that is, culture — it is not shut off from nature thereby creating the dualistic split but "is *of* as well as *in* nature."[9] Such a "conception of the role of experience within nature allows 'human

affairs, associative and personal, [to be] projections, continuations [and] complications of nature.'"[10] Furthermore, "the everyday events, doings, and sufferings… are universally recognized to constitute experience,"[11] and everything in the world possesses fundamental characteristics as generic traits of existence.[12]

Quite probably, Dewey would have supported the thesis of a production of myth based on "specifiable extraneous conditions …[that]…operate effectively because they work so unconsciously" and, as such, lead to supposing that "they are embedded in the nature of things."[13] Nonetheless, he would have rejected the separation and isolation of the "environing conditions as the whole of nature.…[N]ature signifies nothing less than the whole complex of the results of the interaction of man, with his memories and hopes, understanding and desire, with that world to which one-sided philosophy confines 'nature.'"[14] In the spirit of a Deweyan legacy, we should not underestimate the interpenetration and reciprocity of nature-culture relationships.

Now to a final point. Palermo skillfully traces multiple signifiers of the equal opportunity myth creating a vivid and persuasive picture of its working in various historical contexts. He points to the undemocratic arguments presented by Mann and Cubberly and indicates the similarities between the hidden political mechanics of, in their reading, a morally correct capitalism and the more recent, postmodern, version of the Parker's critique of urban curriculum. He then takes us to a classroom level suggesting that decoding mythologies, by means of Barthes's technique, may contribute to the breakdown of false conciousness.

A question arises: Whose false consciousness? If Palermo allocates false consciousness to be the attribute of students *per se,* then the educational process appears to border on a direct and powerful psychological intervention, the possible consequences of which are to be considered from an ethical standpoint. Any critical discourse encounters a controversy of the would-be production of undesirable effects. Nel Noddings has warned against the belief that "a bit of thinking is morally acceptable simply because it is adequate 'critically.'"[15] Assuming that the aim of Barthesian critique is indeed the overthrowing of one's false consciousness, we should ask ourselves, first, if such an act constitutes a *moral* purpose and, second, whether or not it might lead to the syndrome of "the oppressed-becomes-oppressor."[16]

If, however, the false consciousness in question lies elsewhere and is not the predicate-property of some student-subject, then the objective of introducing Barthes's method into a classroom might be reformulated in accordance with the different pedagogical purpose. The shifted locus does not aim to undermine in any respect Palermo's noble and timely idea of exposing the mythic content of several primary educational texts — it just attracts our attention to the complexity, contingent on the manifold of possible directions, this task implies.

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1. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1989).

2. See Gary Genosko, *Baudrillard and Signs: Signification Ablaze* (London: Routledge, 1994), 154-58.

3. By contrast, Nel Noddings, "Excellence as a Guide to Educational Conversation," *Philosophy of Education 1992,* ed. H.A. Alexander (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993), 5-16.

4. See James Palermo, "Dewey on the Pedagogy of Occupations: The Social Construction of the Hyper-real," *Philosophy of Education 1992,* ed. H.A. Alexander (Urbana,IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993), 179.

5. Noddings, "Excellence," 13.

6. See Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education* (Westview Press, 1998), 188.

7. See Inna Semetsky, "The Adventures of a Postmodern Fool, or the Semiotics of Learning" forthcoming in *Semiotics 1999*, Proceedings of the 24th Annual Meeting of the Semiotic Society of America.

8. See John Dewey "Does Reality Possess Practical Character?" in *The Essential Dewey*, vol. 1, ed. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 124-33.

9. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 4a.

10. James Campbell, *Understanding John Dewey: Nature and Cooperative Intelligence* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 77.

11. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Perigee Books, 1980), 3. 12. See Craig Canningham "Dewey's Metaphysics and the Self," in *The New Scholarship on Dewey,* ed. Jim Garrison (Dordrecht, Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 175-92 for the careful synthesis of the Deweyan provisional traits of experience.

13. Dewey, *Art as Experience,* 10.

14. Ibid., 152.

15. Noddings, *Philosophy of Education,* 93.

16. Ibid., 93.