Pedagogy of Mythos

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Humanities, Social Sciences and Social Justice Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This work is a philosophical examination of the relevance and function of socio-political myths in education. Central to this work is exploring the antinomy between myth and reason. Drawing on the work of philosopher Hans Blumenberg, I defend his view that one should go beyond the myth and reason antinomy and understand myth as an important and unique mode of symbolic orientation that, along with reason and science, is an essential part of humanity’s symbolic interaction with the world. From this view, I explore how socio-political myths are philosophically and practically relevant to the analysis of society in general and education specifically. Of particular importance, I argue that a philosophical understanding of ‘socio-political myth’ should be integrated as part of the critical democratic conception of education. By integrating a substantive philosophical understanding of socio-political myths into the critical democratic framework, a number of important pedagogical implications are revealed. Specifically, this work reveals how two particularly powerful socio-political myths that are currently embedded in the Canadian education system, the meritocratic and neoliberal
myths, ultimately erode and undermine values, beliefs and educational practices that are consistent with democracy. In addition, I contend that socio-political myth should be understood as an important and necessary narrative corollary to critical democratic praxis. As such, I conceptualize and defend what I denote as democratic myth as an essential narrative to the development of critical participatory democracy both in and through education. Finally, I conclude this work by examining how democratic myth may be practically developed by teachers and students.
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Introduction

Mythos, Logos and Education

.1 Rethinking Myth

Our era has long been conceived as a child of *logos*. For the most part, Western culture is understood as the product of the rational and scientific spirit. The journey began over 2,500 years ago when mythic Greek culture, which was marked by Homeric myths and the great fictional epics of the gods, was revolutionized by the great rationalist triumvirate of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle (Tarnas, 1991). As such, the West’s cultural identity is historically interpreted as a long journey from the early rationalism and scientific spirit of ancient Greek philosophers to the scientific revolution of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, which, in turn, spurred our current era of progress via pragmatic rationalism and scientism (Tarnas, 1991).

Such scientific and rational progress is hard to miss when surveying its epistemological and technological fruits in our culture. We are saturated by the increased scientific knowledge of every aspect of our existence, from the universe we live in to the smallest parts of our genetic makeup. We are equally saturated with the technological by-products of our rational human ingenuity, from the manufacturing of cures for illness to the latest digital communication devices. In fact, I suspect one would be hard pressed to find any aspect of our modern Western culture that has been left untouched by our rational and scientific spirit.

Of course, implicit within the history of our culture’s rational progress is our collective movement away from myth (Blumenberg, 1979/1985; Bottici, 2007; Kirk, 1973; Tarnas, 1991). Whereas our culture presumably embraces rational argumentation, scientific experimentation, and truth, mythic cultures and communities of past and present embraced and continue to embrace irrationalism, the imagination, and falsehoods. For instance, the ancient Greeks created
imaginary “mythic” stories about gods such as Poseidon that irrationally explained the existence of sea storms; in contrast, Western culture, through scientific experimentation and reasoning, determined that air and sea currents were the real cause. In this light, myth is primarily viewed in the history of Western ideas as the antinomy of reason and science, or what the ancient Greeks called *logos*. Hence, the intellectual growth of our culture has been traditionally understood as progress from “*mythos* (myth) to *logos* (reason and science)” (Blumenberg 1979/1985; Bottici 2007; Kirk, 1973).

Interestingly, however, despite the “great rational leaps” made and both science’s and reason’s omnipresent influence on every aspect of Western society, myths still persist. For all the grandeur and glory of reason and science, myths are still produced and embraced by humanity regardless of the cultural background. Myths continue to be found in literature (Barthes, 1957/1973; Blumenberg 1979/1985; Camus, 1942/2000), religious views (Campbell, 1972/1993; Eliade, 1963; King, 2003; Ricouer, 1967), and even in politics (Bottici, 2007; Cassirer, 1946/1955a; Flood, 1996; Hogenson, 1987; Kolakowski, 1972; Tudor, 1972). The continued existence of myths in even the most rational and scientifically inclined societies opens up several significant philosophical questions: What could account for such resilience? How should we understand these myths conceptually and approach them philosophically?

For traditional defenders of the *mythos/logos* antinomy, the answer to these questions is relatively simple (Cassirer, 1946/1955a; Kirk, 1973). Myth, understood as irrational stories and/or fictional cultural illusions, persist because of the irrational core of humanity. Deep in our nature, our emotions and/or irrational leanings lead us, when unchecked by reason (Cassirer, 1946/1955a) or taken advantage of by others (Cassirer, 1946/1955a; Freire, 1968/2000), to embrace these harmful fictional stories and illusions. Consequently, modern intellectuals and
society must combat myth and work to continue to create a modern culture
disciplined by reason and rooted in rational/scientific progress.

In contrast, some philosophers and theorists have revisited the Western
understanding of “myth” and the idea that humanity progresses through from myth
to reason and science. Quite diverse philosophers, academics, and intellectuals
such as George Sorel (1908/2004), Jacques Derrida (1974), Roland Barthes
(1957/1973), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944/1972), Joseph
Campbell (1972/1993), Leszak Kolakowksi (1972), Chiari Bottici (2007), Henry
Tudor (1972), Clifford Geertz (1983), and, most notably, Hans Blumenberg
(1979/1985) among others have reconsidered whether myth has been properly
understood in modern culture. Specifically, for all these theorists, myth’s
resilience points to the overlooked complexity of myth and the limits of reason and
science rather than inherent irrationality in humanity. And while a conceptual
debate about the nature of “myth” itself has ensued among those reconsidering it
philosophically, it is evident for all these thinkers that both the mythos/logos
antinomy along with the view that cultures progress from myth to reason and
science is inherently problematic and thus must be critically challenged.

When we reconsider the antinomy between reason and myth, several
profound questions concerning our understanding of the relationship between myth
and reason emerge: Can or should reason and science eliminate myth? Are myths
falsifiable? How does reason and science differ from myth? Can myth and reason
coexist in our modern order? What is the relationship between morality, reason,
and myth? Furthermore, equally profound questions have been raised concerning
understanding what a myth is as well as its function within our contemporary
culture: What is myth? How are modern myths similar and different from their
ancient counterparts? What form(s) do modern myths take? How do myths
function within our modern socio-political order? Do modern institutions and power relations influence myths?

.2 Myth and Critical Democratic Education

It is within this contemporary debate about the relationship between myth and reason that I cast my work’s analysis of critical democracy and education. I take critical democracy to consist of two primary philosophical and practical features. First, critical democracy is understood as a participatory model of democracy that conceives of democracy as more than a system of government but rather as a way of life (Dewey, 1939/1976; Portelli & Solomon, 2001). As a way of life, democracy is a never-ending individual and collective process “associated with equity, community, creativity, and taking difference seriously” (Portelli & Solomon, 2001, p.17). Critical democratic education, then, aims at nurturing a democratic way of life both in and through education by engaging substantive issues of social justice inside and outside the classroom. Secondly, critical democracy is also rooted into substantive notions of critical thinking and critical inquiry. More specifically, critical democrats, exemplified in critical pedagogues Paulo Freire (1968/2000) and Henry Giroux (1983), defend the view that critical reflection is a necessary part of a democratic way of life insofar as it offers the possibility of engaging, both on a reflective and practical level, substantive issues of equity, diversity, and social justice.

I take the intersection between myth in contemporary society and the critical democratic tradition in education to be important for several reasons. First, because critical democratic educators try to nurture a particular mode of being in the world, it only stands to reason that if myth continues to influence much of contemporary culture, then we should philosophically examine the relationship between myths and a democratic way life. Secondly, and a related point, critical democratic pedagogues, despite the tradition’s metacritical awareness, have inevitably been
influenced by the *mythos/logos* antinomy. By implicitly accepting this antinomy, critical democratic philosophers and educators have inadvertently come to understand myths as either a philosophically irrelevant category of discourse or as oppressive illusionary tales that must be critically analyzed under the banner of democratic truth. As a consequence, in re-examining the relationship between critical reflection, practice, and myth, new insight and clarity can be provided into how the relationship between reason/science and myth manifests itself in pedagogical practice.

It is within this context that the seminal work on myth by German philosopher Hans Blumenberg is relevant. In *Work on Myth*, Blumenberg (1979/1985) provides unique insight into the antinomy between *mythos* and *logos*. Generally, he argues that this antinomy has led philosophers to overlook the fact that both myth and reason/science fulfil the same functional role; they both serve as important modes of symbolic orientation in a world that is indifferent to us. Further, Blumenberg contends that myth is a unique mode of symbolic orientation that should be understood as conceptually distinct from not only reason but also other narratives and stories. Specifically, he argues myth is able to provide unity and what he denotes as “significance” to individuals and communities. Far from simply trying to reconcile the antinomy between myth and reason, Blumenberg provides a unique insight that moves beyond said antinomy by embracing the necessary and inevitable coexistence of myth and reason/science.

It is my contention that critical democratic pedagogues should take seriously and integrate a Blumenbergian account of myth within their educational theory and praxis. One such reason is that if Blumenberg’s account of myth is correct, then we gain new theoretical insight into how existing socio-political myths (Bottici, 2007), specifically those that erode and resist democratic change, are received by and influence administrators, teachers, and students in unforeseen and unanalyzed
ways. As such, it is one particular aim of this dissertation to articulate and subsequently critically analyze what I take to be two particular socio-political myths that are not only banal in education but erode the possibility of democratic pedagogical practice: namely, the meritocratic and neoliberal myths. In doing so, I intend to reveal how a more substantive understanding of the function and workings of socio-political myths can yield unearthed insights into how these particular myths currently grip the educational populace. Subsequently, in the critical democratic tradition, I will provide a critical analysis of these particular myths, with the aim of revealing how they are fundamentally incompatible with any meaningful sense of democracy or calls for democratic education; and, consequently, it is my contention that such myths should be resisted and abandoned.

My defence of a more substantive understanding of socio-political myths also has important implications for critical democratic educators beyond providing new modes of orientation to critique. In particular, drawing on Blumenberg’s insight that myth is a necessary and inevitable part of humanity’s symbolic orientation in the world, I argue that critical democratic pedagogues must abandon their view that critical theory is not only in opposition to myth but also that theory and reason can somehow replace the symbolic void left in the critiquing of particular myths (Blumenberg, 1996). Specifically, as I will argue, not only has democratic myth been implicitly appealed to by critical democratic pedagogues, such as Paulo Freire (1998, 1968/2000) and Henry Giroux (1983), but that democratic myth is able to provide narrative unity and what Blumenberg (1979/1985) denotes as “significance” through its symbolic orientation, which further opens the possibility of nurturing democratic change both in and through education. In other words, I contend that socio-political myths, particularly what I denote as democratic myth, should be articulated and wed to critical pedagogies’
conception of critical democratic praxis, with the ultimate aim of nurturing the
democratic transformation of our existing social order.

Generally, this work serves as part of the slow theoretical thaw of myth in
academia and Western culture in general (Bottici, 2007; Flood, 1996; Kolakowski,
1972). Far from analysis of myth being a fruitless and irrelevant philosophical
endeavour, this work will reveal it to be necessary ethically and politically if we
truly want to understand and change the social forces that act upon us and within
us. The fact, then, that I situate my philosophical work in education is important
for a number of reasons. First, as I will reveal, myth’s persistence and socio-
political influence in rationally designed and implemented schools reaffirms and
provides further insight into the importance of moving beyond the myth and reason
antinomy. In addition, my work reveals how our education system is an incredibly
important institution and social lever for the reception and work of socio-political
myths in our social order (Rizvi, 2010). My work thus shifts the discussion on
myth in education from whether myth exists or should exist in our schools to
which myth(s) should we be nurturing in our education system and through our
pedagogy.

In addition, this work also provides important insight into the relationship
between critical democratic education and myth. Specifically, I reveal how the
antinomy between mythos and logos has led the critical democratic tradition to
overlook socio-political myths in our society as well as how myths are implicit in
their own work. As such, in understanding myth in a more substantive sense, this
work reveals the complexity of myth’s symbolic role in influencing modes of
being in the world, including a democratic way of life. Further, and of equal
importance, my work’s analysis of the relationship between critical democratic
praxis and myth also provides insight into how critical reflection and myth can and
should coexist as modes of orientation that inform our actions and practices. Far
from the critical democratic tradition being necessarily bound by the myth and reason/science antinomy, this work suggests that this tradition can move beyond said antinomy; in doing so, this tradition can offer new insight into the critical analysis of myths that perpetuate injustices in our socio-political order as well as the possibility of democratic change rooted in both reason and myth.

3 Outline

In Chapter 1, I begin my analysis by providing a chronological account of the emergence of the antinomy between mythos and logos. As I noted at the outset, it is, in fact, this antinomy that has ultimately led many philosophers of education, including those in the critical pedagogical tradition, to understand myth in a very narrow sense. Drawing primarily from the work of Hans Blumenberg (1979/1985) as well as the genealogical account of myth by philosopher Chiara Bottici in her work *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (2007), I will examine how the history of ideas has led to a marked antinomy between myth and reason/science. In doing so, this chapter will serve to clarify how and why myth is understood as an archaic illusion or popularized lie that reason must demystify.

In Chapter 2, I will draw on Blumenberg’s work, specifically his writings in *Work on Myth* (1979/1985). His work provides essential insight into both how the mythos and logos antinomy is misplaced, as well as a revolutionary understanding of how myth is and will always be a symbolic necessity for humans. Blumenberg, by resituating the origins of debate in philosophical anthropology, defends a functional account of myth and reason that challenges the mythos and logos antinomy. In fact, he (1979/1985) argues that mythos (myth) and logos (reason/science) are functionally similar insofar as they both provide symbolic modes of orienting humans amidst an indifferent reality. More than this, however, his work advocates accepting both reason/science and myth as conceptually
distinct and unique modes of orientation that inevitably must coexist even in our modern order.

It is Blumenberg’s philosophy of myth that thaws the popular philosophical discourse on myth. More specifically, if he is correct in his reconceptualizing of myth, then we have to re-evaluate how myths are created, how they grip and influence us in ways that we never properly understood before. Moreover, as I will argue further, we also have to rethink the relationship between myth, critical reflection, and action.

In Chapter 3, I will extend Blumenberg’s philosophical analysis of myths in general to an examination of socio-political myths in particular. The extension of his insights into the realm of socio-political myths is essential to my contention that myths are necessarily a part of our education system. Drawing on Blumenberg (1979/1985, 1996) himself, political theorist Christopher Flood (1996), philosophers Chiara Bottici (2007), and Charles Taylor (2007), I will situate socio-political myths within an understanding of sacred myths, ideology, the social imaginary as well as in contrast to utopian constructions. Having done so, I will address the philosophical challenges that any theoreticians, including those in education, have in trying to conceptualize and critique socio-political myths that have gained receptivity in our socio-political order. Such challenges, as I will address in Chapter 4, must be taken seriously if critical democratic educators are to embrace myth in the substantive sense I am defending.

Chapter 4 unites Blumenberg’s philosophy of myth and my extension of his ideas to the realm of political myth with critical pedagogy in particular and education in general. It is thus in this chapter that I will address how the mythos and logos antinomy has embedded itself within the critical pedagogical tradition. Moreover, I will argue that, far from the effect of this inherited antinomy being benign, it has led this education tradition to do what most Western philosophers
have done: to overlook the omnipresent existence and real force of myth in our socio-political order, including, implicitly, in their own work. As such, following Blumenberg once again, I will argue that critical democratic pedagogues must move beyond the *mythos* and *logos* antinomy, and begin to critically embrace socio-political myths as both a unique and complex mode of symbolic orientation that can create, reinforce, and perpetuate social injustices or can create, reinforce, and perpetuate social democratic change.

Based on this understanding of myth, it is my contention that critical pedagogues face two interrelated challenges. First, they must begin to critically examine existing socio-political myths in our education system that perpetuate social inequities and injustices and prevent the possibility of democratic transformation both in and through education. Secondly, and of equal importance, critical democratic educators should work to articulate and analyze how myth and critical democratic praxis can be more effectively wed. Specifically, as I have suggested, praxis and myth can be united in a way that provides a normative mode of orientation that aims for the democratic transformation of our existing social order based on our desire to nurture substantive notions of equality, freedom, and collective empowerment in said order.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I will address the former challenge—namely, articulating, in a substantive sense, the socio-political myth inherent within our education system that undermines the possibility of democratic transformation. In Chapter 5, then, I will articulate what I take to be a powerful socio-political myth that has ingrained itself within our education system—the myth of meritocracy. Resisting the traditional temptation simply to reduce myth to a web of lies perpetuated by those in power, I will argue that if we understand the meritocratic myth in Blumenberg’s substantive sense, then we understand the complexity of how the myth arose as part of our ideological history, the complex way in which it
is received and worked on within our particular educational communities, and why this myth is such a powerful narrative mode of orientation. Similarly, in Chapter 6, I critically address and examine another powerful socio-political myth that prevents and undermines the possibility of democratic change—the neoliberal myth. Specifically, I will argue that much of the harm caused by the neoliberal myth in our educational communities is the result of failing to understand the relationship between its theoretical and mythic roots and the morally bankrupt socio-political myth that emerges from this unity in society’s social imaginary.

Having critically addressed the socio-political myths that erode, prevent, and undermine the possibility of creating a just democratic social order, I will turn, in Chapters 7 and 8, to articulating a positive account of political myth that should serve as a narrative corollary to critical praxis in order to nurture democratic transformation. Let me be clear in my intention here: I will be arguing that particular socio-political myths can provide a normative mode of orientation that is not only compatible with critical democratic praxis but is necessary for the nurturing of the democratic transformation of our existing social order. In Chapter 7, I will articulate the democratic myth as this very socio-political narrative. Specifically, I contend that the democratic myth, with its narrative core that embraces substantive notions of equality, freedom, and collective empowerment, is an essential mode of symbolic orientation that should be embraced and nurtured by critical democratic educators.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I will examine both the practical challenges as well as the practical pedagogical possibilities of trying to nurture democratic myth in our education system. In this chapter, particular emphasis will be placed on the pedagogical relationship between teachers and learners and the importance of uniting democratic myth, critical reflection, and practice.
Chapter 1
Philosophy and Myth

1.1 Introduction

The opening chapter of my thesis provides a brief historical and chronological examination of the relationship between philosophy and myth. More than this, drawing particularly on the work of Hans Blumenberg and his book *Work on Myth* (1979/1985) and Chiara Bottici and her work *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (2007), I will examine the antinomy that emerged in the history of Western thought between *mythos* and *logos*. Bottici’s (2007) work is particularly significant insofar as, drawing on various sources, it provides a genealogical account of *mythos* and its relation to *logos*. Thus, drawing both on her conceptual insight and knowledge in her work, I aim to further expand and explore the antinomy between *mythos* and *logos*.

Further, I argue, following philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1979/1985), that far from the antinomy being philosophically and socially benign, it has ultimately led to a number of significant conceptual misunderstandings that many philosophical traditions, including those influencing critical pedagogy, have inherited. As I will examine through this chapter, the antinomy between *mythos* and *logos* ultimately led philosophers to believe that this division was both historically and conceptually necessary. One essential consequence, as I will argue further in Chapter 2, is that this antinomy led philosophers to fail to see the important functional similarity between myth and reason as important modes of symbolic orientation in the world, as well as the former’s unique symbolic effect of providing us with a sense of significance amidst an indifferent and often hostile world.

This chapter will begin by examining where the division between *mythos* and *logos* began in Western culture—namely, Ancient Greece. I will begin my
analyses with the pre-Socratics, who, interestingly, made little or no distinction between *mythos* and *logos*. I will then turn to Plato, who served as the monumental philosophical figure in making a clear distinction between *mythos*. Subsequently, I will examine the early Christian interpretation of *mythos* and *logos*, and will examine how *logos* became understood as the dogmatic acceptance of the sacred word of God and how myth remained relevant through allegorical interpretations of ancient myths.

I then turn my historical analysis to the Enlightenment, with a brief analysis of Pierre Bayle, René Descartes, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant. It is my contention that the Enlightenment solidified the antinomy between *mythos* and *logos* (Blumenberg, 1979/1985; Bottici, 2007). Further, I turn briefly to Friedrich Nietzsche’s 1872 work *The Birth of Tragedy* and reveal how even romantic critics of the Enlightenment ultimately affirmed the antinomy, insofar as myth was understood as the valued antithesis of reason and science.

Finally, I will conclude this chapter by turning my attention to the modern work of neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer. I take Cassirer’s work to be significant for two reasons. First, his early works *Symbolic Forms* (1923–1929/1955b) and *Essay on Man* (1944/1956), while heavily influenced by the *mythos* and *logos* antinomy, try to reclaim myth as a unique symbolic form that, while different than reason and science, was nonetheless important to humanity’s development. As such, he is an important, albeit incomplete, precursor to Hans Blumenberg’s (1979/1985) view of myth that I defend; the view that we have to re-evaluate the symbolic function and importance of myth. Secondly, Cassirer’s later work, particularly the *Myth of the State* (1946/1955a), opens the possibility that philosophers have not taken seriously the socio-political force of modern political myths, particularly exemplified in the rise of Nazi Germany. Drawing on this insight into political myth, I argue specifically in Chapter 3 and generally in subsequent chapters, that Hans
Blumenberg’s (1979/1985) conception of myth should be extended into the
analysis of modern political myths, including those inherent in our education
system.

1.2 Ancient Greece and the Emergence of the *Mythos* and
*Logos* Antinomy

When turning to the ancient Greeks as a means of understanding how the
*mythos* and *logos* antinomy emerged in Western thought, one might be surprised to
find little distinction made between the concepts among the pre-Socratics. In
Greek, the word *mythos*, or *muthos*, originally meant “word or speech” (Adkins,
1990; Bottici, 2007). Further, *mythos* later developed a secondary meaning as a
mode of thought and expression in the form of a “narrative or tale.” Among the
pre-Socratic philosophers and even in Homeric poems, *mythos* is not contrasted
with rational thought. As such, pre-Socratic philosophers would often mix and use
interchangeably narratives and rational argumentation. As philosopher Arthur
Adkins (1990) writes in his essay “Myth, Philosophy and Religion,” early Greek
poets such as Hesiod and philosophers such as Empedocles made no theoretical
distinction between *mythos* and *logos* (pp.99–100). Specifically, Adkins reveals
how even in Hesiod’s work, which is traditionally perceived by modern
philosophers as defending myths, one finds him using Greek narratives about
deities to rationally explain how the world moved from chaos to order. Further,
Adkins (1990) points out that historian Thucydides, who is generally perceived as
an “avowed foe of *mythos*,” often accepts the genealogy of Greek deities to explain
the historical developments of the Trojan War (p. 104). Of course, it is generally
accepted by historians and philosophers alike that while the emergence of *logos*
may have begun and developed slowly with the pre-Socratics, the real contrast
between *mythos* and *logos* emerged with Plato.
The role of Plato in the development of the antinomy between *mythos* and *logos* is a controversial one. Traditionally, Plato has been viewed by philosophers as one of the great founders of rational philosophy. More specifically, with the backdrop of traditional Greek myths looming, Plato’s epistemological movement away from his inherited myths and towards Platonic “truth” through rational thought and dialogue is interpreted as a seismic move from *mythos* towards *logos*. For example, in *Meno* (1947), Plato directly appeals to reason in the interchange between Plato’s protagonist Socrates, Meno, and a slave-boy. Through the use of rational dialogue and reflection, Socrates reveals to Meno how even a slave-boy with no educational training can “recollect” mathematical truths that he learned through his soul’s experience of the transcendental forms (Plato, 1947, sec. 86–87). Presumably, then, it is through rational questioning that “true opinions can be aroused and turned into knowledge” (Plato, 1947, sec. 86a–87a).

In *The Republic* (1974), Plato extends his loyalty to *logos* by expanding the role and function of reason into the political sphere. Plato argues that philosophers have the unique natural desire to move from believing imaginary tales and reproductions of reality, as well as unjustified beliefs, towards rational knowledge of the Platonic forms, including knowledge of the Good. As such, it is the philosopher’s role, which Plato exemplifies, to redesign and recreate a utopian society guided by his or her knowledge of the Platonic forms. Of equal importance, Plato also articulates his reservations about allowing artists and poets any significant role in society. In Books II and III of the *Republic* (1974), he outlines the five classes of mythical names that artists explore in their work: gods, heroes, daemons, inhabitants of Hades, and men of the past (cited in Brisson, 2004, p. 22). Further, he argues, while philosophers attempt to recollect and understand the true nature of the world through their understanding of the Forms, artists, in contrast, *only* provide work that resembles reality and thus have no access to true
knowledge. For this reason, Plato argues that artists should have a limited role in influencing the young with myth. More precisely, he argues that the philosopher kings must ensure that the young are only influenced by myths that are edited and deemed politically and morally relevant by the ruling class.

The epistemological dichotomy between the work of the artist and the philosopher’s immutable knowledge of the eternal forms is crucial in understanding Plato’s resistance to *mythos*. For Plato, to provide oral or written narratives about the past exploits of heroes, gods, and daemons is equated with providing stories of the actions and events of the mutable sensible world (Brisson, 2004, p. 22). Consequently, myths that are articulated by artists cannot and should not be understood as knowledge that the philosophers should seek to embrace. As such, regardless of the persuasive or historical significance of myth as a narrative discourse, it will always be part of the mutable sensible world; and thus myths will always be epistemologically inferior to knowledge of the eternal forms that can be verified through reason. Thus, while poets such as Homer may provide very important stories about Greek gods that are allegorical and valuable in a utopian society, it is clear that the rational philosopher king alone can lead people. In effect, for many philosophers, Plato is perceived as the first Western philosopher to embrace rationalism (*logos*) over mythical thinking. Specifically, Plato shifted the pursuit of truth away from the oral tradition of storytelling and the narratives of Greek gods to the rational understanding of the world through dialogue.

Despite the common interpretation of Plato as the first philosopher to move away from *mythos* towards *logos*, when looking in a more detailed fashion at his work, this binary opposition is not quite as clear. In several of Plato’s dialogues we find both tacit and direct acceptance of various characters of Greek mythology. For example, in *Phaedo* (1955), Plato has Socrates in a rational dialogue with
Cebes concerning the immortality of the soul. Having established the morality of the body, Socrates turns his thoughts to the invisible soul:

And shall we believe that the soul, which is invisible, and which goes hence to a place that is like herself, glorious, and pure and invisible to Hades, which is rightly called the unseen world to dwell with the good and wise God, whither it be the will of God, my soul too must shortly go—shall we believe the soul...is blown away by the winds and perishes as soon as she leaves the body as the world says? (Plato, 1955, Phaedo 80d)

Here we find Plato using Hades as an important premise in establishing the rational grounds for the immortality of the soul. Specifically, it is the existence of Hades, which Plato clearly believes is part of mythical narrative, that serves as the metaphysical parallel to the soul and provides justification for believing that the soul is not simply part of the perishable body.

Similarly, in The Republic (1974), Plato famously justifies philosophers creating and maintaining myths. Throughout the work, he uses traditional Greek mythology either as rational premises or to reinforce rationally argued beliefs. In Book III, Plato (1974) argues that the only way to properly perpetuate the stratification of his ideal just society (Guardians, Auxiliaries, and Artisans) is for philosopher kings to use something similar to an “Eastern tale of what, according to poets has happened before now in more than one part of the world” (p. 414b). Subsequently, he outlines the myth, which he categorizes as a “noble lie”, that each particular class of individual in his society should be taught the narrative “fiction” that they were fashioned by god with a mixture of gold, iron, or brass. Plato uses this “fictitious” myth as a means of ensuring political and social stability in his utopian society. As such, it appears that Plato does not desire the annihilation of
myth within his society, but rather he wants to control the creation and reception of such myths by the ruling class.

In light of these aforementioned works, how are we to interpret Plato’s direct use and belief in Hades and his use of myth as fictitious discourse in the context of the *mythos* and *logos* antinomy of which he was the supposed originator? One aspect of the antinomy is clear: Namely, that by the time of Plato the meaning of the terms *mythos* and *logos* had taken on distinct philosophical significance. While they may have begun as synonyms, in Plato’s collective works, *mythos* is understood as a narrative discourse that accounts for figures and events in the distant past, while *logos* is understood as rational discourse that provides philosophers access to truth (Blumenberg, 1979/1985; Bottici, 2007).

1.3 *Mythos, Logos, and Early Christianity*

In her genealogical work on myth, Chiara Bottici (2007) points out that from the early Greek use of both *mythos* and *logos*, we find a distinct and important transformation of the antinomy in Christianity. She (2007) argues that through Christianity, *logos* in particular changed substantially from its early use of

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1 While this distinction certainly emerges in Plato, the historical interpretation of his complete rejection of myth as a meaningful discourse has been exaggerated and is consequently still highly debatable. Philosopher Luc Brisson (2004) argues that Plato mixes *mythos* and *logos* because it is on the one hand philosophically useful, and on the other hand that this narrative discourse may, at times, correspond neatly with *logos* (Brisson, 2004, p. 26). If the latter is the case, then *mythos* remains a powerful allegorical tool if and only if it corresponds with the knowledge of the Platonic forms. In contrast, other philosophers such as Chiara Bottici (2007) or Adkins (1990) point more radically to the view that the *mythos* and *logos* antinomy does not exist in Plato’s works. Regardless of which specific philosophical interpretation we take on antinomy between the two, one is inclined to further reassess the changes of *mythos* and *logos* in Western thought beyond its early Greek conception.
“discourse” or “reasoning” (p. 44). More specifically, the term *logos* was transformed into the Word of God. She points to the Gospel of John to reveal the revolutionary transformation: “In the beginning there was the Word [*logos*] and the word [*logos*] was with God, and the Word [*logos*] was God.” (John 1:1). For Bottici, Christianity transformed *logos* from a rational discourse and structure of reality into the Word of God. The significance of this transformation should not be understated, according to Bottici. She argues (2007) that insofar as *logos* is understood as the Sacred Word of God for all of humanity, “there tends to be no space for recognition of myth” (p. 45). In other words, insofar as *logos* is understood as the primary means of truth, new questions concerning the role and significance of myth emerged.

Further, Bottici (2007) argues that this radical transformation led to an important contrasting distinction between *mythos* and *logos*. Understood in the context of Christianity, *logos* is conceived in the “singular”: the Truth (p. 48). More specifically, in the Christian context, *logos* began to be understood as the unitary means of understanding Truth by understanding God’s revelation through his Sacred Word. Thus, while there was and is interpretation of the Word of God, the ultimate goal of *logos* is to understand the truth of the Sacred Word (Blumenberg, 1979/1985). Concurrently, as *logos* solidified its spiritual and epistemic position through Christianity, *mythos* was concurrently understood in a new light. More specifically, the monotheism of God’s Word was contrasted with Greek polytheism. The Christian view of *logos* as the Word began to be contrasted with the narrative pluralism of various Greek texts. Bottici (2007) points out that as a result *mythos* during the early Christian period was transformed from narrative discourse into the idea of “imaginary tales which, far from containing any kind of truth, are deceitful and dangerous for the salvation of the soul” (p. 49). As *logos*
took on new meaning and significance in Christian thought, myth continued to survive; however, it survived only in an allegorical form.

In his work *How Philosophers Saved Myths*, Luc Brisson (2004) argues that the emergence of Christianity’s monotheism transformed *mythos*. He argues that traditional myths continued to be taken up philosophically as important historical narratives to be reflected on by Christian theologians and intellectuals (p. 121). Key to myth’s survival during this period was intellectuals’ interpretation and understanding of them as a form of allegory. As such, while myths were thought to be stories of pagan superstition and polytheism, many church fathers were able to maintain myth’s relevance in art and literature by reading myths in the spirit of Christianity (Brisson, 2004, p. 114). The problem with interpreting traditional myths as Christian allegories, of course, was ensuring that the allegories inherent in myths and the oral tradition properly cohered with the Sacred written Word. Most notably, during the Renaissance, various traditional mythical texts were translated, published, read, and analyzed. During this time, various authors began analyzing Greek myths historically as well as finding parallels between traditional narratives and the *logos* inherent in church doctrine. In 1336, for instance, Boccaccio was asked to provide a genealogy of pagan gods and an explanation of their meaning (Brisson, 2004, p. 146). In his analysis of Boccaccio, Brisson writes:

According to Boccaccio...myths have several meanings. Thus, the myth of Persus cutting off the Gorgon’s head and lifting himself off the ground on winged sandals can be taken either literally as narrative, ethically as the symbol of victory of a wise man rising toward virtue after having crushed sin, or allegorically as the symbol of Christ triumphant over the prince of this world and returning to his father in heaven. (Brisson, 2004, p.147)
Thus, while “pagans” would presumably interpret myths literally, the Christian tradition provided a symbolic and allegorical meaning to the stories by interpreting them through the spiritual lens of *logos*. More to the point, while there was little room for *mythos* in Western society with the emergence of *logos* as its antithesis, the sole place where *mythos* could survive in intellectual discourse prior to the Enlightenment was as a historical corollary to Christian thought. For this reason, when the Enlightenment brought increased skepticism and criticism to the epistemological foundation of religion, it concurrently attacked myth in the process.

1.4 *Mythos, Logos, and the Enlightenment*

With the emergence of the Enlightenment, the distinction between *mythos* and *logos* takes on its more contemporary meaning. It is during this era of intellectual thought that *logos* transforms radically from Christian Sacred Word to rationally discovered Truth (Blumenberg, 1979/1985; Bottici, 2007). It is also during this time that *mythos* is transformed by intellectuals to mean imaginary fables and stories. In surveying the modern interpretations of the *mythos* and *logos* divide, it is clear that French skeptic Pierre Bayle’s work *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, first published in 1682, is the first by a Western intellectual to skeptically challenge Christianity’s grip on *logos* under the banner of reason (Barnett, 2003; Bottici, 2007; Coupe, 2009). In this work, Bayle argues that religion *and* myth are both “vain images and tales” that have absolutely no foundation in truth (Bottici, 2007, p. 64; Graf, 1993, p. 14). For Bayle, all knowledge can only be understood through pure reason. He argues that religious beliefs are not to be understood as truths illuminated through religious revelation and the sacred word of God. On the contrary, insofar as truth is a derivative of reason, religious beliefs can be held only by faith and faith alone (Barnett, 2003,
Similarly, traditional mythology does not fare better in Bayle’s view since “it is not possible to have a more miserable foundation than the authority of the poets” (Bayle, 1682/2000, p. 18). Through Bayle’s work, it is evident that key elements to his thought would drive the mythos/logos divide. More specifically, for Bayle and his intellectual descendents, logos comes to be understood as an intellectual discourse and methodology that is derived from pure reason and which aims at understanding the truth about “reality.” In contrast, mythos is rightly understood as an imaginary discourse that aims at creating “vain images” of the “unreal” world. And while Bayle does not go so far as to say that the mythical and religious beliefs are completely irrelevant, it is quite clear from his work that they cannot and should not be understood as rightful heirs to logos.

Although Bayle’s philosophical musings may have deepened the epistemological antinomy between mythos and logos, it is René Descartes’ famous reflections, particularly his 1637 work Discourse on Method and 1641 work Meditations on First Philosophy, that solidified the divide between the two concepts in the early decades of the Enlightenment (Bottici, 2007). Interestingly, unlike Bayle, Descartes’ contribution to the antinomy between mythos and logos has less to do with his direct treatment and characterization of mythical discourse then it does with how he radically redefined our individual pursuit of knowledge through reason. One of the key elements of Descartes’ radical break from tradition is his reframing of philosophical speculation in terms of methodology (Descartes, 1637/1997). For Descartes, if the aim of philosophy is to pursue knowledge, then it is no longer sufficient for individuals to pursue truth haphazardly and without a rationally constructed methodology. One of the central features of Descartes’ reconstruction of the philosophical method is his redefining of the individual’s epistemological relation to his or her history and tradition.
(1637/1997), truth and knowledge could only be pursued by radically doubting and sweeping away all of our inherited beliefs:

But as regards all the opinions which up to this time I had embraced, I thought I could do no better than endeavour once and for all to sweep them completely away, so that they might later be replaced, either by others which were better, or by the same, when I had made them conform to the uniformity of a rational scheme. And I firmly believe that by these means I should succeed in directing my life much better than if I had only built on old foundations and relied on principles of which I allowed myself to be in youth persuaded without having inquired into their truth. (p. 79)

Here, Descartes radically redefines the individual’s epistemological relationship with his or her inherited tradition. Before the philosopher, mathematician, or scientist can pursue knowledge through reason, he or she must first throw off the intellectual bonds of his or her inherited tradition (Blumenberg, 1966/1983). Consequently, Descartes, in one monumental blow, rejects all inherited knowledge. One significant consequence is that mythical discourse, which is commonly understood at this time as inherited stories, is easily swept away as part of the “opinions and prejudices” that were part of a poor foundation to build a philosophical system on. As such, historical and traditional stories are to be replaced by the “clear and distinct” ideas that have been methodologically strained by reason. Unsurprisingly, what remains after Descartes’ sweeping skepticism of tradition is the heart of our modern logos: rational reflection, mathematics, and science (Bottici, 2007, p.65).

Descartes’ work also redefined the role of imagination in the age of the Enlightenment. Recall that during the Renaissance, mythical stories were viewed
as pagan tales but remained relevant insofar as they were interpreted in light of a
Christian discourse. For Descartes, however, the human imagination, while an
important faculty to our epistemological pursuits, does not provide us knowledge.
More specifically, in his *Sixth Meditation* (1641/1997), he argues that imagination
is an inferior to pure intellection as a means of pursuing knowledge. Using
geometric shapes as a reference, Descartes argues that the inferiority of the
imagination as the primary faculty of understanding can be seen in its limited
powers of projection compared to the limitless potential of the faculty of reason
(1641/1997, p. 177). In fact, Descartes concludes that it is only through rational
reflection, exemplified in the discovery and defence of the *cogito*, that we can
possible come to understand truth. In and of itself, Descartes’ conception of
imagination is benign. However, in the context of the *mythos* and *logos* divide, it
is significant. If the enlightened thinkers are to view mythical narratives as
“imagined stories,” then myths, according to Descartes, are necessarily distinct
from the knowledge provided by reason and science.

If Descartes recreated *logos* at the epistemological expense of *mythos*,
Scottish empiricist David Hume attempted to banish myth into the dust bin of
intellectual history. In his 1757 work *The Natural History of Religion*, Hume
attempts to reveal that traditional myths and religious beliefs, for which he makes
no conceptual distinction, are not only irrational, fictitious musings but are also
intellectually harmful to modern culture. One of the key elements of Hume’s
critique is that there is a “natural progress” of human thought throughout history.
He argues that Western culture is slowly moving from a collective state of mythic
and irrational thought to rational thought fuelled by a healthy dose of skepticism.
He argues that mythical stories must be understood as distinct from historical facts.
Myths, he (1757/1854) argues, are built from the “the frail memories of men, their
love of exaggeration, their supine carelessness” (p. 440). Without the correction of
reason, the mythical stories of the past inevitably “pervert [their] account of historical events” and forever “corrupt” truth (Hume, 1757/1854, p. 440). Further, Hume (1757/1854) argues that “reason, when obvious, prevents these corruptions: when abstruse, it keeps the principles entirely from the knowledge of the vulgar, who are alone liable to corrupt any principle or opinion” (p. 441). Hence, Hume argues that myths, far from being a set of benign imaginative musings, ultimately corrupt our individual and collective ability to use reason and understand truth.

Through Hume, then, there is one of the first overt philosophical attempts to account for the linear progress of humanity from a mythic culture governed by fear and superstition to a culture that should be governed by rational empiricism. He (1757/1854) argues that in mythical communities humans were “[hung] in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want, which are distributed among the human species by secret and unknown causes” (p. 445). Within this state of being, Hume speculates that early cultures did not have the proper philosophical foundation to rationally deal with the world. As such, humans used their imaginations to create mythical beings and tales that projected the “unknown” onto fictitious beings that resembled themselves. Further, he (1757/1854) argues that had these “ignorant multitudes” developed a more rational philosophy, “they would find that these causes are nothing but the particular fabric and structure of the minute parts of their own bodies and of external objects; and that, by a regular and constant machinery, all the events are produced about which they are so much concerned” (p.445). Thus, he (1757/1854) concludes that because rational philosophy “exceeds the comprehension of the ignorant multitudes,” their understanding of these unknown causes continues to be in a state of muddled confusion, wholly dependent on imagination (p.445).

Finally, Hume argues that it is only by embracing reason that individuals and cultures can throw off the burdens of their imagined mythic past and rationally
comprehend the “real” world. And while Hume argues that traditional myths, such as those in the Greek tradition, have little remaining cultural influence, the religious incarnation of mythic irrational thought is perverting the moral, political, and intellectual development of the Western world. As such, mythic discourse and the imagination are perceived by Hume as the intellectual enemies of *logos*; they are enemies that must be challenged and overcome by reason. It is, of course, Hume’s philosophy that awoke Kant “from his dogmatic slumber” but also affirmed the latter’s view of humans necessarily moving from *mythos* to *logos*.

In Kant, and his works such as *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), we find a philosopher less taxed by concerns over the harm of the illusionary grandeur of mythical illusion; rather, his primary concern was to establish reason as the intellectual authority that should permeate all aspects of human life. More precisely, Kant’s contribution to the *mythos* versus *logos* antinomy is not evident in a radical critique of myth, but in fusing the latter to reason. In turn, he argues that reason functions as the sole means by which we explore all intellectual endeavours such as epistemology, morality, politics, aesthetics, and our hopes. In his essay “What is Enlightenment?,” first published in 1784, Kant examines the very notion of human progress through the collective embrace of human reason. In the work, Kant defines the Enlightenment as “man’s emergence from a self-imposed immaturity” (Kant, 1784/1983, p. 41). Moreover, he argues that this immaturity is not the result of a lack of understanding, but rather a self-imposed lack of courage among individuals to use “one’s own understanding without the guidance of another” (Kant, 1784/1983, p. 41). Kant provides three examples of how this intellectual immaturity manifests itself within pre-enlightened European culture: “I have a book to serve as my understanding, one’s own understanding without the guidance of another, a physician to determine my diet for me” (Kant, 1784/1983, p. 41). Thus, individuals that fail to think for
themselves and use their understanding, conscience, and individual judgment inevitably are trapped in a state of pre-enlightened immaturity. From the outset of Kant’s view of Enlightenment, much like Descartes’, the role of myth is clearly understood as part of our individual and collective immaturity. More to the point, insofar as myths are understood as collective narratives that are inherited by the individual through tradition and are not discovered or created by the individual intellect, they are understood in Kant’s view as part of our self-imposed immaturity. Consequently, for Kant, the Enlightened age is understood as the individual and cultural struggle to overcome this intellectual immaturity of the past, thereby cultivating one’s own mind towards “pursuing a secure course” (Kant, 1784/1983, p. 41).

More than simply reinforcing Descartes’ skepticism about tradition, Kant’s conception of human progress through enlightened thinking ultimately tries to redefine the relationship between reason, freedom, and authority. More specifically, for Kant, there is only a single path in which human progress can be pursued: through the freedom of the individual to use human reason publicly in all matters (Kant, 1784/1983, pp.42–43). As such, human progress is radically shifted by Kant from embracing collective authoritative narratives, such as religious views, to embracing our individual capacity to reason as the sole authority in the public realm. Radically, Kant thus conceives human progress as individual and collective growth from a state of self-imposed immaturity to a state of maturity through reason. Thus, for Kant the human capacity to reason should not be viewed as a common faculty among others but rather the universal self-legislating authority of the human mind and, consequently, the primary means of liberating the self through human understanding.

Kant’s conception of human reason has two further significant implications for undermining the significance of myth during the Enlightenment. First, Kant’s
epistemology aims ultimately to undermine the epistemological legitimacy of traditional metaphysical knowledge, such as belief in the existence of God or the immortality of the soul. Kant, of course, argues that the mind consists of structural features specific to human cognition. Specifically, through the perceptual structuring of the brain, the mind creates divisions of space and time in our perception of the world that he calls “forms of intuition” (Kant, 1781/2007, pp. 65–91). Further, he argues that the human mind also consists of concepts that are understood as general representations of ideas originating in our understanding. Key for all human knowledge is the process by which we bring our intuitions under the rational judgment of our concepts, which, in turn, unifies our intuitions with our consciousness, thereby resulting in what Kant calls synthetic-knowledge. For Kant, the problem with all forms of transcendent beings and their corresponding narratives is that they are conceived as a priori facts and thus beyond human experience. Consequently, there is no possibility that these metaphysical facts are within the scope of human experience (both intuitively and conceptually) and thus must not be understood as human knowledge. And while Kant’s theory does not eliminate the possibility that metaphysical entities are not necessarily inconsistent with theoretical beliefs, which is evident in his moral thought, the epistemological limitations he places on what constitutes knowledge has clear effects on the conceptual relevance of myth (Bottici, 2007, p.71). In Kantian terms, if any myth’s narrative contents are conceived as a priori facts of the world or beyond human experience, then they cannot be considered part of the content of human knowledge or truth.

In addition, Kant’s conception of reason also radically redefined the nature of human action and praxis. In his works *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785/1964) and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788/1997), Kant sought to rationally provide an objective and universal moral foundation for all human
action. Implicit in Kant’s goals, is his rejection of any foundation to moral philosophy that is either contingent or does not provide one with objectively true moral knowledge. As such, he argues that moral theories that attempt to ground moral acts in either human empathy or happiness, such as those which are proposed by Hume (1748-1751/2000) and Bentham (1789/1970) respectively, are inevitably flawed because they are necessarily contingent on the human subjectivity of these emotions. Similarly, Kant also argues that moral actions cannot be grounded in God’s commandments. He asserts that, while God’s commandments are correct, humans must have an inherent capacity to justifiably verify the legitimacy of these commandments to ensure they are worthy of obedience (McIntyre, 1984, p. 45). Rejecting these two traditional sources of moral justification, he argues that human reason, conceived as a normative faculty universally born in all humans, must be the sole means of providing an objective foundation to the will.

Further, having located the locus of moral action in our capacity to reason, Kant creates a rationally derived moral criterion that distinguishes between rational moral actions and irrational immoral actions. In particular, Kant contends that all humans should be bound by the universal law of practical reason, the categorical imperative: one must will only a maxim that can be universally willed without contradiction (Kant, 1785/1964, pp. 88–92). As Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) argues in his work *After Virtue*, Kant uniquely reconceived practical reason in such a way that its self-legislating authority is removed entirely from human experience:

Practical reason, according to Kant, employs no criterion external to itself. It appeals to no content derived from experience...It is the essence of reason that it lays down principles which are universal, categorical and internally consistent. Hence, a rational morality will lay down principles which can
and ought to be held by all men, independent of circumstances and conditions, and which could consistently be obeyed by every rational agent on every occasion. (p. 45)

As MacIntyre rightly points out, Kant radically removes practical reason from all social and historical contexts and establishes it as the sole legitimate normative force for all human action. In fact, Kant contends that it is only through our willing according to practical reason, and not according to our desires and contingent factors, that we can ensure that we are willing freely. In other words, according to Kant, human freedom can only be secured when we can ensure that the human will is acting based solely on reason and is not governed by external causes. For Kant, then, enlightened logos is not conceived solely as the rational exploration and understanding of the material world. Rather, more than this, reason provides the self-legislating framework that should govern all human action.

Kant’s conception of human action and freedom has significant philosophical implications for our modern understanding of the move from mythos to logos. One such implication is that Kant inadvertently relocates the self-legislating subject from his or her historical and social context. Modern, enlightened humans, according to Kant, should not learn how to act and govern their will according to the socio-historical context in which they were raised or through the experiences and knowledge they accrue through life, but rather from their own rational core. In this context, myth is, at best, a morally redundant means of guiding human action, insofar as the “stories” affirm rationally derived truths. Perhaps more significantly, the Kantian conception of freedom, which is linked intimately to the unencumbered will that should be governed solely by its own practical reason, inevitably secures myth as the mortal enemy of logos. Not
only is myth, as Hume and Bayle suggest, irrational imaginings, but their production and reception are a form of cultural and social creation that prevent our individual will from securing freedom through reason. As such, the modern antinomy between *mythos* and *logos* was firmly solidified by Kant and his enlightened peers. On the one side of the divide is *mythos*, understood as irrational narratives of humanity’s immature past that constrain us from autonomy and freedom. On the other side is *logos*, understood as rational and scientific discourse that provides us with the sole means of epistemologically liberating ourselves from our immature past, that leads us to embrace freedom and autonomy.

1.5 *Mythos, Logos, and the Romantic Philosophers*

It is within the philosophical context created by the Enlightenment that Romantic philosophers attempted to re-evaluate the role of myth in philosophy. However, far from challenging the antinomy itself, the Romantic intellectuals instead accepted the dichotomy and re-evaluated the philosophical worth of myth as irrational imaginings (Blumenberg 1979/1985; Bottici, 2007). More specifically, Romantic intellectuals, such as William Blake, F. W. Schelling, Giambattista Vico, Thomas Carlyle, and Friedrich Nietzsche, interpreted myth as an extremely valuable and insightful manifestation of humanity’s ability to understand the world. This understanding of the world, however, was not available to human reason and science but could be comprehended only through the imagination. For Romantic philosophers, the human imagination, dismissed as insignificant by Enlightened philosophers, is the primary means by which humans could come to a deeper understanding of the complex world around them. As such, myth became, in varying degrees and forms, a mode of aesthetic
communication that provided metaphoric insight into the vast mystery and complexity of human existence.²

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, among the most prominent philosophers to explore the *logos* and *mythos* divide itself is Nietszche. Much like poet William Blake, Nietzsche viewed myth as a valuable antithesis to the Enlightenment’s pursuit of truth through reason. Uniquely, however, Nietzsche attempts to philosophically understand myth and its function within modern Western culture. In his 1872 work *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche (1872/1999) defines myth as “the contracted image of the world” (p. 108). He continues by adding that the images “of myth must be unnoticed and omnipresent, daemonic guardians under whose tutelage the young soul grows up and by whose signs the grown man interprets his life and his struggles” (Nietzsche, 1872/1999, p. 108). For Nietzsche, a culture’s myths are thus a powerful instrument of individual and cultural growth. Thus, Greek myths, more than outdated, fanciful stories, provided Greek culture with an essential mode of being and becoming in the world. For example, Nietzsche argues that prior to Greek culture being overtaken by *logos*, the Dionysian myth provided Greek culture with an essential wisdom and truth of

² It is important to note that while myth was once again valued by romantic philosophers and artists, how myth was conceptualized certainly was not unanimous. Schelling, for example, in his work *Historical-Critical: Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology* (1842/2007) argues that the study of myth provides us with intellectual access to our humanity’s development towards knowledge of God. More specifically, understanding myth provides a means of comprehending “theogonic process in consciousness of the original humanity” in prehistorical times (Schelling, 1842/2007, p. 159). In essence, he links the insights of the human imagination with philosophical comprehension to argue that myth provides prehistorical insight into our relationship with God (Bottici, 2007, p. 76). For Schelling, myth is thus understood as a primitive medium of artistic communication; a medium that should be studied and understood to find truth and knowledge.
the world by embracing the tragedy of existence through music and poetry. It is through the Dionysian spirit that Greeks were able to symbolically transcend the phenomenal world and experience the oneness “in the genius of species, indeed in nature” (Nietzsche, 1872/1999, p. 138). Further, he (1872/1999) argues that, without myth, “all cultures lose their healthy, creative, natural energy; only a horizon surrounded by myths encloses and unifies a cultural movement” (p. 108). Thus for Nietzsche, even in his earliest works, myth is understood as a symbolic mode of being for both the artist in particular and culture in general; a vehicle that provides modes of being and becoming in the world. Moreover, it is a symbolic vehicle that is necessary to create and nurture a vibrant and healthy culture.

Following the Romantic tradition, Nietzsche posits logos as the mortal enemy of myth and by implication the enemy of a healthy culture. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche (1872/1999) argues that the mythic culture that modern Europe has inherited from the Greeks has been eroded by logos. Of course, for Nietzsche, logos in Greek culture is understood mythically through the Greek god Apollo and philosophically through the rise of Socrates as a central figure of rationality. He argues that the authoritative nature of reason, which once shared normative space with other Greek myths, has come to dominate modern man to the peril of our culture. In other words, modern man, by embracing reason as the paradigm of human understanding, has stripped myth of its normative force and thus stripped modern Western culture of its health:

Now place beside this type of mythical culture abstract man, without the guidance of myth, abstract education, abstract morality, abstract law, the abstract state, consider the rule-less wandering of artistic fancy, unbridled by indigenous myth; think of a culture which has no secure place of origin and which is condemned to exhaust every possibility and to seek meagre
nourishment from other cultures; that is present, the result of Socratism’s determination to destroy myth...The enormous historical need of dissatisfied modern culture, the accumulation of countless other cultures, the consuming desire for knowledge—what does all this point to, if not to the loss of myth, the loss of the mythical home, a mythical, maternal womb? (Nietzsche, 1872/1999, pp. 108–109)

For Nietzsche, then, modern culture is marked by reason and science’s wanton destruction of mythical narratives. The strength and vibrancy of myth can be gauged by the inverse proportion of strength and vibrancy of reason and science (logos) within a culture. Consequently, Nietzsche, far from challenging the mythos and logos antinomy of the Enlightenment, solidifies and celebrates it.³

³ Nietzsche’s contribution to the mythos and logos antinomy that we have currently inherited should not be underestimated. While Nietzsche would later abandon the view that Greek antiquity, specifically Dionysian myth, could provide a transformative force for modern culture, he did not abandon his view that myth is the medium of individual change. Specifically, Nietzsche’s later works not only expand the scope of myth’s enemies to include institutionalized Christianity along with reason and science, but they also establish mythos as the means to heroic individual transformation. For Nietzsche, the ultimate philosopher is the myth maker. The Nietzshean Übermensch (1885/1976) is the intellectual hero who philosophically demolishes the chains of logos to open the existential possibility of self-creation. And while it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue the legitimacy of the moral and political implications of Nietzsche’s work, it is apparent that the implications of his philosophy and our conceptual understanding of myth are significant. With the unimaginable horrors of the twentieth century on the horizon, he turned myth into the conceptual means of transgressing reason and the moral and political rules. As such, Nietzsche’s skepticism concerning reason’s ability to legitimate morality and myth’s irrational nature led to significant damage to the concept of myth itself.
1.6 *Mythos, Logos, and the Twentieth Century*

Once the *mythos/logos* antinomy was set by the turn of the twentieth century, myth was outside the scope of philosophical study. Rather, myth during this time was predominantly taken up by psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud or anthropologists such as James George Frazer and later, Bronislaw Malinowski (Strenski, 1987). And while these intellectuals provide extraordinary insight into their respective fields, it is important to note that all of their work explicitly or tacitly accepted the enlightened conception of myth and reason. For Freud, myth is a means for science and reason to uncover the suppressed irrational workings of the subconscious. Thus, while he acknowledges the value and power of myth in shaping our lives, the psychoanalyst’s rational understanding of myth allows them to discipline the mind and find truth about the self. For many anthropologists, myths provided narrative insight into the primitive minds of premodern societies. For Frazer and many anthropologists of his time, myth provides access to the irrational and prerational primitive mind; a vast narrative glimpse into what the state of Western culture had been prior to the modern progress of reason and science (Frazer, 1890/1980). The exception to this movement in anthropology is the work of structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss, 1978, 1985; Strenski, 1987). Interestingly, it is Lévi-Strauss’s philosophical foundation that led him to try to posit myth as an autonomous mode of understanding that encompasses strongly structured stories that can be rationally analyzed (Lévi-Strauss, 1978, 1985). And although post-structuralists would critically deconstruct the legitimacy of applying rational structures to mythic cultures, Lévi-Strauss’s belief in the rational structure of myth opened to him the possibility that modern Western culture had underestimated the power, resiliency, and manifestation of myth in our culture (Strenski, 1987).
Among the few philosophical works on myth that emerged during the first half of the twentieth century, the most comprehensive is the work by neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer. Cassirer’s philosophical work on myth provides a unique vantage point, insofar as his theory is clearly influenced by the mythos/logos antinomy that he inherited, while he concurrently tried to establish myth as a philosophically relevant source of study. Central to Cassirer’s philosophical works, is the attempt to extend Kant’s analysis of the a priori categories of human understanding through the analysis of culture (Savodnik, 2003). More specifically, in his early works An Essay on Man (1944/1956) and Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (1923–1929/1955b), he argues that Kant’s philosophical goal of understanding the categories of human thought through epistemological analysis should be extended to understanding other cultural forms of symbolic representation. Cassirer’s work aims to provide a theoretical understanding of humanity in general, and the human specifically, by understanding the symbolic forms by which we collectively constitute the world:

Man’s outstanding characteristic, his distinguishing mark, is not metaphysical or physical nature—but his work. It is this work, it is this system of human activities, which defines and determines the circle of his “humanity.” Language, myth, religion, art, science, history are the constituents, the various sectors of this circle. A “philosophy of man” would therefore be a philosophy which would give us insight into the fundamental structures of each of these activities, and which at the same time would enable us to understand the organic whole. (Cassirer, 1944/1956, p. 68)
For Cassirer, humans are necessarily symbolic beings whose various products are understood as the totality of culture (Baeton, 1996, p. 46). Moreover, he argues that as *animal symbolicus*, humans’ symbolic interaction in and with the world can be analyzed in its various forms—namely, language, art, religion, myth, history, and science. Hence, Cassirer argues that each of these symbolic strands, or what he calls symbolic forms, has unique sets of characteristics and organizational forms (Baeton, 1996, p. 46). The ultimate aim of his philosophy is to elucidate and understand each of these symbolic forms and, more than this, to “make understandable and audible” the common theme that unites these symbolic forms (Cassirer, 1944/1956, p. 71).

Interestingly, Cassirer follows the Enlightened tradition and argues that the common theme that unites these symbolic forms is the progressive process towards self-liberation. In his early work, Cassirer attempts to philosophically track humanity’s symbolic progress from myth and religion to self-liberation through reason and science. In *An Essay on Man* (1944/1956), he argues that myth should be understood as the initial stage of symbolic formation of human consciousness. Unlike many modern philosophers, however, he argues that it is a mistake to understand myth as simply imaginary expressions of artists. On the contrary, what distinguishes myths from “mere” poetry is that in the former there is always an object of reality that the mythic imagination attempts to symbolically capture (Cassirer, 1944/1956, p. 75). In this way, he argues that myth and science are similar insofar as they both quest for the same thing: reality. Hence, myth provides a conceptual means for humans to perceive the world in a different way, which, in turn, allows us to judge and interpret it in accordance with how our mythical conception is constructed.

Despite myth’s basic similarity with science, Cassirer points out that myth has distinct characteristics as a symbolic form. First, he asserts that myth is a
much more fluid and fluctuating stage of perception than the theoretical insofar as their objects of perception differ. For our theoretical perception, specifically empirical science, nature is understood as a set of objective general laws. In contrast, he argues (1944/1956) that myth perceives nature in dramatic form; a world of “actions, of forces, of conflicting powers” (p. 76). Moreover, the mythical perception perceives nature through the dramatic collision of these powers and forces. In addition, Cassirer argues that another unique feature of mythical perception is that it is impregnated with emotional qualities. In contrast to scientific and theoretical perception, which views the world through objective detachment, myth infuses the world with an atmosphere of emotions from grief to joy, exultation to depression. Thus, he argues (1944/1956) that for mythical perception, “all objects are benignant, or malignant, friendly or inimical, familiar or uncanny, alluring and fascinating or repellent and threatening” (p. 77). As such, echoing Kantian themes of freedom and autonomy, Cassirer argues that mythical perception is susceptible to constant change insofar as it is dependent on the contingent and fluctuating nature of human emotions.

From the outset of Cassirer’s philosophy of myth, it is evident that the mythos/logos antinomy of his predecessors colours his work. Like his predecessors, it is evident for Cassirer that his version of myth is contrasted to reason, science, and theoretical perception. This similarity being noted, it is also important to understand how his philosophy of myth strains this antinomy. First, he argues that, given the conceptual roots of myth and mythical perception, it is misguided to interpret premodern culture as irrational or illogical. Within these cultures, myth provided symbolic unity and coherence to reality. As such, myth should not be understood as simply the chaotic imaginings of irrational peoples. For Cassirer, the problem with myth was not its coherence or unity of reality
themselves, but rather that its emotional foundation is and was epistemologically weak.

Once more, he also argues that myth *qua* symbolic form cannot be so easily dismissed by philosophers insofar as it has a crucial role in the symbolic evolution of human consciousness. In other words, while he argues that myth marks humanity’s early attempt at symbolic interaction in the world, it should be understood as an important and necessary stage in the continuum of self-liberation through symbolic forms. He argues that the mythic-symbolic stage, in effect, made possible the emergence of more complex and abstract uses of language. It is only through mythical perception and symbolic representation that language could be developed in a way that could lead to later stages of symbolic development via art and history and culminating with science and reason (Savodnik, 2003). Thus, while the ultimate goal of science is to cause mythical perception to fade away, myth should be interpreted as an important cornerstone that makes self-liberation through reason possible.

Finally, by the end of WW II, Cassirer, heavily influenced by the atrocities of his time, revisited his theory of myth in his work *The Myth of the State*, which was published posthumously in 1946. In this work, Cassirer draws heavily on the philosophy of myth of his earlier works. As such, he continues to frame his conception of myth within his account of symbolic forms as well as within humanity’s pursuit of freedom. Moreover, he also reaffirms his view that mythical thought is rooted in human emotions and trying to provide a narrative account of reality. These similarities noted, Cassirer makes a radical shift when examining the function of myth in modern society and its politics. Far from being viewed simply as a necessary part of our symbolic progress of myth, Cassirer argues that myth is the fundamental enemy of modern progressive thought and has directly
contributed to the rise of totalitarian states and perverse political mythologies such as Nazism.

In *The Myth of the State*, Cassirer (1946/1955a) not only discusses his philosophy of myth but also historically tracks the struggle between myth and philosophy in politics. Beginning, strangely enough, with Plato, he argues that the Greek “grandfather of philosophy” properly understood the relationship between *mythos* and *logos*; while the former may exist in a culture it must be highly disciplined by the rational state. From Plato, Cassirer continues his philosophic-historical analysis of myth through the medieval period as well as within the Renaissance. In his tracking of myth in medieval and Renaissance theory, specifically in the works of Aquinas and Machiavelli, he asserts that one can see the slow but significant movement of the state away from myth and towards *logos* (Cassirer, 1946/1955a, pp. 94–144). Furthermore, he (1946/1955a) argues that by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both Hobbes and Descartes radically reoriented the modern secular state towards rationalism, which culminated in the rational affirmation of the natural rights of man (pp. 204–213). Further, the Enlightenment continued this tradition, through the work of Rousseau, Jefferson, and Kant, insofar as these philosophers continued to provide unity between reason, theory, and the political practice of individuals and the modern state (pp. 220–234).

However, Cassirer argues that the West’s long struggle to discipline myth in modern politics was suddenly washed away with the emergence of Nazi Germany (Schultz, 2000, p. 240). More specifically, for Cassirer myth could not be perceived as a benign part of our primitive past. On the contrary, he (1946/1955a) argues that while the ideas of hero worship and racial Darwinism were an inherited part of Western thought, Nazi Germany had realized the power of myth to collectively mobilize a population under the rule of the state (p. 348). In other words, Nazism’s political myths should be understood as the fundamental rejection
of the political state grounded by reason and an objective understanding of the world, in favour of a nation grounded in human emotion and feeling. Moreover, Cassirer argues that Nazi Germany, by uniting people in myth, was able to ignore rationally derived notions of freedom, autonomy, and rights and consequently plunge the population towards genocide.

Among Cassirer scholars, there is a significant amount of debate over how *The Myth of the State* fits within his general view of human progress from *mythos* to *logos*. One thing that is clear in this work is that myth should not be understood as an outdated mode of primitive human understanding. On the contrary, Cassirer argues that myth and modernity are not and will not ever be completely mutually exclusive. In fact, he (1946/1955a) points out, through his analysis of Nazism, that modern states and cultures have for the first time in history reinterpreted myth as a modern form of *techne* (p. 354). As such, modern political myths, unlike their predecessors, are intentionally created products of the state. Within this context, Cassirer argues that philosophy has an important role in relation to myth. Philosophy must guide us in understanding “the adversary”—namely, irrational myth (Cassirer, 1946/1955a, p. 373). In his final reflection on political myths, Cassirer (1946/1955a) points to the importance of philosophy taking myth seriously in order to combat irrationalism:

> When we first heard of political myths we found them absurd and incongruous, so fantastic and ludicrous that we could hardly be prevailed upon to take them seriously. By now it has become clear to all of us that this was a great mistake. We should not commit an error a second time. We should carefully study the origin, the structure, the methods, and the technique of modern political myths. We should see the adversary face to face in order to know how to combat him. (p.373)
From this, Cassirer reveals his perhaps reluctant slide from trying to understand myth as a necessary part of human progress to advocating the philosophical fight of *logos* against *mythos* (Baeton, 1996; Schultz, 2000). In his work, then, it is clear that the solidification of the *mythos* and *logos* antinomy was a relevant part of the modern political landscape. Nonetheless, Cassirer rightly urges philosophers to take seriously myth within modern culture. Interestingly enough, with rare exceptions, many philosophical communities have generally ignored his advice over the last half century. As a consequence philosophers have seriously neglected the role that myth continues to play in our society and all its institutions.

The work of Ernst Cassirer is an important precursor to my subsequent defence of the philosophical work on myth by Hans Blumenberg (1979/1985). As I will reveal next chapter, Blumenberg, very much influenced by Cassirer’s early attempt to understand the value of myth to humans, not only critiques his predecessor but tries to move beyond the *mythos* and *logos* antinomy. As I will further examine, Blumenberg fundamentally rejects the view, which Cassirer embraces, that humans progress from a mythic culture to a rational culture. Rather, drawing on an insightful philosophical-anthropological position, Blumenberg argues that myth and reason are very much similar, insofar as they function as important and essential modes of symbolic orientation. More than this, however, he argues that myth, far from being obsolete or a set of narratives that reason and science can and should eliminate, is a necessary and irremovable part of humanity’s symbolic interaction with the world.
Chapter 2
Hans Blumenberg and Philosophy of Myth

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter of my thesis, I turn my attention to providing a positive account of myth through the work of German philosopher Hans Blumenberg (1966/1983, 1979/1985, 1996). It is my contention that Blumenberg’s philosophical account of myth provides a unique and insightful conception of myth that traverses the mythos and logos antinomy. In particular, I will argue that his functional examination of myth reveals not only myths’ importance to humanity but also how they have manifested and continue to manifest themselves as a unique form of symbolic orientation within various communities.

Further, as I will argue in the subsequent chapters, Blumenberg’s unique philosophy of myth is the keystone to my understanding of how socio-political myths are created and received within our education system. Specifically, if we take seriously Blumenberg’s conception, then critical pedagogues must rethink and reconceptualize their critical engagement of myths that may undermine democratic transformation as well as be open to the possibility that myth should function as an important narrative corollary to critical democratic praxis.

Additionally, an important methodological qualification must be made from the outset of this chapter. As I will further articulate, Blumenberg defends a functionalist and particularist account of myth. As such, he argues that there are certain conceptual limits in articulating a philosophy of myth. Specifically, he claims that a philosophical account of myth can theoretically articulate the function of myth, its narrative core along with its ability to nurture a sense of unity and “significance” in us. However, he argues there are epistemological limits to any philosophical account of myth insofar as all myths are worked on and
contextualized in a way that embeds them not only with particular communities but within our subjectivity. As a consequence, any philosophy of myth will inevitably be limited in articulating the particular subjective effect that a mythic orientation creates in each individual. Such subjectivity certainly could be hermeneutically mined through qualitative research but is well beyond the scope of this dissertation.

This chapter will begin with Blumenberg’s functional account of myth or what he denotes as the “work of myth.” This part of his philosophy of myth is essential insofar as it forms the basis for his claim that the mythos and logos antinomy fails to capture the functional importance and similarity of both modes of symbolic orientation. Subsequently, I will examine what Blumenberg takes as unique features of myth as a symbolic mode orientation and thus distinguishes it from reason and science.

Having established Blumenberg’s positive account of myth, I will return to his analysis of how this positive account of myth provides new insight into the relationship between myth, science, and reason. Ultimately, he argues, despite the Enlightenment’s intentions, myth is and will always be a necessary and important part of how we practically orient ourselves in a highly indeterminate world; it is this particular insight that will serve as the basis of both my philosophic critique of socio-political myths in our school system as well as my defence of the symbolic need for democratic myth. I will conclude this chapter by critically examining Blumenberg’s brief reflections on political myths; this conclusion will serve as a critique of his criticism of political myths as well as a precursor to my subsequent chapter that extends Blumenberg’s philosophy of myth into the realm of socio-political issues, including those in the area of education.
2.2 Blumenberg’s Philosophical Anthropology and Myth

To open, one important way of understanding Blumenberg’s (1979/1985) radical approach to myth is to interpret his work as a response to some of the inherent difficulties in Cassirer’s conception of myth. The importance of Cassirer’s account of myth on Blumenberg should not be underestimated. In fact, Blumenberg himself acknowledges Cassirer’s contribution to his own functional account of myth and reflects that the latter’s work had been unfortunately neglected by much of academia to our collective detriment. On a general level, Blumenberg clearly draws on the importance of conceiving humans as *animal symbolicus* and, in turn, understanding how symbols function within human communities. This similarity being noted, Blumenberg critiques Cassirer’s conception of myth on two fundamental levels. First, he argues that Cassirer’s account makes the rather grand assumption that symbolic forms and their various expressions are simply part of humanity’s unproblematic existence in nature qua *animal symbolicus* (Adams, 1991, pp. 152–155; Pavesich, 2003, 2008; Wallace, 1985, p. xi). As I will discuss further, Blumenberg argues that we should not assume that symbolic orientation is an unproblematic part of human existence. In addition, he argues that Cassirer, much like many of his *logos*-inclined peers, claims that there is a “natural” teleology of human consciousness that moves from myth to science and reason (Adams, 1991, pp. 152–155; Wallace, 1985, p. xi). For Blumenberg, the assumption that humans’ natural progress from *mythos* to *logos* is not only unjustified, but, more importantly, it masks our anthropological need for both modes of expression and understanding.

Interestingly, Blumenberg’s examination of myth does not begin by providing an analytic analysis of the concept of myth and its relation to reason. On the contrary, Blumenberg (1979/1985), through philosophic anthropology, examines myth at its point of creation and departure, its *terminus a quo* (pp. 4–31). Key,
then, to understanding Blumenberg’s conception of myth is understanding how myth relates to his conception of human existence. Central, then, to Blumenberg’s (1996) view is that the “first proposition of an anthropology would then be, it cannot be taken for granted that man is able to exist” (p. 438). Specifically, he argues that the fundamental mistake that philosophers, including Cassirer, make in speculating on humanity is assuming that our existence is self-evident; hence, many philosophers take for granted our ability to exist in the world qua humans. For example, fundamental to Cassirer’s theory of symbolic forms and our progression from myth to science and reason is the underlying assumption our existence is possible.\(^4\) Blumenberg, in contrast, argues that to understand myth one must also understand the point at which existence is possible for humans.

Central to Blumenberg’s account of the anthropological significance of myth is his minimalist account of human nature. First, drawing on the work of Max Scheler and Ernst Plessner, Blumenberg argues that fundamental to human existence is the need for orientation in the world. As such, human beings are marked with a desire to create congruence between their existence and the world around them. And while humanity’s need for orientation may seem anthropologically obvious, for Blumenberg, it should not be taken for granted. More specifically, while our need for orientation is a precondition of human existence it does not follow that orientation itself is part of this precondition (Pavesich, 2008, pp. 433–434). Once again, taking Cassirer as an example, his conception of symbolic forms is a form of cultural orientation; and thus he takes

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\(^4\) Similarly, as philosopher Vida Pavesich notes in her work “Hans Blumenberg’s Philosophical Anthropology: After Heidegger and Cassirer” (2008), Blumenberg’s view notably contrasts both the Habermasian account of the “life-world” and Heidegger’s Dasein as both philosophers fundamentally assume that our existence is a self-evident foundation of our being (p. 430).
for granted our ability to fulfill this need for orientation. For Blumenberg (1979/1985, 1996), simply by positing orientation as a self-evident part of human existence, philosophers ultimately overlook both what makes this orientation possible and, concurrently, the fundamental difficulty we have in orienting ourselves in this world as humans.

The second fundamental aspect of Blumenberg’s conception of human nature is that we are fundamentally creatures of deficiencies. Here Blumenberg draws on Arnold Gehlen’s anthropological account of humanity’s evolutionary deficiencies in a world that does not fit perfectly with our needs. For Blumenberg, to understand humans we have to understand the two alternative accounts of our biological evolution:

Man can be viewed either as a poor or as a rich creature. The fact that man is not fixed, biologically, to a specific environment can be understood as fundamental lack of proper equipment for self-preservation or as openness to the fullness of a world that is no longer accentuated only in terms of vital necessities. Man is made creative either by the urgency of his needs or the playful dealings with his surplus talents. (Blumenberg, 1996, p. 429)

It is important to be clear on Blumenberg’s position here. He is not positing that humans as a species are weak and pathetic creatures incapable of good. On the contrary, as I will discuss further, he argues that we have collectively made extraordinary strides as a species. However, it is incorrect to assume that these collective accomplishments emerged simply from the abundant biological features of humanity. On the contrary, Blumenberg (1979/1985, 1996) posits that it is our radical underdetermination in this world that drove our collective will to struggle, through various forms, for congruence between our species and the world around
us. To put into simple terms, while butterflies’ biological development fit neatly with nature, humanity no longer fits so neatly; and, as such, it is our lack of fixed biological disposition that accounts for our uniqueness in the world as well as our radical existential struggle to orient ourselves to our subjectivity, communities, world, and universe.

2.3 Blumenberg and the Work of Myth

It is from this unique anthropological starting point that Blumenberg provides his functional account of the “work of myth.” From the outset the idea of the “work of myth” must be understood. For Blumenberg, while understanding myths’ qualities is certainly important, as I will explore later in detail, the real philosophical significance of myth in our lives is understanding the functional role, or the “work,” it has done in orientating our lives to the world around us.

Blumenberg argues that if we truly want to understand the real value of myth then we must understand the problem that myth seeks to solve at its point of departure (its terminus a quo) (Blumenberg, 1979/1985, pp. 6–7). Specifically, he (1979/1985) argues that myth’s importance lies in its ability to provide a solution to the problem of the absolutism of reality (pp. 3–34). Recall that Blumenberg argues that a primary need for humans, left without our biological niche, is to orient ourselves within reality; within this context the absolutism of reality should be understood as the vast horizon of indifference of reality that confronts this fundamental need. As Blumenberg (1979/1985) notes, the absolutism of reality is the point of human existence when “man came close to not having control of the conditions of existence and, what is more important, believed that he simply lacked control of them” (p. 4). Thus, he argues that at some point in our existence, for which he provides a fictional account of its origins, the horizon of an indifferent reality confronted our ancestors; at some point the world’s vast and indifferent
horizon was placed before an ill-adapted species, resulting in an inevitable anxiety that threatened our existence.

For Blumenberg, myth’s original work and its functional importance is to make existence possible by providing a symbolic orientation that mitigates the anxiety of our lack of control in the face of the absolutism of reality. More specifically, confronted by an overpowering reality and concurrently having no inherent biological means to deal with our world’s contingency, he argues that the creation and reception of myth provided an important symbolic solution. He argues that myth as a symbolic form combatted, and continues to combat, the absolutism of reality by providing a symbolic distancing between the subject and the world. More specifically, he argues the great work of myth in human history is that it is the original symbolic form that made our existence possible insofar as its creation serves as “the manifestation of an overcoming, of a gaining of distance, of a moderation of bitter earnestness” (Blumenberg, 1979/1985, p. 16). He argues that myth, through the naming of figures and stories, provided a symbolic medium in which the indifferent and contingent world around, a world that was unfamiliar and marked by anxiety, was transformed into a world that was familiar (Blumenberg, 1979/1985, p. 26). As a consequence, myth provided the crucial symbolic mode of orientation that made our existence possible amidst the absolutism of reality. More than this, as I will further elaborate, Blumenberg (1979/1985) argues that it was myth’s ability to distance us symbolically from the absolutism of reality that made possible the growth and development of reason as another mode of symbolic orientation (pp. 26–27).

2.4 Blumenberg and the Mythos, Logos Antinomy

One might be inclined to think that the relevance of the original function or work of myth is insignificant in a modern discussion of myth. However, Blumenberg’s account of the work of myth is crucial in resisting the modern
philosophical interpretation of moving from *mythos* to *logos*. Given myth’s functional roots, he argues that philosophers who have understood and continue to understand myth as a stage of irrationality or primitivism fail to “recognize in myth itself one of the modes of accomplishment of *logos*” (Blumenberg, 1979/1985, p. 27). Recall, that Blumenberg’s conception of human nature focuses on our need to create congruence and orient ourselves in the world rather than providing a teleological account of human progress from primitivism to rational civilization. Given this starting point, he argues that myth provided an essential mode of orientation much like its later counterpart in rationality and science. Let me be clear here: Blumenberg, as I will discuss further, is not arguing that myth and reason/science are the same, but rather they both provide crucial and undeniable modes of orienting ourselves in the world. For Blumenberg, the danger of us holding the teleological view that modernity is a movement from *mythos* to *logos* is that we fail to see the functional similarity between both modes of orientation: “The boundary line between myth and logos is imaginary and does not obviate the need to inquire about *logos* of myth in the process of working free of an absolutism of reality” (Blumenberg, 1979/1985, p. 12). Further, he (1979/1985) argues that “myth itself is a piece of high-carat work of *logos*” (p. 12). In other words, insofar as we understand myth as an important and essential means of providing symbolic congruence to us, we, in turn, also see that underlying functional similarity between these narratives and our ability to orient ourselves in this world through science and reason. Moreover, he argues that there is a fundamental danger in embracing the idea that modern society has moved from “*mythos* to *logos*”:

That the course of things proceeded “from *mythos* to *logos*” is a dangerous misconception because we think that we assure ourselves by it that somewhere in the distant past the irreversible “spring forward” took place
that determined that something had been put far behind us and that from then on only steps forward had to be executed. But was the spring really between myth that had said that the earth rests on the ocean or rises out of it and the *logos* that had translated this into the so much paler universal formula that everything comes out of water and accordingly is composed of it? The comparability of these formulas supports the fiction that in both cases it was a question of the same interest, only of fundamentally different means by which to pursue it. (Blumenberg, 1979/1985, p.27)

Therefore, for Blumenberg, by failing to understand the fiction of our cultural movement from *mythos* to *logos* we collectively fail to see the functional relevance of myth. The philosophical significance of this collective blind spot should not be underestimated. On the one hand, he argues that this failure has led to an inadequate understanding of how myth survived and continues to survive in an age saturated by science and reason. And, on the other hand, this blind spot has also led our culture to fail to see the real, inherent relationship between myth and reason.

2.5 Blumenberg and Mythic Significance

Blumenberg further argues that crucial in comprehending myth’s power and continued relevance is understanding the quality that makes myth symbolically attractive. Interestingly, Blumenberg (1979/1985) does not radically differ from other philosophers of myth regarding the general form of myth: “myths are stories that are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and by equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation” (p. 34). And while I will discuss the importance of his idea of “marginal variation” further in this chapter, it is important to emphasize that he does rightly distinguish myth as narrative form from rational argumentation and scientific explanations. Moreover, Blumenberg
(1979/1985) also argues that there exists a clear distinction between science and reason and myth; this distinction being noted, he clearly articulates that myth is intellectually relevant:

No one will want to maintain that myth has better arguments than science... Nevertheless it has something to offer that—even with reduced claims to reliability, certainty, faith, realism and intersubjectivity—still constitutes satisfaction of intelligent expectations. (p. 67)

Specifically, he (1979/1985) argues that myth is still relevant and pervasive insofar as it is superior at providing “significance” to human communities (p. 67).

Blumenberg (1979/1985) notes from the outset that “significance is one of the concepts that can be explained but cannot, in the strict sense, be defined” (p. 68). He (1979/1985) argues that the one way to understand myth’s significance is to contrast its symbolic involvement with the world and science’s impartiality and indifference to the world:

Significance is one of the concepts that can be explained but cannot, in the strict sense, be defined. . . . Equipping something with significance is not something we can choose to do. Even granting that man makes history, still there is at least one of its side effects that man does not make; this is the “‘charging’” of the constituent parts of the human world with significance. Whatever it may arouse, reverence, astonishment, enthusiasm, rejection in different degrees of intensity and in the form of unprovable damnation memoriae [rejection from memory], exertions to expel it from the collective consciousness, museum custody, officially organized conservation all of these are ways of dealing with what is significant, and differ from the
obligatory uniformity with which sciences administer and categorize their objects. (p. 68)

Thus, when myth provides significance to the world it provides “meaning” to humans beyond the simple impartial rational explanations. More than this, myth, by infusing the world around us with significance, provided the earliest means of orienting humans. In doing so, Blumenberg contends that myth, in fact, provided, and arguably still provides, the necessary conditions that made the emergence of self-conscious thought and logos (science and reason) possible. To this end, as Bottici argues, myth provides a “grounding” for the conditions of our existence (Bottici, 2007, p. 123).

Given Blumenberg’s difficulty in pegging down a definition for significance, I turn to his explanation of how myth works in providing “pregnancy” to an indifferent reality. In Work on Myth (1979/1985), he outlines an admittedly incomprehensive list of the general means by which significance is created by myth. For example, he notes that if myths have closed-circle patterns or reciprocity between resistances, someone may experience in the myth a sense of heightened existence (p. 70). Here Blumenberg provides numerous examples, including the narrative of Odysseus, to reveal how myth, by using these particular narrative formulations, infuses symbolic significance to our world:

The reason why Odysseus is a figure of mythical quality is not only his return to his native place is a movement of the restoration of meaning, presented according to the pattern of the closing of a circle, which guarantees the tenor of the world and of life as order against the semblance of accident and arbitrariness. He is so also because he accomplishes his homecoming against the most incredible resistances... The mythical
figure imprints on the imagination something that, as an omnipresent elementary fact of the life-world, becomes accessible to conceptual formation only at a late stage: the enhancement of the value of the goal of an action by a mere increasing in the difficulty of carrying it out. (Blumenberg, 1979/1985, p. 75–76)

Thus, myth provides significance for humans insofar as it provides a collective means by which humans infuse the world with subjective meaning and importance; in doing so, it can both increase our symbolic involvement in the “pregnant” world and decrease the power of the world’s indifference to us. In doing so, mythic significance provides congruence between humanity and our environment; by removing the contingency and indifference inherent in reality, myth allows us, ultimately, to create a sense of familiarity in the world (1979/1985, p. 113).

Lastly, Blumenberg also provides further clarity on the idea of significance by explaining its relationship to the concept of “value.” In particular, he (1979/1985) argues that “value is a specific form of significance” (p. 76). He (1979/1985) argues that while both concepts capture the subjective element of our involvement in the world, value “tends toward the objectification of this comparison and thus the possibility of exchange” (p. 76). Of course, implicit in this description is how certain forms of significance cannot simply be objectified and so easily compared. One might say that we can value a certain object the same as another thing; and thus, subsequently, exchange those two items that we are subjectively involved with. This sense of value differs for Blumenberg from the significance that we gain in the world by reading the myth, for example, of Sisyphus. Specifically, this myth teaches through the protagonist the futility of “the importance of not being occupied and possessed by reality only, the importance of being occupied and possessed by a moderate realism” (p. 76). In the latter case,
myth allows us to provide significance to the world, but in a way that cannot be objectified, measured, or exchanged.

One clear concern that emerges from Blumenberg’s view of mythical significance is the radical subjectivity that seems to be implicit in his analysis. If myth is understood as narrative that creates significance, are we left with a mythical world of pure subjectivity; a world in which Nietzschean perspectivism reigns supreme? While I address this concern specifically in discussing the relationship between myth and critical pedagogy, philosopher Philip Rose (2007), in his work “Philosophy, Myth and the ‘Significance’ of Speculative Thought,” argues that Blumenberg’s view is more nuanced and complex than at first glance. In a key passage in Work on Myth, Blumenberg (1979/1985) argues that mythical significance and its subjectivity/objectivity can best be understood in context of aesthetic judgment:

The limiting case of significance—or already a case of going beyond the limit is the good old ‘‘judgment of taste,’’—which combines the pure subjectivity of its origin with the exclusion of dispute that accompanies the claim to objectivity that is made and is never fulfilled. A person who finds a work of art beautiful will expect everyone else to share this judgment, even though he can know, and does know, that the fulfilment of this expectation will only be a contingent event. This sort of objectivity is an expression of subjective conclusiveness, that is, of the unsurpassibility of aesthetic determinations. (pp. 67–68)

From this quote, Rose (2007) argues that Blumenberg’s view is that myth, like aesthetic judgment, functions both subjectively and objectively. Specifically, drawing on Kant, Rose (2007) argues that aesthetic judgment should be understood both as a contingent, subjective experience for an individual and as an objective
universal demand that others judge the object in the same vein (p. 638). As such, these judgments invoke “what Kant calls a sensus communis, a universally shared subjective form or “common sense” that awakens one to what feels like an a priori affinity with both the universal community of human being and with nature as a whole” (Rose, 2007, p. 689). Here, Rose draws points of similarity between Kant’s view of aesthetic judgment and Blumenberg’s theory of myth; myth, by uniting our subjective and objective experience of the world via significance, strives to create a sense of harmony in our experience of the world. Thus, Rose (2007) argues that mythos “allows us to trust the effectiveness of our finite actions within an otherwise indefinite world by making us feel as if our capacities are pre-adapted to the general order of being as such (as a kind of pre-established harmony), a sense of fit that is analogous to the feeling of sensus communis outlined by Kant (p. 689).

2.6 Blumenberg and Work on Myth

Keeping the aforementioned sense of objectivity in mind, it is important to understand myths as collective acts rather than as narrative artefacts produced by the individual. For Blumenberg, myths are particular types of narratives that communities create and recreate, fight for and fight against. Specifically, he argues that myths should be understood as an important part of any collective group’s “institutions” (Blumenberg, 1966/1983, pp. 163-164; Wallace, 1985, p. xxvii). By “institution,” he denotes social and cultural norms that are both inherited and worked on in particular communities (Blumenberg, 1966/1983, pp. 163). As such, myths are necessarily part of the spatial and temporal landscape of a community; they, in turn, must be understood as part of our collective struggle to orient ourselves in the world through the (re)production of narrative significance. Consequently, an individual’s reception of a myth must be understood in the
context of participating in a collective act that is essential to maintain the effect and importance of a narrative within a given community. When a myth is no longer part of the institutional landscape of a community, and thus it no longer provides a narrative significance to a group, then it necessarily ceases to be a myth within that particular culture or community. Moreover, myths, as a part of a community`s institutions, necessarily have a history and thus are contextually embedded within various cultures.

Another important element in the Blumenbergian conception of myth is his view that we constantly “work on myth” within our particular communities. Whereas the “work of myth” denotes the functional role of myth in human history, “work on myth” denotes the particularistic nature of myth and how particular narratives become contextualized within communities (Bottici & Challand, 2006, pp. 318). More specifically, Blumenberg argues that one of the consequences of the moving from “mythos to logos” is that philosophers, such as Cassirer, failed to understand how myth spatially and temporally manifests itself within our culture. He argues that myth should not be understood as a single narrative that is temporally permanent and immutable. He (1979/1985) argues that myth has the characteristic of not only being a narrative with a high degree of constancy of its narrative core but also has an important capacity for marginal variation and “these two characteristics make myths transmissible by tradition: their constancy produces the attraction of recognizing them in artistic and ritual representation as well [as their recital], and their variability produces attraction of trying out new and personal means of presenting them” (p. 34). Blumenberg thus argues that myth should be understood as a narrative work in process; a process in which the basic narrative core of any myth is constantly reproduced and received based on the particular circumstances of a community.
The myth of Sisyphus provides an excellent example of Blumenberg’s particularist conception of myth. Although the myth originates in Ancient Greece, the myth has been “worked on” by various communities and authors to reproduce the myth based on the particular needs of a community. For example, in Lucretius there is an interpretation of the myth as the empty pursuit of politics (de May, 2009, p. 79; Lucretius, 2003 version, p. 100). In contrast, Albert Camus’ (1942/2000) modern work on the myth provides a radical modern reinterpretation based on the existential angst faced when one is confronted by the absurd. With Camus, the myth of Sisyphus reveals the inherent absurdity and meaninglessness of modern life, and he opens the possibility of embracing happiness amid this absurd struggle. As such, Sisyphus’ struggle is understood as modern humanity’s struggle with the apparent purposelessness of existence; his narrative becomes a particularized mythic narrative that opens the possibility of a renewed sense of significance in a post-WW II world devoid of God.

For Blumenberg, the Greek’s reception of the myth of Sisyphus, although significant in its own right, should not be confused with the modern work on such a myth provided by Camus. While both share the basic narrative core, Camus’ work on myth provides “significance” to the specific needs of the modern society. As such, while we can identify basic narrative cores of myths, we ultimately fail to understand the particularist nature of myths if we abstract them spatially and temporally from their particular communities. Hence, Camus’ work on the myth of Sisyphus particularizes the narrative, which provides significance to a specific community at a specific time. Therefore, while his interpretation of the myth shares the narrative core of its historical counterparts, it must be understood as a
unique mode of orientation that met and arguably meets the need for a sense of significance of Western communities.\(^5\)

One implication for philosophers of myth, if we accept Blumenberg’s particularism, is that one must be wary of assuming that we can simply interpret the meaning and significance of myth across vast spatial and temporal divides; what may appear to be a historical articulation of myth may, in fact, be more “work on myth.” To use Freud as an example once again, it is clear that while his insights into the Oedipus myth radically reworked the narrative in a way that revolutionized its effect in the twentieth century, it does not follow that this narrative significance is the same in kind as the one produced in Ancient Greece (Blumenberg, 1979/1985). In other words, while the narrative core of the Oedipus myth remains constant over the course of the last centuries, Freud’s work on myth particularizes

\(^5\) As I take it, Blumenberg’s particularist conception of myth provides important insight into the confusion and difficulty in providing any reified analyses. As philosophers comb the depths of myth and mythology, one is initially overwhelmed by the sheer scope of what is denoted “myth” from the stories of ancient Greeks, to Nietzsche, to Freud, and to Marx, etc. Trying to denote “x” as the universal conception of myth becomes a philosophical process of counting angels in a doorway. If we take Blumenberg seriously, part of the difficulty is the vast amount of “work” done on myth over the course of human history and how this work changes the very nature of a myth while maintaining its narrative core. More precisely, as Blumenberg points out, while we can come to understand the basic narrative core of a myth, such as the narrative of Prometheus, it is worked on through thousands of years by various cultures and authors, philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists who fundamentally and irrevocably change its significance within a particular community. In this sense, Ancient Greece’s Prometheus is, on the one hand, fundamentally similar to Freud’s, as they share the same narrative; concurrently, they are also unique on the particular level given the differences in time and location by which the myth is worked on.
its effects and the type of force at the turn of the twentieth century (Blumenberg, 1979/1985, p. 95). Consequently, one of the key errors of Freudian mythology, or any structuralist account of myth, is to assume that psychologists, philosophers, or anthropologists can abstract and universalize the narrative significance of any myth; in doing so, they inadvertently fail to recognize their own “work on myth.”

Furthermore, Blumenberg’s particularist conception of myth can be further understood in contrast to the abstract, dogmatic mode of thought. Specifically, he argues that a dogmatic mode of thought, to which he credits Plato as the Western founder, posits the view that certain abstract truths are valid in universal space and time. In this sense, dogma is a belief in truths that are singular, universal, and immutable. For example, for Platonists, the understanding of the forms cannot be varied based on interpretation or contrast; the very nature of the Platonic forms makes them impervious to any desired variation. Similarly, Blumenberg also points to Orthodox Christianity as a religion that attempts to demythologize the world. He argues that, although there are certainly various interpretations of the Bible, the ultimate goal of all Orthodox theological work is to find the singular and immutable Truth revealed by God. Thus, unlike myth, Orthodox Christian theology’s ultimate aim is to end the particularist variation of Christian narrative by creating an abstract system of Christian dogma (Blumenberg, 1979/1985, pp. 220–221). Blumenberg (1979/1985) argues that myth, in contrast, “by its nature is not capable of an abstract system of dogma that would leave local and temporal peculiarities behind it...it is orientated specifically toward these” (p. 97). Moreover, it is both myth’s narrative form and particularist nature that uniquely distinguishes it from traditional theory and reason and, consequently, sets up a unique relationship between the two symbolic forms of orientation.

It is important to note that Blumenberg’s particularist account of myth does not negate the possibility or the importance of a philosophic account of myth. On
the contrary, a substantial part of *Work on Myth* (1979/1985) is the philosophical analyses and tracking of the work done by various authors and communities on various traditional literary myths. What it does mean, however, as we philosophically and theoretically work on myth, is that philosophers should not posit a condition of universality when analyzing them. Furthermore, in articulating myths we should also understand that the philosophical expropriation of myth inevitably comes with a loss. In particular, any theoretical analysis removes myth from the particular space and times that it occupies within our community. Consequently, any analysis, including Blumenberg’s, is valuable but necessarily incomplete. This point will be particularly important when I interpret modern political myths in our current education system in subsequent chapters; the particularization of myth within communities, as well as the subjective nature of this work on myth and its reception among these communities, inevitably puts interpretative limits on the depth of analyses that philosophy is able to provide.

2.7 Blumenberg and the Reception of Myth

Before turning to resituating Blumenberg’s theory of myth within the contemporary debate between the relationship between *mythos* and *logos*, it is important to outline an intentional point of emphasis he places on the analyses of myth. In his work “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric”, Blumenberg (1996) remarks that in modern culture the analysis of rhetoric, of which he considers a myth a specific type, places too much emphasis on solely the production of myth. For whatever reason, whether it be the radical shift in seeing humans as the subjects of history and/or the rise of powerful institutional forces, he argues that contemporary cultural theorists generally focus on who produces myth, and how myth is produced and distributed through various channels. While Blumenberg does not deny the importance of this facet of mythical analysis, he is quick to point out that what is often overlooked in this
analysis is the reception of myth. Specifically, he (1979/1985, 1996) suggests that the questions on how myths are accepted, worked on, embraced, rejected, abandoned, and replaced are just as important as those surrounding their production.

This particular emphasis by Blumenberg is clearly important if we take seriously his view that communities work on myth. More to the point, myths are not a narrative that can be simply applied to a population, as Plato assumes is possible with reference to his “Noble Lie” (Plato, 1974, 414e–415c). For instance, if the Canadian government were to try to produce and disseminate Plato’s myth in its traditional form, such that we should conceive our stratification in society as the result of being born from gradations of metals in the earth, the acceptance and reception of this myth would inevitably be limited in both scope and influence. Given the social and cultural norms of Canada, such a myth would inevitably fail to be received in a way that would provide narrative significance to our community. This, of course, does not preclude other myths serving to legitimize social stratification in our society, as I will discuss later. Rather, as I take it, what Blumenberg’s theory means is that the production and reception of myths are so intimately connected that any account of myth is drastically inadequate in understanding the full force of myth by focusing solely on the former.

2.8 Blumenberg, Myth, and the Contemporary Age

Given Blumenberg’s general conception of myth, let me now turn my analysis to his view of the relationship between mythos and logos and its subsequent effect on the manifestation of myth in contemporary culture. As noted in the opening of this chapter, Blumenberg’s functional account of myth and reason reveals their common element of fulfilling our need for orientation amidst an indifferent world. Unsurprisingly, he argues that the Enlightenment should not be interpreted as a movement from mythos to logos; as I have already noted his
theory implies that *mythos* at its very conception was a crucial piece of *logos* that provided us with essential breathing space from the absolutism of reality. More than this, however, Blumenberg argues that, while the Enlightenment radically changed the relationship between myth and reason, this epochal movement was more complex than the Enlightenment philosophers first had hoped.

In his work *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966/1983), Blumenberg argues that the Enlightenment offered a radically new means of orientating ourselves in the world. Specifically, he argues that central to the Enlightened movement is the collective addressing of the problem of contingency in the existence of the world. Rooting the tension of contingency to the Gnostic dualism of the Middle Ages, he argues that Enlightenment philosophers such as Bacon and Descartes offered a new possibility. The Christian tradition framed the problem of contingency in the power and will of God, and the solution to the problem in the fulfilling of God’s covenant for the sake of transcendent certainty. In contrast, the Enlightenment offered an alternative; through the intentional self-assertion of humans in the world, we could collectively set out through scientific experimentation and reason to construct a world that offered security and self-realization through human ingenuity. As such, while philosophers such as Descartes did not deny the existence of God, their theories intimately linked modern intentional action, modern scientific method, and the material world in such a way that the transcendental world became incidental to both human progress and our understanding of the world.

More than this, the Enlightenment also reconceptualized *logos* by offering a new account of progress. Blumenberg argues that modern progress is exemplified in Descartes. By progress, Blumenberg (1966/1983) does not mean the traditional conception of a linear and indefinite movement towards a particular goal, but rather the idea of setting up a form of life where we collectively allow a state of
provisional uncertainty while we search for and finally discover knowledge. For Descartes, disciplined human reason and scientific experimentation offered the possibility that “post-mythical” communities could exist in a state of epistemological flux insofar as our faith in human ingenuity via logos inevitably led to a truth. Interestingly, as Blumenberg points out, progress as a form of life for Descartes extended not only to scientific matters such as physics but to ethics as well (Blumenberg, 1996, pp. 434–444). Given the Enlightenment’s conception of progress, one can interpret Kantian ethics’ ultimate aim to be closing the provisional nature of ethics by providing both a universalist account of how one should act morally as well as an account for what moral matters lay beyond the purview of the human intellect. More than this, however, the Enlightenment philosophers went further; the scientific method could ultimately replace myth in its entirety. Here, Descartes’ radical skepticism aims not only to sweep away all myth but also to advocate its total replacement through rational and scientific progress.

From the outset, it is important to reiterate that Blumenberg is not arguing that science and reason are simply another narrative or unique type of myth. As pointed out earlier, he notes that they should be understood as a unique mode of symbolic orientation. Moreover, he is adamant to point out that science and reason and the corresponding philosophy during the Enlightenment radically changed the nature of our orientation in the world and that has made them an irremovable part of contemporary life. Blumenberg (1966/1983) reflects that “we cannot live without science. But that is largely an effect produced by science. It has made itself indispensable” (p. 231). According to Blumenberg, then, the problem with science and reason’s relationship with myth is not a matter of its teleology or its revolutionary effect in creating modern culture but rather that the former set out on the impossible task of replacing the latter. More specifically, Descartes and the
Enlightenment philosophers failed to see that with a radical attempt to destroy myth there came an accompanying cost:

> Myth had hardly defined the philosopher’s object, but it defined the standard of achievements that he could not fall short of. Whether he had loved or despised myth, he had been set up by it because [philosophers] had been satisfied by it...Theory sees in myth an ensemble of answers to questions, such as it itself wants to be. That forces it, while rejecting the answers, to acknowledge the questions. (1979/1985, p. 27)

In essence, Blumenberg radically reconstructs the effects of the Enlightenment on myth. Far from the Enlightenment simply replacing the mythical world that preceded it, he argues that enlightened culture’s self-assertion, while reoccupying the institutional position of its predecessors, concurrently inherited the task of answering all the questions that myth had answered before it. More to the point, the implicit promise embedded at the very core of the Enlightenment program is the underlying expectation that it can and will provide legitimate epistemological knowledge to the essential questions that we need to orient ourselves in the world.

Given this aforementioned context between *mythos* and modern *logos*, Blumenberg argues that our culture neglects the relevance of the former. In his work “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric” (1996) he argues that, although science and reason have certainly became an irremovable part of our institutional structure, it is clear that *logos* has ultimately failed, both in adequately providing complete congruence as a symbolic mode of orientation and in adequately providing a method or procedure that provides definitive answers for the question it had inherited from its previous epoch. To reiterate, Blumenberg is not claiming that science and reason failed to
provide some definitive answers nor a very powerful and compelling mode of orientation. Rather, he is claiming that the Enlightenment’s reoccupation of myth with science and reason demanded more from logos; it demanded that we could provide definitive scientific and rational knowledge to all aspects of human existence. Moreover, the Enlightened tradition also set out the ultimate goal of acting as an autonomous agent under the guidance of these definitive answers in every aspect of our being: from our scientific experimentation with the material world, to the organization of our political world, to ethical decision.

Ultimately, for Blumenberg, reason and science’s inability to provide definitive truths amidst our provisional state of progress provides an epistemological gap in our attempts to orient ourselves and act amidst this world. He (1996) argues that it is precisely because of this gap that rhetoric, of which myth is understood as a part of its conceptual family, can continue to flourish within contemporary culture. He asserts that amidst this provisional state of progress humans are inevitably compelled to act in various situations from political to ethical events. In these vast and varying situations, both science and reason, unable to provide definitive truths through their institutions, must give way to rhetoric in general and myth specifically (Blumenberg, 1996, pp. 434–435). Hence, he (1996) argues that “rhetoric creates institutions where evident truths are lacking” and thus “lacking definitive evidence and being compelled to act are the prerequisites of the rhetorical situation” (p. 435). In other words, he argues that despite modern humanity’s vast growth, we are no further along in having a definitive set of answers to ensure that we act as truly autonomous individuals. Hence, Blumenberg (1996) argues that we must be “conscious of both being compelled to act and the lack of norms of a finite situation” (p. 437). Thus, as Blumenberg rightly points out, the impossibility of acting in accordance to the
definitive answers provided by logos does not negate our need to act in and with the world.

Here, Blumenberg provides an intriguing account of why the belief that we have progressed from “mythos to logos” is fatally flawed. As noted, human existence within this infinitely complex, contingent, and confounding world makes acting solely under the direction of rational and scientific norms and customs within our culture impossible. And here we find myth’s important role in modern society; namely, as a narrative means to provide norms, customs, and beliefs that allow us to act even without definitive truths. In other words, we need myth to provide narrative institutions in order to act in a world without certainty and to create significance that grounds human actions. Thus, myth’s continued existence should not be attributed to unshakeable irrational feelings that humans cling to. Rather it should be understood as an essential method of understanding the world in order to act in it.

Central to understanding myth’s resiliency in the “the age of logos” is what Blumenberg calls the axiom of the principle of insufficient reason. The principle of insufficient reason is the inversion of Leibniz’s optimistic view that “he could assign a sufficient reason even for the fact that anything can exist at all” (Blumenberg, 1996, p. 446). In contrast, Blumenberg’s (1996) principle of insufficient reason holds that “in the realm of reasoning and practical activities in life (praxis), it can be more rational to accept something on insufficient grounds than to insist on a procedure modeled on that of science and it is more rational to do this than to disguise decisions that have already been made in arguments that are scientific in form” (p. 448). In the principle of insufficient reason, Blumenberg goes beyond asserting that myth and rhetoric are simply a necessary part of our modern intellectual landscape. Myth is not just an ugly necessity in our society,
but rather is an essential means by which we provide a logical foundation to human praxis.

While I will articulate further the importance of this principle into the nature of political myths, the most obvious example that elucidates the intuitive nature of this principle is in ethics. Suppose one is faced with a tough moral decision, such as whether to lie to someone for one’s own benefit. Faced with a tough moral decision one might assume appealing to philosophy and reason might clarify one’s ultimate decision and subsequent act. However, such an appeal would lead an individual only into a complex matrix of meta-ethical and normative positions that inevitably lead to contradictory positions, from deontology, utilitarianism, to natural law theory, to name a few. Faced with such a moral decision, from the Blumenbergian perspective one may argue that to believe in a myth or narrative that grounds our moral behaviour, such as the Christian narrative of love one’s neighbour, may be a more rational or, at least, reasonable basis for ethical praxis than strict philosophical reasoning.

It is important to note that in defending the principle of insufficient reason, Blumenberg is not arguing that we should ignore reason. On the contrary, he (1996) asserts that the “principle of insufficient reason is not to be confused with a demand that we forgo reasons” but rather “one for which the reasons are diffuse and not to be regulated by method” (p. 448). This is an important distinction for Blumenberg insofar as he is clearly arguing for a more practical sense of intelligence in the same vein as what Aristotle defends in his view of practical reasoning (Monod, 2011, p. 4). For Blumenberg, reason cannot and should not be narrowly defined by scientific or technocratic methodology. Rather, practical intelligence must take into account the contingency and uncertainty of the world and our need to reflect and act in it. In doing so, practical intelligence does not wallow in a sense of rational indeterminacy nor does it manufacture scientific and
rational truths for its own sake; it is open to the possibility of acting without such constraints. Blumenberg’s commitment to balancing reason and rhetoric is a key element that sets him apart from irrationalist perspectives such as those advocated by Nietzsche (1872/1999) or, as we will see later, in political writings of George Sorel (1908/2004). Reason and science in his model should not be so easily dismissed as another form of narrative fiction. Not only do I agree with Blumenberg that the elimination of science and reason is, at this time, a cultural impossibility, but it also may not even be desirable. Rather, like Blumenberg, what we have to be cognizant of is science and reason’s limits and weaknesses and, in turn, the limits and strengths of rhetoric such as myth in contributing to human progress.6

2.9 Blumenberg and Political Myth

At this point, I would like to turn to one final and important point of contention with Blumenberg’s philosophy of myth. In particular, in Work on Myth

6 One interesting criticism directed not only at Blumenberg but at all modern philosophers working on myth is revealed in the work The Absence of Myth (2006) by mythology scholar Sophia Heller. In the work, Heller argues that the fundamental error in modern approaches to myth is that they invariably fail to understand that myth’s power and authority is necessarily connected to its prereflective reception within premodern societies. She argues that myth survived and flourished in premodern societies insofar as the narratives were untarnished by the individual and collective consciousness. However, she argues that as modern culture emerged, consciousness negated myth.

I think, however intuitive it is, that Heller’s argument rests on the fallacious distinction between “mythic consciousness” and “modern consciousness.” I would also suggest, along with Blumenberg, that Heller’s view that our modern mode of consciousness can eliminate all forms of myth is mistaken. In fact, evolutionary biologist David Merlin (2001) points out in his work on the evolution of human consciousness that while the collective embrace of science and reason, combined with mass literacy, revolutionized human consciousness, it does not follow that we displaced myth even in contemporary societies.
Blumenberg addresses the idea of Cassirer’s concern for the powerful nature of modern political myths. In doing so, he claims that there is an important difference between traditional myths and more modern myths, which he calls “pseudo myths.” He argues that what distinguishes traditional myths from their modern counterparts, such as the myth of the Aryan race, is that the ancient narratives, such as those in Greek culture, have survived through millennia. More specifically, he argues that traditional myths have survived a long process of “Darwinism of words” in which the narratives developed optimal significance (Blumenberg, 1979/1985, pp. 149–174; Wallace, 1985, pp. xxi–xxii). More specifically, he argues traditional myths were criticized and worked on in a way that secured their role in contributing to the cultural and political norms of Western culture. As a result, Blumenberg argues that, through this long process, traditional myths have been created and worked on in such a way that they effectively produce significance to their audiences. In contrast, modern myths, such as the Aryan race myth that Cassirer looks at when discussing the rise of Nazism, have not gone through the same historical process. As such, he argues that these modern myths fail to be historically optimized as part of our cultural institutions because of the limited time these types of narratives have circulated within modern cultures (Blumenberg, 1966/1983, pp. 164–167).

Quite frankly, I find Blumenberg’s distinction between traditional and modern myths to be philosophically weak. First, one significant conceptual danger that he introduces in this distinction is the idea that, in some way, mythical discourse is necessarily optimized throughout the ages. Specifically, given his own account of the particularist nature of myth, it follows that while the narrative core of myth, such as the story of Prometheus, may survive millennia, it does not follow that the process of working on the narrative optimized it in any way. In fact, the survival of Greek myths may be just as easily attributed to the plasticity of these
narratives to be worked on by many unique perspectives or simply the West’s historical ties to Greek culture.  

Finally, even if one were to assume that the historical process of myths being optimized, through a historical process of editing and working on a myth, is accurate, it does not follow that the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate myths is sound. More precisely, one may hold Blumenberg’s premises to be true and conclude that while traditional myths are optimized in a certain way, modern myths remain legitimate forms of myth insofar as they are narratives with constant cores and provide significance for those communities that receive and work on the myth. In the case of modern myths, they simply need more time to be optimized to the point of traditional Greek myths. In other words, by Blumenberg’s own account of myth, temporal survival cannot determine if a narrative is a myth in and of itself; it only can determine its cultural impact.

In addition, it is not entirely clear that traditional myths still hold the institutional role that Blumenberg implicitly suggests. Although Greek myths play a substantial role in Western literature and philosophy, which Blumenberg’s work itself draws on, I question both their scope and power in and among much of North America’s general population. Outside of the ivory towers and literary circles of Western cultures Greek mythology is not being constantly worked on and received. Simply put, while Greek myths may, to a certain extent, serve as effective fodder for Hollywood’s action entertainment industry, I suspect that much of our population does not embrace the story of Odysseus as a means of providing narrative significance to our lives. This, of course, is not to say that Western culture has not inherited and continued to embrace many values, concepts, and ideas from these myths. Rather, it is to say that Greek myths themselves, with their constant narrative core, are not prominently being received and worked on by large segments of our community as an important mode of symbolic orientation. Thus, while elements of these myths may persist in various parts of culture, it does not follow that this tradition has as great an influence on our cultural institutions as Blumenberg suggests.
In fact, I would go as far as to say that Blumenberg’s critique of modern myth is inconsistent with both his analysis and discussion of myth in *Work on Myth* (1979/1985) as well as in his later work “An Anthropological Approach to the Contemporary Significance of Rhetoric” (1996). As noted, while the vast majority of Blumenberg’s analysis and discussion of myth in *Work on Myth* focuses on Greek myth, he interprets the philosophical movement of German Idealism as a form of myth insofar as Hegel and Kant, among others, tried to provide original narratives that resituated the individual subject in the world. In the same work, he provides an in-depth analysis of Nietzsche’s myth of eternal recurrence (Blumenberg, 1979/1985, pp. 243–245). And while Nietzsche’s myth of eternal recurrence certainly has traditional roots, it is clear that his work on the myth lacks the cultural optimization that Blumenberg suggests is at the core of traditional myths.

Further, I would suggest that in his more recent work, he all but abandons the idea that myth needs to be historically optimized. Specifically, if we take his account of how rhetoric, including myth, fills the epistemological gap left by science and reason, it is evident that we cannot conceptually ignore the role of modern myths. It is for this reason that Blumenberg himself discusses the role of rhetoric in the context of contemporary ethics, politics, and social institutions. Thus, while tracking the work on the Prometheus myth may be important, so too is how modern myths fulfill today’s institutional needs. To this end, I will extend Blumenberg’s insights into myth to a discussion of modern political myths.

As I defended throughout this chapter, Blumenberg’s philosophy of myth provides important insight into not only how myth has been historically overlooked as an important mode of orientation but also how it remains an essential mode of symbolic orientation in our modern order. This being noted, as I have also argued, one area where Blumenberg’s philosophy is limited is examining how modern
myths are an essential part of our modern socio-political order. The subsequent chapter will extend Blumenberg’s analysis of myth into a discussion of modern political myths. In the next chapter, I will argue that Blumenberg’s philosophy of myth provides equally important insights into how political myths serve as an essential mode of symbolic orientation in highly indeterminate socio-political order. Far from being irrelevant and outdated stories, political myths provide a sense of unity and narrative significance to individuals and communities.
Chapter 3
Socio-Political Myths

3.1 Introduction

In extending Blumenberg’s philosophy of myth to include political myth there are several key conceptual issues and questions that inevitably emerge. First, how and what makes a myth a political myth? Specifically, how should we understand political myths in the context of a discussion of traditional myths and the concept of ideology? As I will argue throughout the next chapter, political myth, while certainly conceptually related to traditional myths and ideology, should be understood as a conceptually unique form of symbolic orientation (Bottici, 2007). Of particular note, drawing on theorist Christopher Flood’s work *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction* (1996), I will qualify his view and argue that political myths, although related to “sacred” myths, are unique insofar as they are not necessarily grounded in a timeless metaphysical realm but rather embedded in the material world. This is an important point insofar as if political myths interact with the material world, then they also intertwine and interact with rational and scientific accounts of said world as well.

Further, Flood also makes an essential conceptual distinction between ideology and political myth. Defending Flood’s (1996) insightful conceptual mapping of myth and ideology, I argue in this chapter that political myth should be understood as “marked” by ideology, but it cannot be collapsed into the latter notion without conceptual and philosophical loss (Bottici, 2007). Further, I will argue that the relationship between political myth and ideology effectively captures both Blumenberg’s particularist conception of myth.
Once again drawing on Blumenberg, an important issue that I address in this chapter is the relationship between political myth and political theory and reason. If Blumenberg is correct in his view that the mythos/logos antinomy has burrowed its way into our philosophical view, then, invariably, political theorists have overlooked the significance of the work of myth and the work on myth within our socio-political order. This conceptual gap being noted, I suggest that myth can be understood as part of Charles Taylor’s (2007) conception of the social imaginary. Taylor’s insight into the social imaginary provides several interesting insights into how political myths are conceptually unique from reason and theory as well as how they interact with one another in our modern socio-political order.

The final conceptual clarification in this chapter is in discussing the relationship between political myth and utopias. Building on the aforementioned view that political myth is an essential part of our social imaginary, I will contend that political myth must be understood as necessarily distinct from utopias (Blumenberg, 1979/1985; Bottici, 2007). This distinction is essential insofar as I argue that political myths, unlike utopias, can function to mobilize praxis towards defending the status quo or towards democratic transformation.

Finally, I will argue that in embracing political myth as a substantive mode of orientation and being, there are two interrelated philosophic considerations that must be addressed by critical democratic educators: first, understanding how the unique features of political myths create unforeseen difficulties in challenging the status quo, as many myths perpetuate injustice; and secondly, understanding how political myths can support the nurturing of a just social order. I conclude this chapter, then, by briefly addressing the former consideration by examining the difficulties that philosophers have in addressing political matters because of their failure to understand the political significance of myth in our current social order. This examination will serve as precursor to my discussion of political myth and
critical pedagogy in the subsequent chapter as I argue that critical pedagogues must reconsider how they critically engage undemocratic myths as well as how they should embrace those democratic in nature in order to reoccupy the former.

3.2 Politics, Myth and Reason

The precarious nature of the relationship between mythos and logos within contemporary culture unsurprisingly has bled into the theoretical study of political myths. As political theorist Christopher Flood (1996) notes, the mythos/logos antinomy has inevitably influenced much of academia’s study of myth. On the one hand, many theorists of myth have little interest in bridging the divide between ancient and modern myths in the field of politics while political theorists have shown little interest in locating their work in any significant way in relation to ancient myth, and, subsequently, bridging the gap in a meaningful way to a discussion of politics or ideology (Flood, 1996, p. 4). This gap being noted, there has been a renewed theoretical and philosophical interest in examining the role of myth in our political landscape by philosophers and political theorists alike (Bottici, 2007; Wingo, 2003).

Within this academic context, it is evident that those political philosophers and theorists that have ventured into discussion of political myths have generally accepted that political myths are to be understood as irrational stories that negatively impede rational political progress. Recall that Cassirer was one of the earliest modern philosophers both to take political myth seriously and to denounce it as an irrational force.

Another significant twentieth-century figure in the analysis of the irrationality of myth is anarcho-syndicalist George Sorel. In fact, Sorel’s work Reflection on Violence (1908/2004) predates Cassirer’s work and attempts to defend the political importance of myth as an irrational cultural force. In contrast to Cassirer, Sorel (1908/2004) argues that political myths are not produced by
states and political groups, but are rather created through the populations embracing, through feeling, sentiment, and intuition, unifying images (p. 118). For Sorel, the most important of these political myths is the myth of the general strike. He argues that the myth of the general strike collectively unifies the proletariat in intuition and sentiment in a way that makes revolutionary action both possible and necessary. In this sense, he (1908/2004) argues that myths are to be judged based on their socio-political effect: “Myths must be judged as a means of acting in the present” (p. 118). Hence, the proletariat, by being able to represent their actions within a set of socialist ideas and images, become united in not only revolutionary thought and revolutionary feelings but, more importantly, in action. Moreover, he argues that myths are irrefutable because they serve as a collective affront to modern society through revolution; as such, the myth is not a matter of critical discussion but an emotional and imagined call to action that is indifferent to critique. Interestingly, for Sorel, political myth is a necessary part of political revolutions insofar as its images unite people in a collective will to action. Thus, unlike Cassirer, he argues that political myths are a necessary part of political progress.

While I will discuss other philosophers of political myth further, I think Cassirer and Sorel provide an interesting starting point in understanding Blumenberg’s possible contribution to the study of political myth. On the one hand, we have Cassirer, whom Blumenberg ultimately rejects on the basis of the belief that we progress from “mythos to logos.” On the other hand, we have Sorel, who clearly inverts this traditional paradigm and argues that the only way we can have political progress is to embrace the irrational force of myth. I would argue that Blumenberg would be equally concerned with this perspective. At the most basic level, Sorel’s philosophy of myth falls in the same trap as Romantic philosophers of myth; it unjustifiably glorifies myth as an irrational force. More
specifically, in Sorel, we find an exuberant rejection of our capacity to reason and a radical embrace of myth as a completely irrational and emotive force that drives the political masses to action. As argued earlier, Blumenberg defends a position of understanding and adequately balancing the role of reason and myth within modern culture. As such, at the most fundamental level, Sorel’s view is equivalent to “forgoing” all forms of reason for the sake of revolutionary action. In doing so, Sorel’s conception of myth, actually echoing Cassirer’s concerns, purposefully sweeps away the institutional norms and customs that reason and science have long contributed to. To this end, Sorel’s conception of political myth, for all its revolutionary insight, potentially undermines any meaningful conception of practical reason that Blumenberg defends.

Recall that in the Blumenbergian sense, myths are understood as narratives with a constant core that provide significance to communities. At their most fundamental level, then, political myths should be understood as political narratives that provide socio-political significance within a community’s social order (Bottici & Challand, 2006, p. 320). As Chiara Bottici and Benoît Challand (2006) point out, one essential aspect of this conception of political myths that makes myth different from other political narratives, such as various historical accounts of political events, is not its content or its claim to truth, but rather that it creates significance for a group within a political order (p. 320). Moreover, as Bottici (2007) adds, political myths can address the specific political conditions and needs of groups by providing narrative unity and significance to their lives.

3.3 Political Myths and Sacredness

Now, one rather obvious question that emerges when discussing myth and politics is how to determine if a myth is political or apolitical. One helpful insight is provided by political theorist Christopher Flood in his work *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction* (1996). In this work, Flood argues for a distinction
between sacred myth and political myth. Flood (1996), like Blumenberg, believes that all myths are understood as stories with a constant narrative core of “the past, present or predicted political events” (p. 41). Hence, included in this category of political myths are myths of traditional societies such as “stories of origins and foundings, stories of exploits of cultural heroes, stories of rebirth or renewal, and eschatological stories” (p. 41). One fundamental difference, he (1996) argues, is that modern political myths do not have “sacred status” in secular societies (pp. 27–41). Specifically, he argues that traditional myths, such as the Inca myth of the origins of the universe, carry with it a sense of metaphysical “sacredness” that is absent in modern political myths. He argues that while modern political myths must be considered true by a community they are not epistemologically grounded in any idea of sacred.

As interesting as this distinct quality of sacredness is to a discussion of political myth, I hesitate to accept it as a distinguishing characteristic. First, implicit in the idea of “sacred myths” and modern political ones is the idea that the secular Western world has swept away the metaphysical underpinnings of myth in contemporary political culture. As we have seen, most recently in the United States in George W. Bush’s administration, the lines between the sacred and the secular in relation to modern political narratives continue to be intertwined. Regardless of the Bush administration’s real intentions with regard to the war in Iraq, the narrative that American political manifest destiny was “sacred” insofar as it came from God gained important reception among much of the population. Simply put, I think that a weaker, but still important, claim should be made than the one Flood posits: what distinguishes modern political myths from the sacred is that they do not necessarily have to be “sacred.” In other words, whereas the legitimacy and reception of ancient myths was dependent on them being understood as eternal stories beyond human physical experience (Eliade, 1963),
modern myths do not need to be “sacred” in the same way. Rather, modern political myths are often received as worldly narratives embedded within the immanent world around us. Moreover, as Blumenberg notes, it is the narrative function of myth, with its ability to nurture significance in the world, that marks myths rather than their spatial/temporal correspondence to a transcendental reality.

This shift away from the sacred can, at least in part, be understood through the fundamental shift in modern society from the transcendental to the worldly through science and reason. Science and reason did not so much as completely eliminate the transcendental world but, rather, reoccupied the religious conception of the world with one that offered validity through the use of reason and science. As such, modernity offered a radically new set of institutional customs and norms that could ground myth. More precisely, modern myth, and specifically political myths, could be grounded in science and reason as well as our everyday experience in the material world. For instance, in modern political myths, we find a clamouring to ground these narratives through theory or science. The Nazis’ myth of the Aryan race serves as a perfect example of such a political myth. In this Aryan myth, there is a fusion of the Nazis’ narrative with theoretical roots, such as Nietzsche’s conception of Übermensch and Hutchinson’s Social Darwinism, among others, as well as the insidious use of the scientific method to both legitimize the narrative but carry out its end goal of Aryan domination and purity (Bottici, 2007, p. 184). In this sense, myth provided narrative significance to the Nazis’ political vision of the Reich and guided science and reason; at the same time, science and reason provided a modern, worldly means of grounding this myth. It was the unity and the reciprocity between myth and science and reason that fuelled this modern political myth’s powerful reception in the world.
3.4 Political Myths and Ideology

In addition, Flood also provides another interesting analysis of modern political myths—namely, that they are ideologically marked. By ideology, it is important to note that Flood is not using ideology in the traditional Marxist sense, of false consciousness, but rather in the more general and neutral sense, such as that Karl Manheim (1936) and Clifford Geertz (1964) defend. In this sense, ideology is understood as a set of unified beliefs, values, and customs that provide a conceptual map of our social reality that orients our thoughts and actions in the world (Bottici, 2007; Geertz, 1964; Mannheim, 1936). Flood (1996) thus argues that modern political mythical discourse “carries the imprint of the assumptions, values, and goals associated with a specific ideology of identifiable family of ideologies, and that it therefore conveys an explicit or implicit invitation to assent to a particular ideological standpoint” (p. 42). Further, he argues that the ideological marking of political myths is an objective property of the account. By being ideologically marked, modern political myths cannot be understood outside the larger context of the unified political beliefs, values, and acts that they are tied to. He notes that production and reception of myth is intimately tied to the ideology that the myth is marked by and that the community assents to. Consequently, he argues that the various facets of modern myth are tied to their relation to ideology:

The choices among possible alternatives [for myth] in the selection of information, the attribution of qualities, motives, and objectives of historical actors, inferences concerning relationships of cause and effect, use of descriptive terms or other lexical items, grammatical constructions, overall organization, location of the narrative, and any other factors are relevant insofar as they contribute to the orientation of the discourse in the direction
of one ideological current as opposed to another. Hence, the term *mythopeic* can be applied to any political narrative *to the extent that it is ideologically marked*. The term indicates that the narrative has objective characteristics which could potentially produce or reproduce characteristics. (Flood, 1996, p. 43)

Here we have a fascinating account of how political myth and ideology are intimately tied. According to Flood, the very construction of political myths and their ability to provide significance through their reception should be understood in their relation to how they are situated in relation to particular ideologies within a society. Moreover, this relation is understood by Flood as objective fact about political myths.

On a superficial level, the fact that political myths and ideology are so closely related seems obvious. However, one crucial point that Flood’s account addresses is that political myths should not simply be reduced conceptually to pure ideology. As he rightly points out, while political myths are marked by an ideological system, we should maintain a conceptual distinction insofar as all forms of ideology are not myths. More to the point, by collapsing the two concepts together, we fail to understand how myth provides a unique form of discourse that must be analyzed in its own right (Bottici, 2007).

Flood’s discussion of the relationship between ideology and myth provides interesting insight into discussion of Blumenberg’s conception of myth. One point of intersection is that we should not fail to see that the receptivity of political myths is ultimately dependent on the pre-existing modes of ideological orientation within communities. As Blumenberg (1996) asserts, the receptivity to myth depends less on facts but rather on expectations (p. 451). To this end, the minute details of a political myth are intimately tied to and rooted in the ideology of a
community and the corresponding expectations created by the political values, beliefs, and actions and needs of that particular community.

One can see this intimate connection most clearly in examples such as the political myth of the proletarian revolution. We can understand the workers’ revolution as a political myth as it is a narrative with a consistent core. It tells the story of the historical and current oppression of a particular group of people and describes social and political redemption through this group’s revolutionary overthrow of its oppressors. In other words, this myth frames the reality of a group’s oppression with a narrative of both their resistance to the harm done to them and a prophetic goal of recreating a just world through their actions. Moreover, this myth is a symbolic form of orientation that clearly provides communities, particularly proletariat themselves, with a sense of significance within their political order. Specifically, as this myth is received within communities a new sense of significance is given not only to the oppressive acts of the bourgeoisie both in the past and present but also to the resistance to such acts by the oppressed themselves. For example, through this myth, the exploitation or abuse of workers is no longer understood as an inevitable effect of industrialization but as a necessary consequence of class conflict; moreover, it is a necessary conflict that can only be overcome through the revolutionary acts of the proletariat. Further, this narrative is intimately tied to the Marxist ideology that proliferated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For Flood and Blumenberg, the myth’s receptivity is necessarily dependent on the political climate, where it manifests itself, as well as the ideology of these various communities.

Once more, while the proletarian revolution is certainly part Marx’s own work, it is important to understand the distinct role of the political myth. Interestingly, Flood (1996) points out that even in Marx’s own work, while there is a significant amount of theoretical and social scientific work describing the
historical and material necessity of the revolution, there are seeds of narrative and roots of the revolutionary political myth. Flood cites this intriguing section of Marx’s writing of the “Manifesto of the Communist Party” to reveal his narrative affections:

The history of hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that that each time ended, either in a revolutionary constitution at large, or the common ruin of contending classes...The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of old ones. (as cited in Flood, 1996, p. 114)

Flood rightly notes that in this section of Marx’s work, there is a clear narrative description of the history of class struggle; a narrative which is not simply serving as a story that provides significance to the proletariat as the anointed agents of political and economic change. What Flood takes from this narrative is that we find Marx’s political myth mixed with his theory. And while I discuss this implication further in this chapter, for the time being, I want to focus on the fact that as the political myth of the proletariat gained traction throughout the world, it inevitably became conceptually distinct from Marx’s early narrative description and his theoretical reflections while maintaining the mark of his socialist ideology.

I contend that the political myth of the proletariat proliferated amidst communities due partly to the limits of Marx’s theoretical pursuits. While Marx’s
revolutionary theory provides a “scientific” description of the proletariat revolution (Althusser, 1968/2005), which can be understood as providing the ideological seeds of the political myth, the narrative that was received and worked on was unique to its theoretical roots. In particular, one of the central problems with Marxist theory is that its historical and scientific descriptive nature ultimately reduces the oppressed to pure subjects of history. I would suggest that the political myth of proletariat revolution, while undoubtedly marked by ideology, provided narrative significance to people that are and were compelled to bring about a more just social order. In other words, Marxism undoubtedly provides, and continues to provide, modern institutions with new theoretical possibilities of how social change occurs throughout history, as well as a theoretical map for an ideal society. The proletarian myth itself, however, emerged out of a certain inadequacy of Marxist reason and science. Marxist descriptive analysis left a normative gap for those revolutionaries that were compelled to act; as an economic and political theory, it provided a great and inspiring description and prediction of the creation of a just world, but it did so without providing a normative guide for the here and now. As such, as both revolutionaries and proletariats were compelled to act to bring about change, this normative gap had to be filled. It is my contention that the political myth filled this gap. It provided the narrative basis for people to act to bring about Marxist theoretical predictions. To this end, the myth was undoubtedly adapted and changed at various instances to adequately fulfill the particular needs of diverse communities all while being “marked” by Marxist ideology.

Flood’s account of the relationship between ideology and political myth also provides further insight into Blumenberg’s particularist conception of myth. As Flood argues, the very construction of political myths is necessarily dependent on the particular ideological community. For this reason, it is unsurprising to see that
Blumegenberg’s notion of working on traditional myths also makes conceptual sense when examining modern political myths (Bottici, 2007). To use the example of the proletarian revolution, one can see how this myth was worked by various communities based on the distinct ideological institutions of these communities. The most obvious example is Maoist work on the political myth. For obvious reasons, the idea that a socialist revolution in China should be rooted in the proletariat was inadequate in an agrarian nation. Consequently, we see the political myth of the proletarian revolution being worked on and changed to meet the distinct needs of various oppressed agrarian communities. Without such work, the political myth could not, and would not, adequately provide significance to the Chinese revolutionaries. Moreover, even with this change to the characters and setting of the narrative, we can also see how the narrative is marked by the same family of Marxist ideologies.

3.5 Political Myth and Blumenberg’s Principle of Insufficient Reason

Implicit in both my analyses of Marxism as well as Flood’s analyses of modern myths is that despite significant advances in politics through reason and science (both cognitive and social), political myths serve an important role in providing a unique narrative mode of orientation that creates a sense of significance in our current political landscape. In part, this continued relevance can be attributed to Blumenberg’s insight that the principle of insufficient reason makes rhetoric, such as myth, possible. Unlike a field such as mathematics, modern politics at the level of everyday praxis demands that we constantly and immediately act as political citizens within our various socio-political organizations and communities. To put it more bluntly, while we may constantly disagree on the answers to mathematical problems with little consequence to our everyday being, in politics we are not so lucky; for better or worse, we have to
reflect, believe, and participate in political acts without a firm scientific and rational foundation. As Blumenberg (1996) points out, it is our need to act politically without sufficient reason that necessitates rhetoric and myth as a mode of orientation:

What is at stake is not only the relation between science and political authorities but also the realm of statements that have very important practical consequences, consequences that cannot be suspended, although in their theoretical status these statements are based, perhaps forever, on an insufficient rational foundation, or may even be demonstrably incapable of being verified...A decision in such questions as whether man is by nature good or bad, whether his character is determined by heredity or by environment, whether he makes or is made by his history, can indeed by deferred by science, but cannot be deferred in practice and be declared to be meaningful. (p.449)

As Blumenberg nicely puts it, the very scope of modern politics demands that individuals and groups of individuals constantly act as political agents. Consequently, as political agents we are compelled to act even without sufficient justification or a rational foundation for said actions. As he notes, even the debate about human nature and its role in politics, which many philosophers argue must serve as foundation of any political belief, is highly indeterminate and has been heavily debated without a definitive answer. This inevitably insufficient ground

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8 In fact, the very nature of the debate of human nature is an interesting study in the indeterminacy in political acts insofar as how political theorists frame the qualities of human nature often determines the nature of the political order and corresponding normative guidelines to political actions.
for political belief makes myth, such as the myth of the proletarian revolution, a necessary mode of orientating ourselves so that we can act with practical reason—given our epistemological limitations. Myth thus provides narrative significance and unity that would be otherwise missing given the limits of reason and science.

I think that beyond the insufficient rational foundation in modern politics that Blumenberg discusses, other unique characteristics of our current socio-political order also nurture the need for myth as a mode of orientation. First, while political indeterminacy can be traced to its foundational roots, I suspect that equally important is the ever expanding scope of political discourse at every level. Our current political landscape is an infinite universe consisting of billions of actors and extraordinarily complex sets of relations between individuals, communities, organizations, nations, and businesses. Further, within this landscape, there is an extraordinary mass of discourse and information, ranging from academic works, laws, and regulations to millions of media reports. Moreover, we find through the development of communication technologies both an increased access to this information but an exponential growth of political information itself. Lastly, even this information is complex insofar as it has varying degrees of accuracy. Simply put, not only do we face an indeterminate political foundation, but we are also compelled to act in meaningful political ways amidst an unimaginably complex and vast political world.

The vast political landscape that we engage in as political agents in many respects compounds our need for myth in order to act. First, as modern politics has revealed, the growth of reason and science and the creation of the modern state has resulted in the increased demand that we act as autonomous and rational political agents. However, as the demand to act autonomously has increased, we are concurrently confronted by the products of our rational works. Such work has produced such an abundance of information and knowledge that it undermines the
possibility of acting in any meaningful sense as fully informed, autonomous rational agents. One only has to look at the endless amount of data production in political and social organizations to see how this modern contradiction has emerged. If one were to attempt to act as a fully informed rational agent based on even half the data and information available to us at any point in time, we would ultimately fail to act. Much like the modern Kafkaesque bureaucracy of the first half of the last century, the modern production of information, which has accelerated over the last thirty years, has radically changed political knowledge into a faceless juggernaut of epistemic indeterminacy; a juggernaut that swells and grows for the sake of the rational governed state and corporate entities but ultimately undermines the possibility of individual rational praxis.

Within this context, I think the study of political myth has a renewed sense of importance amidst our political order. Amidst the dense fog of political indeterminacy, myth has provided and continues to provide narrative significance to a political order that is fraught with uncertainty. For good or bad, myth continues to be produced, received, and reproduced in our current socio-political landscape in order to provide narrative significance to our lives. Through political myths, our political order in all its vast complexities is transposed with narratives and concurrently infused with significance. As such, myths provide necessary narratives that aid in the guiding of our thoughts and actions within our social order.

3.6 Political Myth and Taylor’s Social Imaginary

In the context of contemporary political theory, myth may be understood as intimately related to the concept of the “social imaginary” (Taylor, 2007). Charles Taylor (2007) argues that the “social imaginary” should be understood as something much “broader and deeper” than the traditional intellectual schemes of understanding how people engage their social order (p. 171). He (2007) argues
that the social imaginary should be understood as the way “people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations” (p. 171). Here, Taylor, like Blumenberg, acknowledges both the limits of traditional rational methods for understanding how people engage in our socio-political order as well as the fact that we actually believe, reflect, and act in the world based on “imagined” modes of orientation that are not adequately captured by theory.

Further, Taylor is quick to point to the inherent differences between social theory and the social imaginary. First, he (2007) argues the social imaginary is framed around how ordinary people understand their surroundings, and this is “often not expressed in theoretical terms, it is carried in images, stories, legends etc” (p. 172). Secondly, whereas theory is limited to small communities of intellectuals, the social imaginary is often shared by large groups and even whole societies. Lastly, Taylor (2007) asserts that the social imaginary is “that common understanding which makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (p. 172). Thus, the social imaginary provides an invaluable sense of symbolic unity within our social order; through this unity we gain a common understanding of our social order that guides our everyday socio-political practices.

For Taylor, then, the social imaginary is understood as a set of symbolic significations that serve as background information that provides the possibility of collective unity and understanding of our thoughts and practices. Although the social imaginary often fails to be articulated and, in many cases, is unstructured, it provides an implicit map of our social space that allows groups to share common meanings and understandings that make collective acts, such as those in the political realm, possible and meaningful. One interesting example that Taylor (2007) explores is the idea of the “public sphere” (p. 187). Taylor argues that the
notion of the public sphere is a central part of the social imaginary of modern society. Specifically, he (2007) argues that the “public sphere” is an imagined symbolic “common place” where we can individually and collectively engage in public debate and discussion that has the capacity of “reaching the common mind” (p. 187). Thus, while we can point to vast media and discourses that fill this common space, the space is itself part of modern society’s social imaginary; it is at its very essence an imagined common place whose symbolic signification provides a collective unity that makes possible a common understanding of public debate and discourse. Once more, Taylor (2007) points out that the “public sphere” has normative importance in our society insofar as there is a collective expectation by large parts of our population that our government must be responsive to this space of common discourse and debate (p. 188).

Another interesting insight that Taylor provides in describing the social imaginary is the relationship between theory and social imagination inherent in society. Taylor argues that, despite the social imaginary being conceptually distinct from theory, in some cases, theory becomes part of the social imaginary. He argues that theories can begin to infiltrate the social imaginary, often among small groups of elites, and then begin to take hold in larger social groupings. Furthermore, he (2007) notes that during this movement from theory to the social imaginary, the former is often transformed and the form varied along the way (pp. 175–176). Further, he asserts that John Locke’s social theory is an example of this phenomenon (pp. 167–171). He (2007) argues that Locke’s theory is important in providing insight into our current social imaginary insofar as he was the first philosopher to articulate the idea that a mutual exchange in economics should be the model of human behaviour and is the “key to a harmonious co-existence” (p.167). Taylor asserts that Locke did not simply argue that the idea of mutual exchange was empirical fact; he also argued that it was grounded in God’s
Taylor concludes that currently, Locke’s theory of mutual exchange as a model of human relations has become an essential part of the social imaginary of Western cultures. And he notes that while God’s role in grounding the ideas of mutual exchange has fallen out of favour by much of the Western citizenry, the normative power of Locke’s idea of mutual exchange has embedded itself in our social imaginary. Thus, Taylor argues that while theory certainly can influence the social imaginary of societies, it does not follow that theoretical idea and the idea as part of the social imaginary are necessarily the same. His point is an important one as it is not sufficient to understand the theoretical roots of myth if we are to capture how a story, tale, or set of ideas manifests itself within the everyday life and particular socio-political contexts.

This being noted, Taylor interestingly points to the fact that often ideas and narratives that are inherent in the social imaginary can be traced to their theoretical counterparts.

Taylor’s concept of the “social imaginary” provides further insight into how political myths are produced and received by individuals and groups within particular communities (Rizvi, 2010). First, it is clear to see how political myth is part of a community’s social imaginary. Political myths are collectively shared and imagined narratives that circulate and are received within the complex background of our common social understanding. As a result, political myths often go unnoticed and unexamined as they manifest themselves within a community. As such, they are understood as a particular type of narrative in the map of the social imaginary; a narrative that orients us and creates significance within our social order and thus “coagulates our experience” in a way that provides important grounding to our political thoughts and practices (Bottici, 2007).

Further, political myth, as an important part of our social imaginary, must be understood as unique from theory. Once again, echoing Blumenberg, if we
understand political myths as part of the social imaginary, then we should always understand these narratives within the context of live political experience; they are necessarily dependent on the spatiotemporal social landscape in which they are situated. Although the social imaginary and, in turn, political myths may be shared by small and even large groups, they are necessarily linked to the collective imaginings of historically situated people. Thus, political myths cannot and should not be understood as being conceptually equivalent to discourses on political theory and science.

Also, while political theory, as Taylor points out, can often turn into ideas inherent in the social imaginary, they should not be conceptually understood as being one in the same. To use an example previously discussed, Marx’s theoretical articulation of the proletarian revolution is, at its very conceptual core, different from the political myths of the revolution. Of course, this is not to say that Marx and Engel’s philosophical articulation of class struggle and the proletariat revolution did not spur the myth as part of the elite first and then to larger and larger groups. In fact, this process of reception and production of the myth from its theoretical constructs clearly occurred in various communities as revolutionary elites drew on the myth and subsequently spread its narrative contents and significance to the general population.  

9 This historical continuity being noted, it is important to see that as the political myth of the proletariat revolution became part of various groups’ social imaginary, it became varied and transformed as it was adapted to various social contexts. In other words, although the narrative core of the myth remained constant, the myth manifested itself within different community’s symbolic backgrounds in ways that were unique to the socio-political demands of the community. In terms of the myth of the proletariat revolution, an interesting manifestation of this narrative within a community’s social imaginary is in the United States during the twentieth century, especially in the polarizing views of figures such as Joseph McCarthy and John Edgar Hoover. The popular American engagement of the proletariat
In addition, the concept of the social imaginary also reveals an important characteristic of political myths that Blumenberg (1996) discusses in his work on rhetoric. The social imaginary is not only created and recreated by groups, but it also serves as a unifying force within our social order. As Taylor points out, the social imaginary unifies groups by providing common images, stories, tales, etc., that aid us in sharing a similar descriptive and normative map of our social order. This collective unity is an important feature of political myths. In embracing a political myth, a group becomes unified not only in its articulation of the myth as a mode of symbolic orientation but also in the narrative significance which the myth provides the group. As Blumenberg (1996) points out, rhetoric and myth work on a foundation of “persuasion and consensus” with the ultimate aim of “congruence” through agreement (p. 442). To this end, political myths are narratives that provide modes of collective agreement that make possible collective unity both in thought and action in our political order. This is not to say, as Blumenberg himself points out, that this unity through political myth is not complex or constantly in a state of socio-political flux. On the contrary, political myths are constantly being shared, challenged, reworked, or even abandoned by groups and the individuals that make them up. This state of narrative flux is simply part of the makeup of our political revolution by these figures was not, I would argue, the engagement of Marx`s theoretical premises and conclusions. On the contrary, the McCarthy era brought forth a radical engagement of the proletariat revolution qua myth as part of the American social imaginary. Consequently, it was the possibility of the myth of proletarian revolution being collectively embraced, as part of the American social imaginary, that threatened these figures; the threat that this narrative would provide a new sense of significance to the collective will of large numbers of American people, which would consequently unite the population towards transforming the status quo.
order. However, within this state of flux, political myth provides a common unifying narrative that aims at consensus and agreement in terms of socio-political beliefs, values, and actions.

3.7 Political Myths and Utopias

Another important distinction in political myth that is discussed by philosophers and political theorists alike is the one between modern political myth and utopia. As Bottici (2007) points out, political myth and utopia tend to be grouped together. In part, this is because, as she argues, there are conceptual similarities between the two (Bottici, 2007, pp. 197–198). One significant similarity is that both fall under the concept of the social imaginary; both play an important role in providing a collective understanding of our political and social order (Bottici, 2007, p. 198–199). As such, they both unify groups within society and provide a normative means of engaging and orienting ourselves individually and collectively in the world. In addition, both political myths and utopias are intimately tied to political ideologies that are inherent within the community. In fact, both myths and utopias are ultimately dependent on how groups decide to orient themselves ideologically in the world. As an example, the social force of both the myth of a proletarian revolution and Marx and Engel’s utopian vision for society is necessarily dependent on the corresponding force of the ideology within a particular community.

One of the most substantial differences between myth and utopia is the particularist nature of the former in comparison to the latter. Specifically, as Bottici (2007) and Blumenberg (1985) argue, utopias are rational and theoretical constructs that serve as static representations of what society could be. In contrast, myths are by their very nature produced, reproduced, and received as narratives of particular times and places (Bottici, 2007; Blumenberg, 1979/1985). For instance, while Marx’s utopia and More’s *Utopia* (1516/1903) can be understood as
conceptually independent of both time and place and thus are “nowhere,” political myths are by their very conceptual nature always contextually situated. In other words, as Bottici (2007) nicely puts it, “utopias are no-places, whereas political myths are invitations to act here and now” (p. 199). Consequently, we find that a significant number of political myths, while providing narrative significance that fosters a better world, cannot be conceptually understood outside of historical context. Political myths that include historical figures, such as Rosa Parks, Gandhi, Che Guevara, and Martin Luther King, are perfect examples. The significance provided by the narratives of these revolutionaries is necessarily dependent on the real historical context in which they lived as well as the context in which the myth is worked on and received. And although we can understand these narratives as part of the social imaginary, they cannot be conceptually abstracted from their context without their narratives ceasing to be myths.

Another way of understanding this difference between myth and utopia can be found in Blumenberg’s work. Specifically, Blumenberg (1979/1985) argues that utopian constructs aim to provide a conceptual construct that serves as a guide and comparison for us. Further, he argues that it is the goal of this guide to provide perfect convergence between our symbolic understanding of the world and the ideal. As such, the realization of a utopian vision is concurrently the realization that our mode of orientation, whether it is Marxism or Liberalism, perfectly matches the socio-political order. In contrast, myth offers no possibility of congruence. In fact, he argues that myth works in the conceptual gaps between having no orientation in the world and perfect orientation through the actualization of utopia. Thus, political myths offer no permanent and absolute form of orientation, and, as a result, do not aim to resolve and end every aspect of social and human contingency by bringing about a perfect state of affairs. It is in fact the
contingency of the world, which utopia wants to remove, that sustains our need for myth.

As a final point of difference between myth and utopia, I would like to examine Bottici’s view that utopias are by their very nature critical of a political order. However, this sense of criticality does not necessarily hold true for political myths. Specifically, she (2007) argues that utopias are critical insofar as they provide a theoretical comparison between an imaginary state of political affairs and an existing political order (p. 199). By way of comparison, then, a utopia inevitably critically challenges an existing political order. She (2007) argues that myth, in contrast, is not necessarily critical. For instance, citing the Nazi’s myth of the Aryan race, she argues that while myth can be critical, it does not necessarily have to be so (p. 199).

While Bottici’s distinction is interesting, I think we should be careful in positing a notion of inherent criticality in the concept of utopia. For one, it is not entirely clear to me that the notion of “criticality” accurately captures the difference between a Marxist Utopia and the Nazis’ Aryan myth. More to the point, I think there is an argument to be made that the Nazis had a particular, albeit horrific and abominable, utopian vision for German society. If this is the case, Bottici is mistaken in attributing utopias with some inherent criticality. However, I believe that the crux of her argument is that all utopias, regardless of their moral validity, necessarily carry with them a critical sense of challenging the status quo for good or evil ends.

Political myths, in contrast, do not necessarily carry with them this same sense of social comparison and criticality. While many myths may provide significance in ways that compel groups to act towards social change, there are also political myths that serve as a means of sustaining and reproducing the status quo. Moreover, as Bottici and Challand (2006) point out in their exploration of the
post-9/11 myth of the “clash of civilizations,” political myths may often be conservative and parasitic on communities in ways that hinder collective progress. Specifically, they argue that since 9/11, the narrative that the Western world is in a powerful culture war with Islam has manifested among large parts of American culture. As a result, the “clash of civilization” myth has unfortunately provided a narrative lens that has united a large number of people and has provided political significance to our world. As Bottici and Challand (2006) reveal, this sense of unity and significance has led to a collective sense of Orientalism and Xenophobia; in doing so, the myth has legitimized unethical division between cultures to the point of embracing injustice.10

Clearly, the myth of the “clash of civilization” is not utopian in any sense. Specifically, I would suggest that an interesting characteristic of this myth is that it is conservative in its nature insofar as it tries to reinforce and justify existing social divisions between peoples by nurturing hatred and injustice between them. The antagonistic and conservative nature of the myth makes those that embrace it and work on it unable to change the state of affairs to end the so-called clash. As such, the “clash of civilization” served as the political means to legitimize (and continue to legitimize) their existing hatred for one another; it is a call to action to maintain the status quo in the world, and it exacerbates differences between others in a way

10 As a Canadian sitting north of the United States’ border, it is clear that for us the myth of the clash of civilization has become part of our social imaginary as well. The social debate over Canadian Omar Khadr’s imprisonment in Guantanamo Bay is a perfect example. It is clear that a significant portion of the movement to keep him locked indeterminately in prison without due process stems from people situating him as an icon in the fight between terrorist Islamist culture and the Western world. The fact that he is legally a Canadian citizen and a human deserving of certain rights regardless of other circumstances is understood as secondary and insignificant to the fact that his parents are Islamic terrorists fighting against the values, beliefs, and customs of the Western world.
that makes change impossible. To this end, political myths, unlike utopias, can function to bring about change within our political order or maintain the status quo and prevent substantial change.

### 3.8 Political Myth and Morality

Before continuing, it is important to address one glaring concern when wading into the deep end of philosophical discussion of political myth. One significant concern in defending any positive account of political myths is the relationship between morality and myth. In particular, as George Sorel in *Reflections on Violence* (1908/2004) unapologetically defends, because myths do not deal with facts but rather with our imagination, expectations, and consensus, then it would follow that anything goes morally if a myth is a legitimate part of our normative order (p. 117). It is on this basis that some theorists have interpreted Sorel and his theory of myth as a precursor to immoral totalitarian narratives and propaganda (Ohana, 2009).

First, I think this concern is, on one level, a legitimate one. More specifically, political myths, while a necessary part of our social order, also, like political theory, can carry with them the capacity to legitimize and sanctify moral harms. There is nothing inherent in myth, in and of itself, that guarantees that as a mode of orientation it secures a just and moral course of thoughts and actions. Moreover, political myths have the added danger of being produced and received in modern society by millions of people and thus can create large-scale harm. And while this is certainly an important and warranted concern that we must take seriously if we take myth seriously, it is important that we do not simply abandon myth as an immoral mode of orientation. On the contrary, political myth can work for the political and moral benefit of people and reflect the best knowledge and experience of moral matters, or it can embrace the immoral narratives that
encourage and promote the ills and evils that have burdened human history; however, it does not follow that immorality is a necessary part of myth.

Part of the problem, which is reflected both in Nietzsche (1885/1976) and Sorel (1908/2004), is that many philosophers insist that we must radically remove myth from its context in such a way that it transcends moral constraints, values, and/or virtues. As I will discuss in more detail later, I am not advocating that we remove political myth from the moral and rational institutions of society. In particular, following Blumenberg, I am arguing for a more comprehensive and practical notion of reason that includes contextualization of myth and reason; a contextualization that does not abandon the years of moral history and truths that resonate in our communities but rather embraces them as a key part of our mythical engagement with the world. In other words, we should direct our criticism of immoral myths not at myth itself but rather at the contents of the political myth and how they may advocate harming or neglecting others. Furthermore, we should direct our narrative powers to take seriously the role that political myths have in extending and nurturing stories of our moral growth and struggles within our communities.

3.9 The Philosophical Challenges of Embracing Myth

Having gone over the fundamental philosophical terrain of modern political myths, let me now turn to addressing what I take to be three interrelated philosophic difficulties that make addressing political myths problematic. Specifically, aside from the obvious aversion of contemporary philosophers towards political myths, there are a number of significant obstacles any place where we find theoretical engagements of myth. One such obstacle is the issue of the different symbolic “forms” that distinguish philosophy and political myth. As Flood (1996) points out in great length in his work, political myth, in its purest form, relies on narrative and, as such, consists of “the symbolic expression of a
sequence of events connected to matter by time” (p. 117). Moreover, as already argued, mythical narratives are validated not by the accuracy or factual validity of the narrative description but by the significance they provide to a group of people in their specific socio-political order. In contrast, philosophy, once again at its analytical purest, consists of a series of arguments that, in turn, rest on inductive and deductive reasoning, factual claims and supports, and critical analysis (Flood, 1996, p. 116). Of course, the legitimacy of arguments traditionally perceived, unlike myth, is not so much on their effect but rather their epistemological truth through their coherence, soundness, and validity.

By not sharing a similar symbolic form, one finds that philosophers discussing political and social theory fail to effectively engage in a discussion of myth. For one, we find that philosophers assume that political myths can be conceptually subsumed and understood through rational deliberation and consequently held to the same standard of legitimacy of any other socially scientific narrative; in doing so, philosophers inevitably fail to see how the narrative functions within current political conditions. Now, let me be clear here: I am not suggesting that philosophers should forgo questioning and rationally analyzing political myths. As I will discuss further, critical thinking and reasoning play an important role in engaging myths. Rather, what I am claiming is that if philosophers address political myths purely in a traditional, analytical vein, they inevitably fail to grasp how they can gain traction within communities despite a clear indifference to the coherence, soundness, and validity of the myth. For example, the myth of the “class of civilizations,” as Bottici and Challand (2006) point out, is a political myth that has been highly criticized on rational argumentative grounds by philosophers, political theorists, social commentators, and politicians alike (pp. 322–323). Despite heavy rational and critical commentary, the political myth gripped and continues to grip much of our
population. The survival of this political myth, at least in part, is due to the fact that critics fail to understand that as a political myth the effectiveness of its narrative form rest on its ability to symbolically orient and produce significance in a population that was fearful of a non-Christian religious “other” after 9/11. As such, critics are often left dumbfounded by the inability of reason to penetrate these myths, and subsequently, they frame the collective irrationality of the populace as a matter of pure social deception or pure ignorance.

Another problem that arises in the fundamental differences in form between myth and theory is that philosophers and political theorists can be dismissive of political myths despite these unique narratives serving important and positive roles in our political order. If philosophers and theorists only take seriously those parts of political order that are rationally grounded, they inevitably miss political myth’s social importance. This point is made by Cornel West (2004) in reference to the relationship between political theory and religion, particularly Christianity, in North American culture. He (2004) rightly points out that many political philosophers, such as John Rawls, too easily dismiss the role of Christianity in creating a just political order (pp. 160-161).

I think that part of philosophers’ reluctance to acknowledge religion’s contribution to Western politics is certainly in part the result of the Western drive to provide secular justification for political institutions. I also would like to suggest that part of this reluctance is a failure to see and comprehend political myth’s importance within our political order. For instance, while Christianity undoubtedly played an important role in forming the rational foundation to the modern Liberal state, it also had and continues to have an invaluable role in shaping the political myths inherent in the West and other countries, for that matter. To use Cornel West’s own example, the liberation theology roots of the American civil rights movement that Martin Luther King Jr. drew directly from
played an essential role in transforming the United States’ political order. I would add that King Jr. helped nurture and work on the theological narratives in such a way that they were transformed into powerful political myths.

To be more specific, one of King’s gifts was his ability to unite the liberation theology tradition within the context of modern American politics. By drawing on the liberation theology movement, King interpreted the Bible, from the call of Moses’s liberation of the Israelites to Jesus’s preferential option to the poor, as a call to transform this world and to make it more just. More than this, however, he contributed by making the Biblical narrative of God’s preferential treatment of the poor and the need for the oppressed to overthrow the shackles of hatred, marginalization, and oppression a political myth amidst an oppressive reality; a myth that provided a mode of orientation and narrative significance to large groups of the American population even though many of these groups did not share the same religious or racial background. As a political myth, the African-American community’s call for the liberation of the oppressed in order to transform the United States into a just country became, and still remains, a powerful narrative that serves as a radical call for action amidst a racially divided social order. Most famously, King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, which is both grounded by the Christian liberation movement and infused with Christian symbolism and rhetoric, continues to resonate as a powerful call to North Americans as well as others around the world to participate in and embrace the political myth that inspired a struggle for a more just social order.

For all the extraordinary work done by many political philosophers, such as Rawls, Richard Rorty, and Robert Nozick, the role of religion’s ability to shape real and everyday experience is largely ignored or theoretically dismissed (West, 2004). For Rawls (1971/1999), in particular, political myth is absent in creating a just social order insofar as all rational and reasonable people, who are
hypothetically stripped of their “conceptions of good” within an ideal social order, would assent to principles of rights and distribution. As such, through the rational acceptance of a set of individual rights and Rawls’s difference principle, a population would reasonably find consensus that would necessarily make a liberal democratic society just, fair, and stable (Rawls, 1971/1999). Within this basic theoretical construct, political myths, especially those grounded in Christianity or any other conception of the good, are irrelevant insofar as his theory eliminates the very need for myth to provide significance and unite citizens towards creating a just political order. To put it another way, Rawls’s political philosophy does not theoretically see myth because his theory provides a rational justification for the perfect congruence between human reason and the creation of a just social order. Thus, religion becomes bound to the idea of rational consent and “reasonableness,” and political myth does not exist. One might be able to accept Rawls’s omission of political myth if he was not trying to guide and provide means of rationally engaging and changing our existing political order. However, as I have contended throughout this chapter, if philosophers are intending to actively engage both critically and constructively the existing political dynamics within our social order, then they must take seriously political myth as a unique and necessary mode of orientation. Consequently, Rawls and other philosophers of his ilk that fail to acknowledge political myth necessarily are missing a fundamental element of how people actively engage in the socio-political order.

A second obstacle that philosophers have in engaging political myths is the issue of reoccupation that Blumenberg discusses in his various works. One problem, as I noted earlier, is that theory cannot provide theoretical constructs and definitive answers to political actors. This fact rings particularly true as we move further and further away from the halls of academia to the complex political experiences that we are confronted with every day. Again, even using Rawls as an
example, his theory rests on the highly debatable conception of the person, the idea of the “reasonable” consensus, and the validity of the difference principle (Benhabib, 1992; Cohen, 2008). As such, while I think Rawls’ political theory stands as one of the most coherent and well argued pieces of pure political philosophy, it in no way threatens to completely reoccupy our political landscape in a way that would make political myths irrelevant. Political myth will always function to provide narrative significance within a world where definitive answers are lacking and the need to act as political subjects remains. What this means, then, is that while we should acknowledge and embrace the many roles political philosophy can have in politics, we should do so with a sense of epistemological humility when theoretically engaging with our existing political order in general and political myths specifically.

Additionally, one must also understand some of the deep ideological roots of political myths within particular communities. What I mean here is that philosophers, in failing to understand the function of political myths in a community, can also fail to perceive the ramifications of their critical engagement of myth. This point is the political equivalent to Blumenberg’s point that the Enlightenment’s desire to eliminate was erroneous. In critically and rationally trying to replace traditional myths, philosophers and theorists fail to see that Western culture is drawn to work on myths in a modern context in order to nurture a symbolic mode of orientation that fulfills our individual and collective need for narrative significance. If, for example, the political myth of the liberation of the oppressed is rationally dissected and criticized and subsequently falls out of favour and is no longer a primary mode of symbolic orientation, then we should ask ourselves what political myth might or should replace it. This particular example is important because we have seen since the end of the Cold War an equally powerful narrative that describes the end of the age of ideology and utopia,
particularly those drawing inspiration from Communist ideology. Among the conceptual victims of the attack on leftist ideology are political myths that have been marked by this ideology (Jacoby, 1999; Fukuyama, 1993). And while we could discuss how the story of the end of ideology has itself become a political myth, an equally important question is understanding what political myths have reoccupied these narratives of moral and political justice. To put it another way, if certain political myths no longer unify groups and provide narrative significance anymore then we should focus on what alternative myths have reoccupied this void in symbolic orientation in our communities.

As a point of clarification, I am not claiming that philosophers should not critically analyze political myths. On the contrary, critical engagement of political myths is an important means by which we can understand and challenge their legitimacy. What I am suggesting is that if the aim of our politics is to create a more moral and just social order, then we must be sensitive to the myths that offer the possibility of obtaining this vision by compelling us to act in ways that bring about a more just state of affairs, as well as those that maintain the status quo, or worse, lead to increased injustice. If, for example, by way of rational criticism, philosophers undermine the liberating power of the political myth that inspired the Civil Rights movement, and this is replaced by a political myth that sustains oppression or nurtures resignation and political apathy, then we are worse off. Moreover, as I will discuss further in my analyses of education, I would go so far as to say that we would be worse off in this situation even if the political myth that replaces the myth of liberation fits more neatly within the scientific and rationally constructed technocratic institutions in today’s modern culture. It is for this reason that philosophers and educators alike who actively engage in the politics of praxis must be more aware of how myth functions within our socio-political order.
A final point of difficulty that philosophers have to be aware of in understanding political myths is how myth itself may be implicit within theory itself (Derrida, 1974). We should be suspicious of claims of the rational purity of political theory. Specifically, in various works, we find many philosophers drawing on the narrative form in attempts to support their argumentation, and also on existing political myths for philosophical effect. As already noted, in reference to Flood’s (1996) work, Marx’s early works contain within them the use of narrative form with a clear desire to incite a sense of significance in the proletariat; it aims to compel workers to unite towards a struggle against the bourgeoisie’s oppression. Interestingly, the tension between Marx’s use of narrative and rational argumentation is a small part of the debate of “early Marx” and “later Marx.” While Das Kapital (1867/1984) and Marx’s other later works point to scientific and rational grounds for the historical conditions of the Communist revolution and the view of humans as economic/revolutionary subjects, his early work emphasized the role of political praxis and the need for the proletariat to act as revolutionary agents to bring about a just world (Kitching, 1988; Kolakowski, 2005). To this end, we find that despite Marx’s intentions, his “scientific” theory became part of the social imaginary of various communities and infused them with political myths echoing those of his early works. Within revolutionary communities, from Russia to Cuba, one finds particular myths that echo, on an activist level, the political myth that was inherent in Marx’s early work. Thus, although Marx may or may not have been unintentionally using political myths in his early work, he does so because his early work is a manifesto to contextual, socialist political activism that requires a need to create unity and compel people to act within their political order.
It is these very requirements that make political myth an effective narrative corollary to his theoretical manifesto.  

Having examined both the philosophical nature and the relevance of political myths within our socio-political order, the next chapter of my dissertation will turn to examining how these political narratives have been misunderstood and largely overlooked by the critical pedagogical tradition in education. As a proponent of critical pedagogy, I think this oversight has led critical pedagogues to fail to understand the political myths implicitly embedded within their own work as well as to address the common philosophical difficulties that I articulated above. Specifically, I will assert that political myth should be understood as an important narrative corollary to critical praxis and as such should provide a normative mode of orientation that, along with reflection and action, aims at the democratic transformation of our social order.

Furthermore, as Chiara Bottici points out, in examining the political work of Enlightenment philosophers one can also see traces of political myths of the time clearly influencing their theoretical work. One particular political myth she (2007) points to is the political myth about “the state of nature” and the New World (pp. 139–142). Famously introduced into theoretical constructs by Hobbes and later utilized by Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and other contract theorists, the theoretical use of the concept of the “state of nature” became an important element of a normative conception of a rationally formed state. Although, Locke and Rousseau were honest in admitting that the concept of the state of nature was not historically factual, what they failed either to see or point to is its mythical roots. As Bottici (2007) points out, the idea of the state of nature was not a benign and historical piece of political philosophy. Specifically, she reflects that the narrative of the “state of nature” with the exploration of the New World had a far-reaching influence and effect within the social imaginary of Europe. In many instances the state of nature was connected intimately with Europe’s expansion and manifest destiny in the New World; as such, it echoed the European idea of progress through political, social, and cultural domination.
Chapter 4
Critical Pedagogy and Political Myths

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I turn my analysis to the relationship between political myths and the critical pedagogical tradition. It is my contention, as a defender of critical pedagogy, that critical pedagogy’s failure to articulate a substantive understanding of political myth has been and continues to be philosophically and practically problematic. Specifically, I will argue that because critical pedagogy builds much of its philosophy of education on Marxist and critical theory foundation, it has inadvertently inherited the *mythos/logos* antinomy. As I will argue, this inherited tradition leads critical pedagogues to, on the one hand, overlook the symbolic importance, force, and resilience of myths within our socio-political order. On the other hand, this conceptual oversight also prevents critical pedagogues from examining the political myths implicit within their own conceptual scheme.

In this chapter, then, I will argue that political myth, understood in the Blumenbergian sense as an ideologically marked narrative that provides unity and a sense of significance to our socio-political order, is an essential symbolic mode of orientation that critical pedagogues should re-examine. More than this, I will argue that critical pedagogues should attempt to articulate and embrace certain strands of political myth that fulfill the normative aim of democratically transforming the existing socio-political order. Finally, I will argue that critical pedagogy, in turn, also provides important insight, which Blumenberg overlooks, into how political myths are influenced by systemic power relations.

I will open this chapter by examining critical pedagogy’s view of myth, particularly as articulated by Paulo Freire (1968/2000), and reveal how the Marxist theoretical roots of this tradition leads to understanding myth as a form of
oppressive ideology and mystification. As I argued throughout the preceding chapter, I will contend that critical pedagogues should reassess this view of myth. Further, I will argue that the Blumenbergian conception of political myth provides crucial insight for critical pedagogues into how political myths are worked on in our particular communities in general and schools specifically.

In the second half of this chapter, I will defend and articulate political myth as an important narrative corollary to critical praxis. Specifically, I will argue that political myth, in and of itself, is not incompatible with democratic transformation. Rather, the key for critical pedagogues is to articulate and examine strands of democratic myths that can serve as a normative mode of symbolic orientation, which can enhance and work with critical democratic theory, reflection, and practice. To this end, I defend the need for democratic myth, for which I articulate in Chapter 8, to be incorporated as an important narrative corollary to critical pedagogical praxis.

Finally, I will end this chapter by outlining what I take to be two important areas of philosophic investigation for the critical pedagogical tradition to pursue, if they embrace myth as a substantive mode of orientation. First, critical democratic educators must begin to articulate and critically examine the existing socio-political myths that are worked on in our schools. Secondly, they should articulate a positive account of myth that is compatible with critical democratic praxis. It will be these two general lines of philosophic inquiry that will inform the second half of my dissertation.

4.2 Political Myth, Critical Pedagogy, and Marxism

To begin, given the fact that philosophers have generally been historically averse to analyzing political myths in the context of modern theory, it should come as little surprise that critical pedagogy has generally followed this trend. In fact, for the most part, critical pedagogy has said little on myth at all and has focused
primarily on clarifying the critical role of theory in and of itself and, in turn, the role of theory in the dialectic between reflection and action (praxis). Interestingly, the philosopher of education who deals directly with the issue of the *mythos/logos* antinomy is Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968/2000). Freire (1968/2000), in the context of discussing the epistemological role of praxis for teachers/students, argues that the role of the problem-posing educator is to create “together, with the students, the conditions under which the knowledge at the level of *doxa* is superseded by true knowledge, at the level of *logos*” (p. 81). Now it is important to note that here, Freire is drawing a distinction between *doxa*, which denotes unjustified opinion, and *logos*, which denotes reason, rather than *mythos/logos*. This difference being noted, Freire does, however, emphasize the nature of *logos* as the means of moving students from a state of subjective opinion to a state of critical rational praxis that is true knowledge. For Freire, echoing his Marxist epistemological roots, *logos* offers the critical possibility of both critiquing existing unjust social structures and transforming the world to create a just socio-political order.

In examining critical pedagogy’s epistemological relation to myth, one cannot overlook the common Marxist roots that they have inherited. Central to Marxist philosophy, once again, is his concept of ideology. For Marx, ideology is understood as false consciousness where individuals and groups fail to understand the oppressive ideas, beliefs, customs, and existing social structures. For Marx, ideology ultimately prevents the thinker from understanding the social contradictions that exist in the current social order, and, as a consequence, it limits the possibility of revolutionary action (Kolakowski, 2005, pp. 126–128; Marx & Engels, 1846/1970). Marx does not claim, however, that ideology should be understood independently from the material and social conditions in which it exists; on the contrary, ideology is deeply rooted in the real social conditions of an
existing society. To this end, Marx argues that ideology is the product of the material conditions and corresponding sets of beliefs, values, and rituals that maintain class conflict and prevent revolutionary praxis.

Marx’s conception of ideology is an important one as it frames the problem of injustice in a way that provides important roles of *logos* for Marxist theorists. For Marx, analytic reason and theory plays an essential role in combatting false consciousness through ideology. Specifically, theory provides revolutionary intellectuals with the means of understanding the dominant ideology and the objective material conditions that maintain class conflict and the status quo. As such, Marx, following the modern tradition, argues that our capacity to reason offers human consciousness the possibility of dismantling the mystified world around us that maintains class conflict and the inherent contradictions within the unjust capitalist system. Hence, Marx argues that theory and reason are an important part of revolutionary, practical intelligence insofar as they serve as a means by which the proletariat interact with and change the material conditions of society. In the context of Marxist rational critique of false ideology and scientific analysis of class relations, myth, both in form and content, is at best irrelevant and at worse part of the narrative “imaginings” of a false ideology.

In terms of our discussion of myth, Marx’s reliance on analytic and practical reason as the critical foundation that opposes false ideology has had a lasting influence on critical pedagogy’s understanding of myth. It is important to note, however, that critical pedagogues generally do not defend Marx’s early formulation of ideology (Apple, 1979/2004b; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 1983). Instead, Freire, Giroux, and Apple all accept Mannheim’s more politically neutral account of ideology as particular sets of social, political, and cultural ideas, beliefs, customs, and corresponding practices within society. However, what they do take from Marx is the fundamental view that *logos*, understood specifically as critical
reason, provides the conceptual and reflective means that makes democratic transformation of our political order possible. More precisely, they collectively argue that critical theory has two important and interrelated roles in our individual and collective progress. First, it provides the reflective means for people to critically decode the complex sets of discourses, beliefs, values, customs, and institutions in a given social order that produce or reproduce systems that oppress, marginalize, and exploit people. Secondly, theory provides a critical guide for human reflection, so that we can engage constantly in a process of changing the existing social order. Therefore, much like Marx, critical pedagogues’ critical rational foundation implicitly leans them towards framing their conceptual understanding of political myth under the traditional enlightened view that modern culture is moving “from mythos to logos.” As a consequence, critical pedagogues either engage in a discussion of political myth with the view that myths are harmful socio-political illusions that prevent people from comprehending the unjust reality of their social order, or they do so quite flippantly and use the term in its modern pejorative sense to signify an unjustified, false popular belief.

As an important point of clarification, it is evident that despite critical pedagogy’s Marxist roots its conception of theory and the role of reason differs significantly from Marx’s and has been heavily debated within the tradition itself. Of particular importance is the fact that many critical pedagogues, drawing on the Frankfurt school’s own critique of traditional Marxist theory, argue that there is an embedded sense of metatheoretical critique that is inherent in critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1983). For this reason, unlike Marx, critical theorists are not just critical of existing social structures and ideologies but of logos itself; specifically, they are critical of the social, cultural, and political consequence of reason. Of particular importance to critical theorists and pedagogues alike is how the rationalism of the Enlightenment, which promised liberation and emancipation through science and
reason, had transformed into repressive forms of technocratic and positivist rationality.

Most notably, Adorno and Horkheimer in their work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/2000) reinterpreted modernity’s roots in the Enlightenment amidst the spectacle of Nazism and Stalinism. Far from viewing the horrors of the twentieth century as an irrational aberration, they argue that the Enlightenment’s scientific conception of rationality had struggled and succeeded to separate the human subject from the material world. In doing so, the world has consequently become objectified in a way that allows for its rational domination. Further, technocratic reason and rational positivism have objectified culture in ways that allowed for the rational domination of humans. This metatheoretical critique of reason has had a lasting influence on many critical pedagogues. Specifically, critical pedagogy became rightly concerned with the influence of rational positivism on contemporary education. In fact, in the critical pedagogical tradition we find a significant number of authors challenging the totalizing and dogmatic effects of technocratic reason and positivism in education on a range of issues, from the standardization of education to the creation of hierarchical structures of institutional power (Apple, 2001; Freire, 1968/2000; Giroux, 1983). To this end, critical pedagogy is highly critical of the use of reason and its use to create, justify, and maintain unjust institutional arrangements in the education system and society in general.

The critical, metatheoretical foundation of critical pedagogy is undoubtedly an important and crucial element of critiquing and analyzing the relationship between *logos* and our aim at creating a just social order. Without such a critical foundation and skepticism of our enlightened roots, we risk reifying reason in a way that loosens it from the humanizing of the world and our aim of creating a more just world. I want to suggest that, even with this metatheoretical process of
self-reflection, critical pedagogy did not, however, properly re-establish political myth as a complex and necessary mode of symbolic orientation that is more than simply a premodern form of irrationality or a false form ideology. Rather, critical pedagogues, who were influenced by the mythos and logos antinomy, either abandoned the concept of myth all together, or they conceptualized it as a form of mystification that had to be overcome if social transformation was going to be possible.

4.3 Critical Pedagogy, Paulo Freire, and Myth as Socio-Political Illusions

In terms of critically engaging political myth as a form of political illusion, Freire’s work Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1968/2000) provides the most comprehensive analysis. In this work, Freire provides a lengthy discussion of myth in relation to critical pedagogical theory. He contends that myth is to be understood as popular beliefs and narratives that are produced by oppressors to maintain their power and control over the oppressed. He argues that oppressors use myth to negate the possibility of revolutionary praxis and dialogue for the ultimate goal of conquest:

The desire for conquest (or rather the necessity of conquest) is at all times present in antidialogical action. To this end the oppressors attempt to destroy in the oppressed their quality as “considerers” of the world. Since the oppressors cannot totally achieve this destruction, they must mythicize the world. In order to present for the consideration of the oppressed and subjugated a world of deceit designed to increase their alienation and passivity, the oppressors develop a series of methods precluding any presentation of the world as a problem and showing it rather as a fixed
entity, as something to which people, as mere spectators, must adapt. (Freire, 1968/2000, p. 139)

Therefore, Freire draws on his Marxist roots to use myth to denote false ideology that prevents social transformation insofar as it limits the possibility of critical praxis and dialogue from critiquing the existing social order. To mythicize the world is understood in this sense as a set of “deceitful” methods that are intentionally created to mystify the status quo.

Further, Freire (1968/2000) provides a series of examples of the myths that inhabit our existing status quo. Included in his list and his critical analysis is the “myth that the oppressive order is a free society; the myth all persons are free to work where they wish...the myth that this order respects human rights...the myth of the universal right of education...the myth of equality of all individuals” (Freire, 1968/2000, p. 139). He argues that these myths become part of the oppressive social structures and institutions in society. In particular, institutions, such as education, pattern their actions and pedagogical practices based on the larger unjust social structures and then aid in the transmission of myths to the children that, in turn, maintain the unjust social structure (Freire, 1968/2000, p. 154).

Given this conception of myth, Freire argues that part of the commitment in humanist and libertarian pedagogy is aiding the oppressed in the process of embracing praxis and unveiling the mythical world of oppression. It is by the oppressed practically and critically engaging the status quo that they are thought to be led subsequently to the “expulsion of the myths created and developed in the old order, which like spectators haunt the new structure emerging from the revolutionary transformation” (Freire, 1968/2000, p. 55).

Freire’s view of myth in the context of critical pedagogy is an important one. On the most basic level, it is important insofar as it reveals the influence of the idea
of moving from “mythos to logos” on critical pedagogy. Thus while critical pedagogues, including Freire, Giroux, and Aronowitz are quick to resist the reification of analytic reason and Marx’s unfortunate positivist tendencies, they did not abandon reason and theory’s dominant role in critiquing the dominant classes’ myths. And while this may not come as much of a surprise, it has important implications for how critical pedagogues understand and engage myths. One implication of this conception of myth is that when political myths are understood simply as false beliefs and illusions then we fail to understand how they, at a very fundamental level, serve as an important mode of symbolic orientation. For Freire, political myths are narratives that are always produced and deposited along the society’s asymmetrical lines of socio-political power. More than this, political myths are symbolic barriers whose signifiers mask reality and thus are an important symbolic barrier that critical theory must overcome in order to open the possibility of achieving democratic change.

Another implication for the Freirean conception of political myth in critical pedagogy is that critical theory fails to fully understand how and why myths develop and manifest themselves within our contemporary social order and education system. In particular, as Blumenberg points out in *Work on Myth* (1979/1985), myth at its symbolic roots performs the same basic function as reason; it provides a symbolic means of orienting ourselves amidst an indifferent reality. Far from simply masking reality from reason, political myth, like critical theory itself, is a symbolic way we cope and struggle in the world. Even this basic difference in approach to political myth offers radically different insights into how these myths possibly manifest themselves within our society. Rather than attempting to decode the reality behind a political myth inherent in our educational system, critical pedagogues should ask how and why a political myth, as a mode of
orientation, effectively embeds itself within educational discourse and pedagogical practice.

4.4 Critical Pedagogy and Blumenbergian Philosophy of Myth

Before examining what Blumenberg’s (1979/1985) conception of myth may add to critical pedagogy, let me first discuss what critical democratic theory may add to his functional account of myth. For all his insight into myth and rhetoric, Blumenberg discusses very little the role of systemic power relations on either. Given this oversight, I want to suggest that critical pedagogy’s demand that we cannot understand any form of political ideology outside the existing power structures of our various communities adds important insight into our discussion of political myth. To this end, we find that political myths, even understood in the Blumenbergian sense as a mode of orientation rather than an illusion, often serve to both maintain and strengthen the socio-political interests of those in power. While Blumenberg is right to point to the importance of the reception of myths, we must do so without neglecting how political myths are produced and distributed. In fact, it is this crucial insight that Cassirer (1946/1955a) was so horrified by. Specifically, Cassirer realized that political myths could be intentionally created and distributed by those in power through the institutional structures of the modern state. Despite Cassirer’s enlightened conception of political myth, he was correct in his intuition that within a society the production and reception of political myths are necessarily influenced by the existing power structures within a society. Therefore, the ability to strategically create and distribute political myths in modern societies has been intimately tied to the economic and political power within a culture.

For critical pedagogues, then, any analysis of myth and political discourse cannot be separated from political power and the existing social structures. For this reason, when critical pedagogues critically analyze a myth they ask certain key
questions: Who created a political myth? Who benefits from this political myth? And who is harmed by this political myth? This matrix of power relations and political myths is clearly apparent in a political myth such as the Nazis’ Aryan myth. The power of the Nazi state to produce and maintain this political myth for the benefit of one group at the expense of many others reveals how the ability and force of political myth to travel channels of institutional power is important to understanding myth itself. Moreover, one cannot fail to see Nazi Germany’s knowledge and understanding of these mediums for political myth in the context of educational discourse. The importance of schools as a place for political myth to serve the interest of the Nazi State is apparent both in Hitler’s extensive writing on the subject in Mein Kampf (1925–1926/1971) as well as in the Nazis’ subsequent transformation of the German school system and establishment of the Hitler Youth. To this end, the Third Reich’s education system became an important socio-political place for the creation and nurturing of the Aryan myth and its oppressive implications for millions of people.

Another example of the relationship between power and political myths comes in critical discussions of the media (Chomsky, 1997, 2003b). As Chomsky (1997, 2003b) and Giroux (1999) have argued extensively, the ability of the media to control the creation and distribution of cultural values and stories has become an essential socio-political force within our society. Specifically, Chomsky (1997) argues that we cannot understand the media’s influence without understanding the power structures that control it. For this reason, he argues that American media’s structure and messages are necessarily determined by the corporate interests that control them. He (1997, 2003b) argues that the American media ensures that the existing elitist structure in the United States continues to concentrate power and capital in the hands of the few while ensuring that the masses are adequately distracted from challenging the status quo. Following Chomsky, I would suggest
that we must take seriously the influence of how political myths are worked on and distributed within the existing power structures inherent in the modern media. Case in point, American media mogul Rupert Murdoch has more power and influence to distribute political messages that conform to his own interests than 99% of the population in North America. It only follows that this media power allows Murdoch the opportunity to voice political myths with a higher rate of frequency and influence.

Similarly, in terms of the pedagogical role of the media on children, Giroux (1999) argues that the existing concentrations of power of our society have also allowed certain socio-political values and stories to be reinforced in our culture’s youth. Specifically, he argues that many corporate distributors of children’s movies and television shows intentionally reinforce various narratives and values that perpetuate inequities and unjust power relations in our social order. Giroux points to Disney films as an example of this phenomenon. For example, he (1999) argues that the film The Little Mermaid, created by The Walt Disney Company, reinforces sexual stereotyping of women as being obedient to men and the importance of pursuing superficial ends in life among other harmful narratives (pp. 99–107). As Giroux (1999) argues, the fact that The Walt Disney Company is controlled and run by a highly powerful group of American elites, and that it intentionally teaches oppressive views of women and minorities to our children is concerning to say the least. I would argue, in fact, that Disney is very much aiding in the production of certain political myths through these teachings. Moreover, the Disney corporation’s ability to use media as a powerful pedagogical tool reveals, once again, how political myth cannot be understood outside the various avenues of power relations within a given society. Critical pedagogy thus rightly points to the need for educators to both critically understand how political myths flow along
and within the existing power structures in our society as well as to teach students to critically engage political myths and their production and distribution.

The problem, then, with critical pedagogues’ analysis is not that they insist that narratives, such as political myths, must be understood as a part of the existing power relations and corresponding interests within our highly stratified society. In fact, as I have argued, this important insight is an essential part of our understanding of myth that Blumenberg neglects. On the contrary, the problem is that, given the nature and function of political myths, there is more to be said about how and why these myths manifest themselves in our society and education system. In other words, by understanding political myths primarily as illusions that are produced by self-interested elites, critical pedagogues theoretically miss important elements of this particular type of narrative. For example, one important aspect of political myth that is overlooked is how myths are worked on, reproduced, and particularized within specific contexts and material conditions. In particular, the reception and work on any socio-political myth, while certainly influenced by existing power structures, must be understood distinctly from those that are produced and distributed by dominant factions within our society.

Freire, for example, fails to understand how political myths, even those that maintain our unjust social order, become particularized and worked on by various communities. More specifically, Freire understands myths as purely deceitful products of the ruling class. The problem with this account is not that the existing power relations and social structures influence the production of political myths, but the fact he overlooks how these myths manifest themselves within particular social contexts. For instance, suppose that we are critically analyzing the myth of the “clash of civilization.” For critical pedagogues, one may look at how this political myth was created by the dominant class of Western culture. Specifically, the myth could be critically analyzed as a means of mystifying United States
hegemonic economic policy and as a political myth that legitimizes corporate America’s desire to extend their economic and political interests into countries such as Iraq (Chomsky, 2003a). In turn, one may look to how American and Canadian schools reflect this ideological interest by extending this political myth into our educational system through the curriculum and the silencing of debate, among other forms of manipulation. What this account of political myth misses is how the “clash of civilization” myth may be received and worked on in ways that create narrative unity and significance within particular communities. For example, the political myth has become an important part of the debate concerning religious rights of Muslims to wear the burka and hijab in many communities in the United States and in Canada (Nussbaum, 2010; Zizek, 2010). Within various communities, the political myth is worked on in a way that frames the debate as a powerful narrative of Islam’s attack on Western culture. In this instance, the myth of the “clash of civilizations” may be produced and reproduced in particular communities as distinct social groups work on the myth in ways that may, in fact, be distinct from the political origins of the myth and even in many respects distinct from the intentions of the political elite. This is not to say, however, that politicians and social elites may not tap into the social capital of particularized myth as a means to gain social and political capital among large segments of society. It is rather to suggest that political myths are worked on by both dominant and powerful segments of our society as well as oppressed communities alike. Consequently, by focusing solely on Fox News’s, Glenn Beck’s, or the White House’s production and work on political myths, we inevitably fail to see how their production and reproduction occurs even among the most marginalized within our society. It is thus the challenge of critical pedagogues to understand how these particular manifestations of political myths embed themselves within our schools.
4.5 Critical Pedagogy and the Receptivity of Myth

Further, I think that by emphasizing an illusory character of myth, critical pedagogues fail to capture why political myths are received by individuals and groups. Specifically, because Freire, Giroux, and the like place particular emphasis on the role of powerful segments of society that manipulate and deceive people through myth, they fail to understand adequately how a myth may grip individuals and groups by coagulating their experiences and by creating narrative significance in their lives. Specifically, as we shift away from understanding myth as barrier that critical theory must penetrate, to seeing it as a distinct mode of symbolic orientation, we must also shift our attention to the reception of political myths. As much as dominant groups in our society use their power to influence the production of certain political myths, their effectiveness ultimately is dependent on their reception in society. Specifically, the strength and vitality of any political myth is necessarily dependent on its ability to provide unity and significance to individuals and groups in their particular socio-political order. It is precisely this sense of significance that provides us with a sense of unity and meaning in our political order and opens the possibility for individuals to act as socio-political agents despite a sense of epistemological indeterminacy in the world.

Looking at a contemporary example, let us suppose that Rupert Murdoch were to attempt to create a political myth that he was selected by God to be the leader of the United States and lead America to a free market promised land. Further, suppose that he were to use his entire media empire to further this narrative. Although I suppose that there may be some citizens who would accept this narrative in such a way that it becomes an important myth in their lives, I suspect that for the most part this political myth would fail to gain political traction and would ultimately fail. The failure of such a political myth is not answerable in
terms of Murdoch’s socio-political control over institutions, but rather in terms of
the myth’s inability to provide a sense of significance within the existing political
conditions for the vast majority of Americans. The resistance to such a myth may
stem from a number of rational and mythical sources: a skepticism concerning the
theological legitimacy of the myth, a belief in the inherent contradictions of the
free market system, or a political defence of democracy against authoritarianism,
among others. Whatever the source of the resistance to such a political myth, what
is important is that our understanding of a political myth must include an
understanding of how the narrative provided unity and significance to a group’s
political conditions.

The receptivity of political myths is important to critical pedagogues,
especially in critically engaging the myths inherent within our education system. If
myths are understood as ideological illusions that mask reality, then the role of
critical theory is an easy one. For instance, if there is a political myth, the role of
the critical educator is to work with the students to expose the deceptive nature of
the myth and, in turn, help guide the students into perceiving the true reality of the
unjust social order in order to transform it. However, if we take seriously the
political myth’s narrative significance within the political order, traditional forms
of critical analysis are insufficient. At the most fundamental level, the reception
and acceptance of a political myth may be completely distinct to the truth or falsity
of the narrative. Recall, once again, political myths are not historical or scientific
accounts of politics but, rather, narratives with a constant core that function as an
essential mode of symbolic orientation. Moreover, even if critical theory were to
show the irrationality and contradictions in believing a particular myth, it does not
follow that it will simply be abandoned depending on the strength of significance
that it provides a group. The myth of the “clash of civilization” serves as a perfect
e example of this. As Bottici and Challand (2006) point out, despite a significant
amount of rational criticism, the political myth continues to be embraced by a large number of Americans (p. 322–322). Moreover, a critical educator may facilitate critical analyses and dialogues concerning this myth to reveal its xenophobic roots and inherent contradictions. And while such critical analysis is well placed and certainly important to critical pedagogical practice, an educator may fail to expose with the students the sense of significance that this mode of orientation provides them and their community.

4.6 Critical Pedagogy, Political Myth, and Reason

Blumenberg’s conception of myth also provides further insight into the relationship between political myth and critical reason. As noted, while critical pedagogy embraces critical theory’s metatheoretical reflection, as an educational philosophy it ultimately rests on reason. As Blumenberg (1979/1985, 1996) argues, however, myth in modern society is created in the gaps of epistemological indeterminacy that is left from reason. I take this point to be one of the fundamental differences between my Blumenbergian account of political myth and the critical pedagogical conception. For critical pedagogues, any meaningful form of critical resistance and social transformation should be grounded in a critical theoretical rationale (Giroux, 1983, p. 107). Inherent in this view is the assumption that critical reason is epistemologically sufficient to guide human action in a way that will transform the world. Without denying the importance of critical reason in education and politics, I think we should be skeptical of the claim that liberatory praxis can unite analytic and practical reason in a way that is sufficient to lead to emancipation and significant democratic change in our social order. Following Blumenberg, I think that critical pedagogues, despite their critique of the enlightenment, fall into the same trap as their predecessors by believing that reason can sufficiently answer the questions inherited from mythic cultures and fulfill all
of our epistemological needs within a complex and indeterminate socio-political system.

Moreover, if critical pedagogy could provide an adequate theoretical grounding for critical praxis in a way that provides epistemological certainty and an adequate foundation for us to act as autonomous agents, then political myth would be unnecessary. However, as Blumenberg (1996) argues, the very nature of the complexity of our world and humans as political beings makes indeterminacy a fact of our socio-political order. To this end, political myths are both a necessary and irremovable part of our political order insofar as we are compelled to act as political agents in the world, but we have to do so without the certainty of political truths. As Blumenberg (1996) points out, in many cases the belief in myth may be both rational and necessary given our epistemological uncertainty and our need to act. In this sense, political myth, far from being a deceptive mask of reality, is an important mode of orientation that can serve as narrative guide to our practical intelligence where reason may be inadequate.

If we take seriously political myth’s necessary function within our political order, then critical educators are faced with a unique challenge in engaging these narratives in the education system. In particular, as we critically analyze political myths with our students and colleagues, the critical analysis of myths, regardless of their effectiveness, will not negate our need for such myths. For instance, suppose that a critical educator and students, through critical dialogue and problem-posing methods, are able to effectively critique a particularly harmful political myth in such a way that students are compelled to abandon it. It does not follow that through this critique, students’ and educators’ need for a political myth is concurrently abandoned. Having abandoned a particular political myth, students and teachers alike would be compelled to reoccupy the myth with another insofar as critical theory and reason cannot sufficiently fill the epistemological void.
created by the critique. This does not negate the importance of critiquing certain insidious and harmful political myths, but rather to argue that once a political myth is cast aside we may legitimately ask: What is going to replace it? In other words, traditionally, the rejection of a political myth was thought to reveal reality and clear the way for the possibility of critical reason to dialectically guide human action towards justice. In contrast, I want to suggest the rejection of a political myth by critical theory reopens an epistemological indeterminacy that critical pedagogues must try to reoccupy. Moreover, if the conceptual tools of critical reason are insufficient to reoccupy this position, which I think they are, then we have to either articulate political myths that are rooted in our desire for a more just and democratic world or at minimum be aware of the possibility that other political myths will be worked on and received by these groups.

4.7 Political Myths in Critical Pedagogy

By acknowledging the banality of political myth within our society, critical pedagogy should also begin to reflect upon and evaluate the positive role such mythical narratives may have with our individual and collective political aims. To this end, a more substantive understanding of myth does not simply lead to more conceptual obstacles to overcome, but it also offers new possibilities for understanding how democratic change and social transformation can be nurtured in education through this mode of symbolic orientation. In fact, I would argue that political myth has been an implicit but unacknowledged part of much of critical pedagogy from its inception. Among the most notable political myths that have served as the narrative core to critical pedagogy has been Marx’s myth of the proletariat revolution. From the work of Freire (1969/2000) and McLaren (1989) to the work of Henry Giroux (1983, 2004), the proletariat myth works with their theoretical analysis to provide narrative significance to their work. Although their discussion may vary slightly in details, central to all of these educational theorists
is the narrative that the oppressed, through liberatory praxis, will collectively unite in a process of emancipation and subsequently recreate the social order to make it more democratic and just. Undoubtedly, these philosophers bring many facts to bear in order to provide justification for this political myth. However, in the end, it is a narrative that provides an important mode of orientation and sense of significance to critical pedagogues and the oppressed. Specifically, I would argue that amidst a reality where human suffering and injustice is widespread and accepted, this political myth serves as an important narrative to the social imaginary of our culture. The political myth offers the possibility and hope that through collective actions and human reflection, groups can and will fight for a better world; more than this, the collective struggle also opens the possibility of a just and moral world free of human suffering and oppression. As such, the call to resist injustice and the subsequent redemption of the oppressed produces significance among those that receive this myth while concurrently uniting both the exploited and marginalized in society as well those groups of privilege that struggle with them. In acknowledging the importance of this political myth to the critical pedagogical tradition, we should, in turn, resist the temptation to dismiss this myth as insignificant storytelling. On the contrary, we should embrace political myths as a necessary part of our ability to unite towards democratic change.

Remarkably, among the most notable critical pedagogues to infuse his or her work with political myth is none other than Paulo Freire himself. Despite his critique of myth, much of Freire’s work draws on political myth to provide a narrative foundation to his critical praxis. As noted, at the most fundamental level, Freire draws on the Marxist myth of proletariat revolution. What is often ignored by education theorists in discussing Freire’s educational philosophy is that in drawing on this myth he does so as a part of the liberation theology movement.
For Freire, the liberation of the oppressed and the transformation of an unjust social order are grounded in his belief in salvation history and the Biblical narratives of Moses and the Israelites and in Jesus’s redemption of the oppressed. Aside from the interesting fact that many critical pedagogues simply ignore Freire’s Christian roots, I think that his roots in liberation theology lend credence to the fact that, as much as he brings reason to bear on the issue of oppression and injustice, he also implicitly acknowledges the importance of a narrative and mythical dimension to human progress and redemption. More simply, the narrative of humanity’s love of one another, including the poor, and the hope that we can unite to transform this world is as significant to his critical foundation as Marxist dialectical theory.

Furthermore, Freire’s account of humans’ existential interaction with the world also echoes the importance of narrative and rhetoric as a constitutive part of human praxis. He argues that through praxis, men and women both create history and become historical beings. It is through this unique interaction between humans and the world that humans can “tri-dimensionalize time into the past, the present and the future, their history, in the function of their own creations, develops as a constant process of transformation” (Freire, 1968/2000, p. 101). It is through this unique interaction within and between humans that he claims that a complex set of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges emerge, which he calls “epochal units.” Moreover, he (1968/2000) argues that the concrete representations of these “ideas, values, concepts, and hopes, as well as the obstacles which impede people’s humanization constitute the themes of epoch” (p. 101). For example, he (1968/2000) argues that a fundamental theme of our epoch is that of domination, which necessarily implies that its opposite is a theme for which we should strive. Further, he argues that the complex interacting between themes of an epoch constitute its “thematic universe” (p. 101). Interestingly, Freire
(1968/2000) argues that all societies contain both larger universal, continental, and historical themes as well as smaller epochal sub-units that are generated through the diversification of themes within smaller community circles (p. 103).

Freire’s discussion of epochal units and the thematic universe is an interesting feature of his theory in the context of our discussion of political myths. As W. Ross Winterowd argues in his article “Black Holes, Indeterminacy, and Paulo Freire” (1983), despite Freire’s insistence on epistemological objectivity through reason, his own philosophy has elements that are highly epistemologically indeterminate. Further, Winterowd (1983) argues it is this sense of epistemological indeterminacy that highlights the importance of rhetoric throughout Freire’s various works (pp. 33–34).

Following Winterowd’s insight, it is evident that Freire’s discussion of the thematic universe and epochal units has a closer affinity to the concept of the social imaginary and Blumenbergian political myths within our world than to traditional objectivist accounts of reality. Freire is correct to point out how humans’ relationship with the world creates unique, complex sets of values, ideas, concepts, and hopes. Moreover, as Freire suggests, we can divide and understand these lived situations thematically. It is evident, however, that myths in general, and political myths in particular, are a fundamental and implicit part of the “thematic universe.” More specifically, it is humanity’s ability to generate coherent myths that provide us with significance and makes possible our ability to comprehend our existence thematically. To use Freire’s example, we can understand this epoch as one characterized by domination only insofar as we can understand a specific set of values, ideas, beliefs, and hopes that are situated within a specific myth of human progress that emphasizes our moral, political, and rational assent to individual and collective self-realization—what Freire calls
“humanization.” In other words, it is the mythic core of Freire’s philosophy that
directs and provides meaning to his critical praxis.12

4.8 Political Myth, Critical Pedagogy, and Praxis

It is my contention, then, that political myths are an important conceptual
corollary to critical pedagogy’s emphasis on praxis as a dialectic of
reflection/theory and practice in education. The importance of praxis in education
is one of the important conceptual elements that critical pedagogy has certainly
influenced in the area of philosophy of education. On the one hand, praxis resists
the reduction of reflection to pure verbalism and idealism. Critical thought and
reason is understood as an essential human activity that should not be abstracted
away from the social conditions and material practices in which it takes place.
Critical pedagogues also argue that reflection must be intimately tied to other
human practices, such as teaching, that make up human experiences. Without
critical reflection and theory, people may fail to understand how their beliefs and
practices are influenced by the harmful effects of the existing power structure, or,

12 I think that Freire himself would most likely resist this interpretation.
Specifically, it could be argued that critical reflection and theory allows us to
objectivise the thematic universe in a way that is distinct from our narrative
orientation of the world. Here, I gather, we have returned to the issue of our faith
and optimism in critical reason. And as much as I defend Freire’s emphasis on
critical reason decoding the world and providing an absolutely essential means to
both understanding and transforming our social order, I do so without believing
that it can simply replace our mythic understanding of the world in its entirety.
Even if we could completely decode the world and expose the existing social
order’s limits, situations, and oppression, there is and always will be a need for
myths to provide unity and significance in our society. This especially holds true
when we traverse the very complex and contentious area of political values, ideas,
concepts, and hopes that lay at the foundation of our social imaginary. As we do
so, political myths become an important means by which we can collectively unite
amidst uncertainty and create a particular sense of significance with our society.
even if they perceive these injustices, their actions may turn into directionless activism (Freire, 1998, p. 30). To this end, praxis’s transformative power emerges from the dialectical process of critical reflection and practice interacting in the material and social conditions of the world in a way that resists, disrupts, and attempts to transform all human thought and practices that create and maintain injustice in our world.

For critical pedagogues, education is an important point of interaction and development of praxis for obvious reasons. First, our modern education system is one of the important socio-political institutions that transmit and teach a society’s beliefs, values, and cultural practices. As such, critical praxis becomes an essential mode of interpreting and resisting those beliefs, values, and practices that encourage the maintenance of the status quo and injustice in the world. In addition, education is also a focal point in terms of developing and implementing pedagogical practices that develop with students their ability to critically reflect and act in this world in order to transform it. In other words, the relationships between teachers and students are understood as crucial educational opportunities that offer the hope and possibility of developing and nurturing praxis within learning communities that are devoted to social change.

Recall, once again, that political myth must be understood within our situated and contextual interaction with the world. For this reason, political myth should not be understood as a form of idealism but rather as highly contextualized narratives that emerge out of our collective experience of particular political conditions. If we understand political myths as a necessary and inevitable part of our political experience, then it is precisely within praxis that myths manifest themselves and intertwine themselves with reflection, theory, and practices. More to the point, in locating and understanding political myths, we should not look solely to theoretical and abstract origins or features, but rather to how these
narratives are a part of the interaction of human reflection and practice. Not only does the need for political myths emerge from our interaction within the world but so too do the effects of myth—namely, its ability to collectively unite groups by providing them with a sense of significance for various beliefs, values, and actions within our society. The myth of the “clash of civilization,” for example, does not simply manifest itself benignly in human thought. Its socio-political force is derived from the fact that it becomes part of a large number of people’s processes of reflection and practice. As a narrative that provides groups with a sense of significance and coagulates their experiences, it alters both how they reflect on the world as well as their various actions.

4.9 Political Myth as a Symbolic Ally of Social Transformation

For critical pedagogues, understanding political myth in the substantive sense does more than simply make their critiques of political myth more complex. As I take it, one of Blumenberg’s great insights into myth is that we should re-evaluate their positive role and the function they have within contemporary society. Once we strip myth away from its illusionary and irrational characterization, we find that many political myths can serve the same democratic ends that critical pedagogues have allied themselves with. To put it more bluntly, there is no necessary theoretical or pedagogical reason to separate political myth from praxis that aims at challenging existing injustices and nurturing democratic transformation. In fact, as Blumenberg reveals through his articulation of the principle of insufficient reason, our practical engagement of the world through praxis might make embracing a political myth that serves our democratic ends more rational than embracing normative prescriptions from a technocratic and positivist system. Thus, it is not political myths in and of themselves that are
incompatible with critical praxis but rather myths that fail to serve the democratic values, beliefs, hopes, and practices of critical pedagogy that are problematic.\textsuperscript{13}

At the most fundamental level, as we assess the limits to what theory and critical reason can provide individuals and groups that are engaged in democratic struggles in our schools, we begin to see the importance of political myths to the recreation of our social order. For better or worse, critical theory and reflection cannot provide a comprehensive philosophical foundation that provides a complete mode of orienting us morally and politically in the world. As we have seen with the implicit use of myth within critical pedagogues’ work, political myths provide a crucial narrative orientation that works with our ability to critically reflect on the world in order to change it. As Blumenberg (1985) himself points out, aside from the fact that myths provide a more distinct symbolic mode of orientation to understand and interact with the world than do rational accounts, they also excel at providing groups with significance that infuses their understanding and interactions with the political order with heightened forms of meaning and importance. To Blumenberg’s point, as good as critical pedagogy is at critically dissecting our social order and revealing its contradictions and inherent incoherence, it struggles

\textsuperscript{13} My defence of political myth in relation to critical pedagogy is not to eschew moral, political truths that emerge through human experience. On the contrary, as we begin to delve deeper into the political landscape through praxis, certain truths have and will continue to emerge. Rather, it is to argue that our need for narrative significance through political myths will, as Blumenberg argues, always exist as we continue to seek symbolic congruence with the world. In many cases, these political myths will obscure truth and the betterment of humanity, such as we find in the myth of the clash of civilizations. At the same time, in many cases political myths will open the possibility of acting more justly and humanely in the world; these myths will serve as the narrative force behind our aspirations to transform this world from one that serves the few at the expense of the many to an order that is ruled by all for the benefit of all.
with philosophically articulating the very sense of significance that political myth provides.

More to the point, critical pedagogy needs the political myth of democratic progress, the liberation of the oppressed, and the overcoming of injustice through our collective will in order to unite groups with a particular sense of significance to our political world. To use an example discussed earlier, it is not a coincidence that in Marx’s early works that focus on praxis, he relies on political myth to supplement his arguments. Nor is it a coincidence that as Marx’s later works moved towards the social science of our socio-political order, politicians and revolutionaries resorted to working his ideas into political myths that fit complex contexts that they confronted while practically engaging their communities. In both cases, our practical intelligence needs narrative significance to engage on a practical level our political experiences. As we move into a state of critical praxis with our socio-political order, political myths become an essential means of engaging the world. It is precisely political myth’s ability to orient us and provide significance to our political order that critical reason alone struggles to fill when engaging politics at its material and practical foundation.¹⁴

¹⁴ Further, and certainly a related point, political myth’s importance to praxis is also evident at its point of engagement with theory and practice. As Blumenberg argues, myth provides a mode of orientation where reason alone is insufficient. For philosopher Philip Rose, this insight into myth provides an interesting point of intersection with speculative philosophy (Rose, 2007). He argues that many of the grand, speculative philosophical systems created by Kant, Hegel, and Whitehead share the same quasitranscendental foundation as myth and in many cases use mythic means of operation, such as circularity, to strengthen their ties to the transcendental ideal of Truth.

A similar point is made by Leszek Kolakowski in the context of discussing Habermas’s theory in *Main Currents of Marxism* (2005). Kolakowski (2005) argues that Habermas works under the precarious assumption that critical reason and knowledge can be united with our practical reflection and interaction with the
Let me be clear on some of the implications of my argument that political myths should be understood as a key part of critical pedagogy’s account of praxis. First, I am not arguing that political myth should supplant critical theory and reflection. For one, given contemporary culture and the nature of reason I, along with Blumenberg, am highly skeptical that any political myth could replace rational accounts of our society. Here, once again, I think that Cassirer’s view that the myth of the Ayran race replaced reason is flawed. The Nazi myth did not replace reason but rather supplemented it for their evil ends. I am arguing instead that political myth works and should work with reason and theory in conjunction with our other practices. To this end, critical theory works on political myths within the particular contexts of our socio-political orders; further, political myths supplement our critical reflection and theory by uniting us in narrative significance and coagulating our experiences as we act in the world. In turn, as we act in the world our experiences and practices further inform both our theoretical constructs, our reflective processes as well as our political myths.

Under this conception, much like critical pedagogues’ traditional account of praxis, the reciprocal interaction between our modes of symbolic orientation (reason and myth) and practices is crucial. As Freire (1968/2000) argues, theory without other practices becomes pure academic verbalism (p. 87). Likewise, political myth must also be united with other practices that work on myth and are infused with myth. Simply, if political myths are not worked on or do not adequately meet the needs of the lived political conditions of communities, then

world with little trouble (p. 1101). Interestingly, Kolakowksi (2005) argues that this unity is extraordinarily problematic without framing the relationship within the context of a mythic mode of orientation (p. 1102).
they become narrative relics; at its very essence a political myth must be received
and collectively worked on in order that it does not just become another story
among others. More than this, both modes of orientation have to interact
conceptually with one another. This is undoubtedly the more difficult conceptual
relationship to articulate given the historical antinomy between *mythos* and *logos.*
This difficulty aside, as I have tried to reveal through Blumenberg and the implicit
role of political myth in Freire’s philosophy, there need not be an either/or choice
between critical reason and political myth. In my account, it means that without
losing their critical theoretical roots, critical pedagogues must accept the limits of
reason and resist the temptation to think that theory can and should supplant all
narrative modes of orientation. Concurrently, in accepting political myth, critical
pedagogues also must ensure that they do not fall into Sorel’s trap of thinking
political myth should supplant critical theory and reflection.

This last point is an important one in discussing the role of critical theory
and political myth. As Bottici (2007) argues in her work, Sorel makes the mistake
of thinking that political myths are completely immune to rational critique insofar
as their political force resides in their ability to unite the feeling and emotions of a
group (p. 162). As I argued earlier, political myths undoubtedly create certain
unique conceptual challenges to those critiquing them because of their form and
their function within society. Consequently, as educators critically engage political
myths they must do so understanding the true and substantive philosophical
complexity of these narratives. They must take seriously how political myth
unites, moves, and grips critics, administrators, teachers, and students alike.

It does not follow, however, that we cannot rationally critique political
myths nor that such critique cannot influence the abandonment of myths. Humans
in contemporary culture are not either mythic or rational, but rather both. As such,
we can bring reason to bear on various narratives to reveal their incoherence, their
contradictory nature, and their fallacious characteristics. The critiques of the Nazis’ myth of the Aryan race or the “clash of civilizations” serve as good examples. For both political myths, the rational critique and discussion of these myths undoubtedly led and will continue to lead people to question and abandon them. This point is particularly salient as we understand the moral and ethical implications that practical reason brings to bear on these political myths. Simply put, just because the Nazis’ anti-Semitic views took the form of political myth does not prevent us from rationally critiquing or understanding the moral implications and effects these narratives had. In fact, if such moral reasoning was brought to bear on the myth earlier by more of the world, then much of the harm that was inflicted might have been prevented. I take one of the lessons learned from WW II to be that critical reason must be directed consistently and swiftly upon harmful myths when they rear their ugly heads in contemporary culture.

At the same time, we find that despite these critiques and critical discourse that certain groups dogmatically hold to these myths insofar as they provide a sense of significance and symbolic unity to their lives. However, it does not follow from this unfortunate fact of life that we should collectively negate the importance of critical reason engaging these myths. On the contrary, it points rather to the importance of this struggle as well as the importance of working on myths that serve our democratic ends.

4.10 Next Steps: Political Myth and Critical Pedagogy

The key, then, in engaging critical praxis that includes theory, myth, and practice in education is twofold. First, following the critical pedagogical tradition, we should decode and understand beliefs, values, ideas, and practices in education that produce and reproduce injustices both within our society in general and in schools specifically. Included in this critique is articulating and critically analyzing political myths that currently occupy important roles within our
education systems. As a part of the articulation of these political myths there must be an examination of the mythical means of operation that these narratives possess. It is only by coming to a deeper understanding of how these myths work that one can begin any meaningful critique. It is this very process that my subsequent chapters on the political myths of meritocracy and neoliberalism will try to critically articulate and engage in.

Secondly, and certainly just as important, is the examination and articulation of strands of democratic myth. Hence, following critical pedagogues, I am arguing that all thought and theory must be “tied to a specific interest in the development of a society without injustice” (Giroux, 1983, p. 19). This, as I take it, is an important element of engaging in political myth within the context of critical pedagogical philosophy. More specifically, one of the key elements of critical pedagogy is that this tradition insists that theory cannot be value neutral; as such, critical pedagogical theory “takes sides in the interest of struggling for a better world” (Giroux, 1983, p. 19). In the same vein, I am arguing that in uniting critical theory with political myth, we concurrently unite them for the same purpose. Just as critical educators use theory for the goal of justice, so too should we make use of political myth. As such, critical pedagogues should engage and work on political myths that unequivocally aim at creating and developing a better world that is free from injustice. Hence, educators and students who engage in critical praxis unite both their symbolic modes of orientation under the same political ends. As a result, political myths, just like their theoretical counterparts, are critically assessed based on their practical contribution to human freedom, happiness, and justice rather than on their symbolic form. Articulating a positive account of political myth as a part of critical praxis is an important element for critical pedagogues, especially given the pervasive and banal nature of myth. As I noted earlier, if our critical engagement of particular myths challenges or even
undermines these narratives, we must at least try to articulate existing democratic myth and potentially more democratic and just myths that can reoccupy the mythic void left by critical praxis. Failure to do so risks either the adoption of alternative myths that may also undermine the possibility of social transformation by individuals or groups or possibly a return to the previously critiqued myths despite their incoherence and lack of soundness.

In the two subsequent chapters, I will address the first area of critical inquiry. Specifically, I will articulate what I take to be the two most powerful political myths that occupy our education system: the myth of meritocracy and the neoliberal myth. In both cases, I will examine how each myth serves as an important symbolic mode of orientation for the various members of the educational community and provides unity to their experiences in schools as well as a sense of significance. More than this, I aim to reveal how these myths, as they are currently worked on in our schools, fundamentally undermine and erode the nurturing of democratic educational pedagogy. In this sense, I will be uniting critical reason with analysis, and applying it to existing undemocratic myths in education.

In terms of the second line of inquiry, I will return to articulating a positive account of democratic myth and nurturing said myth in our schools in the final two chapters of my work.
Chapter 5
The Myth of Meritocracy

5.1 Introduction

Having articulated the importance of uniting critical pedagogy and a Blumenbergian conception myth, in this chapter I will turn my attention to the articulation and critical examination of one particularly powerful socio-political myth that is embedded within our current education system: the myth of meritocracy. Drawing on Blumenberg’s (1979/1985) view that we must go beyond the mythos and logos antinomy by reconceptualising myth and the limits of reason, I will argue that far from the meritocratic myth being an irrational and imaginative fiction, it is rather a narrative that is received and worked on by administrators, teachers and students alike, providing them with narrative unity and a sense of significance to their socio-political order.

Central to this chapter, then, will be articulating how the myth of meritocracy is received and worked on within schools. Specifically, as I argued in the previous chapter, the critical pedagogical tradition must understand socio-political myths, in this case the myth of meritocracy, in the substantive sense. In doing this, drawing on Blumenberg’s conception of myth (1979/1985), I will articulate the narrative core of the myth of meritocracy as well as how this particular myth is received, worked on, and particularized within educational communities in a way that provides a sense of narrative unity and significance to its members. More than this, I will argue that, despite the myth’s appeal, in its existing narrative and institutional form it legitimizes existing inequities in our social order and thus undermines the possibility of democratic change to our socio-political order.
I will begin this chapter by examining the theoretical and historical roots of meritocracy as well as its narrative core. In particular, I will argue that meritocracy began as a theoretical construct and transformed into an essential part of our existing social imaginary. Secondly, I will further articulate this narrative core of the myth of meritocracy through an examination of the film *The Pursuit of Happyness* and its protagonist, Chris Gardner.

Having articulated the historical roots and mythical core of meritocracy, I turn my analysis to how the myth is an essential symbolic mode of orientation in our current school system as well as in our socio-economic order. Of particular note, I will examine how the reception and work on the myth is effectively correlated to the institutional practices of schools and in our consumer-based economy.

In the second half of this chapter, I will critically examine the philosophical and social implications of the myth of meritocracy in the context of embracing and nurturing, critical democratic practices in the classroom as well as the goal of creating a just, democratic social order. It is essential to recall that, in doing so, I will be reaffirming my view that we must critically examine myths despite the fact that they pose unique challenges to reason. As such, I will begin my critique of the myth by examining the incoherence of the primary assumption of merited progress. Subsequently, I will turn my critical attention towards articulating how the myth of meritocracy inevitably undermines the possibility of democratic change insofar as it necessarily affirms and legitimizes the existing inequities in society.

5.2 The Historical and Theoretical Roots of the Myth of Meritocracy

It has been over 60 years since the idea of creating a meritocratic social order swept through North America’s political and social institutions. The term meritocracy was coined by English sociologist Michael Young to denote a society
that confers social, political, and economic rewards to its citizens based on their desire and ability to earn advancement rather than on social circumstances such as birth (Young, 1958, pp. 17–29). In fact, one could argue that the notion of earning socio-economic advancement has, in a very short period of time, become the very fabric of our current institutions, including education. Canadian schools, like those of our American and European counterparts, have become central institutions that provide students with the opportunity to earn advancement in our society. In this sense, education has come to be unanimously perceived as the “great equalizer” of our social order; an institution that provides an equal opportunity for all students to work hard and use their talents for social advancement.

The idea of creating a meritocratic social order emerged out of a strong reaction by academics and politicians against the privileged class at the turn of the twentieth century. In North America, there was a growing concern among many politicians and intellectuals that nepotism and the perpetuation of aristocratic class was detrimental to both American and Canadian societies. During this time universities generally functioned as institutions for the upper class to reproduce itself by conferring intergenerational social status. Specifically, in the United States, Harvard University became symbolic of ceremoniously rubber-stamping social privilege onto the sons and daughters of American oligarchs (Lemann, 1999, p. 49).

By the 1940s an increased sense of skepticism arose among many cultural critics and academics about whether the existing social order was the most appropriate fit for highly industrialized and complex North American societies. What emerged was the view that modern capitalist societies should be run and guided by a significantly different group of individuals; a group that was intellectually superior rather than simply rich, and who embraced capitalist values of hard work and obedience rather than the values of bourgeois high culture
(Lemann, 1999, pp. 42–52). From this general view emerged the construction of the philosophical argument for the creation of a new merit-based society that would be led by what Thomas Jefferson over century earlier had called a “natural aristocracy” (Lemann, 1999, p. 45).

The central philosophical assumption that lay at the foundation of the meritocratic social order is the view that all humans are born with natural abilities and assets that are hierarchically differentiated (Husen, 1974, p. 10; Lemann, 1999, pp. 17–26; Young, 1958, p. 49). Hence, each individual genetically inherits different capacities and skills that range significantly from one to another. Within this vast gradation of capacities and skills, whether it is an ability to do math or create a work of art, groups of individuals are “naturally” sorted into a hierarchy with a small group of individuals displaying superior ability (Lemann, 1999, pp. 25–26). To use a popular example, it has been shown that Einstein was genetically blessed with a brain that was naturally superior at performing mathematics and physics than the average person’s brain (Abraham, 2001). For the early defenders of the meritocracy system, the goal was to create a society that reproduces this natural hierarchy in society by ensuring that intellectually superior individuals such as Einstein fulfill their role as the elite of society.  

If this sounds familiar, it is because it is not quite a novel philosophical argument. Plato had an identical argument nearly 2,500 years earlier. Of course, Plato argued in *The Republic* (1974) that humans were also naturally sorted by ability, and that society should mirror this ordering with the “guardian” class of philosopher kings at the apex. While it is certainly beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate the similarities and differences between Plato and the modern meritocratic system, it is interesting to note that the former was a staunch enemy of democracy (Popper, 1962). Moreover, an important part of his disdain for democracy came from his concern that democratic equality leads to an unstable and unjust society because tolerance for plurality of desires among citizens debases collective and individual discipline, organization, and planning (Plato, 1974, pp. 561–563).
The defenders of meritocracy argue that education has a central role in reproducing nature’s hierarchy. In a meritocracy, education must be a social institution that allows individuals to ascend to their appropriate social rank. Several distinct characteristics differentiate the meritocratic school system from its predecessors. First, it must be objective and value neutral in assessing students in order to ensure that the population is ranked without bias (Husen, 1974, p. 27; Young, 1958, pp. 55–60). Of course, central to ranking is the movement towards creating common standards to compare all students against one another (Husen, 1974, p. 99). Secondly, the school system provides motivation for the students by creating a competitive climate and external rewards such as grades, praise, and access to scarce positions in universities (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 2). In doing so, the students will be psychologically driven to put forth their best effort, in order that they maximize the use of their natural endowments.

Within a meritocratic social order, it is argued that a student’s merit is determined by a combination of his or her natural abilities and the amount of effort he or she puts into his or her educational studies. At any given point in a student’s career, the mixture of these two factors should necessarily determine his or her rank within the hierarchy of the school. Based on this system, the most talented and driven individuals will emerge at the top of the class. In turn, these students will be provided with the opportunity to attend universities and subsequently enter into the positions of social privilege in society. Most importantly, throughout the various systems of ranking, these students deserve their social position on the basis of earning it rather than their ranking being based primarily on their parents’ social status.

In this sense, our education system is very much analogous to a formal foot race. Specifically, the education system sets up an objective and neutral way of measuring competitors performances by forming both a common length and
common units for measuring the race. In this sense, the established length of the race, width of the lanes, and the timing mechanisms are thought to be similar to the objective compartments of knowledge and objective means of evaluating and measuring students moving through these compartments. In addition, the education system provides incentives to those who are successful in the race. Just as the Usain Bolts of the world are provided with financial and social capital to motivate them, so are our students, who are offered a vast array of financial and social possibilities for reaching their merited ranking in the world, from prestigious roles in academia to captains of industry to the political managers of our social order. Once more, by fixing these variables in the race, one can accurately rank the competitors based on their natural ability to run and the effort they put forth during the race. Further, if all these variables are fixed appropriately than each competitor presumably deserves their ranking.\footnote{It is important to note that the meritocratic movement in education did take slightly different forms in Canada than it did in the United States. In the USA, the meritocracy movement was married to rigorous intelligence testing in the form of the IQ and SAT tests (Lemann, 1999). In contrast, Canadian schools preferred measuring students’ merit by testing their mastery of a common body of information in the various academic disciplines (Stamp, 1982). Of course, more recently this distinction has become more tenuous, although, as I will discuss further, the goal of standardization drives both systems. This difference being noted, both the Canadian and American education systems embraced the meritocratic ideal that education should be an institution that was “open” in the sense that it allowed for social mobility among students based on their natural ability and effort.}

It is important to note that as a social and educational theory, meritocracy contained in its original form certain democratic roots. Most obviously, meritocracy fundamentally challenged the aristocratic caste system that unjustly oppressed millions. Drawing on the idea of equal opportunity, defenders of meritocracy argued that the existing social order in North America fundamentally
limited the opportunities of the vast majority of the country’s citizens while concurrently benefiting a small segment of society. In essence, the cycle of inherited privilege was criticized as being fundamentally unjust and harmful to society. More than simply criticizing the existing social order, defenders of meritocracy, such as Henry Chauncey and Harvard president James Conant, provided a rational and scientifically grounded alternative that could be practically implemented by radically redesigning the education system (Lemann, 1999, p. 141).

In addition, meritocratic theory also effectively tied the idea of equality of opportunity to fairness and social mobility. The creation of the meritocratic society would fundamentally alter the existing socio-political structures so that the individual rather than the privileged class would be the keystone to society. Afforded the opportunity and proper social structures, the hard-working and talented individual could climb the social ladder of privilege and, without complications, realize the social, economic, and political benefits that may once have been impossible. Further, the individual achieving such status would do so fairly and deservedly because he or she was competing against his or her fellow hard-working and talented citizens. Democratic legitimacy thus shifted to the mobility of the individual within the existing social structures. In this sense, the democratic state would function to secure the opportunity for the talented individual to achieve all of his or her political and social goals.

Further, given the historical context of the idea of meritocracy circulating North America—namely, the socio-political reality of the Cold War—it is important to note that early meritocratic pioneers framed the meritocratic social modes as a democratic alternative to communism. Specifically, early advocates of the meritocratic system were adamant in framing the social organization of American society on the basis of equality of opportunity and a structural openness
to social mobility rather than equality in rewards (Lemann, 1999, p. 40). And while the legitimacy of this theoretical distinction can be called into question, what is important is that in making the distinction American, meritocratic defenders such as Conant were careful to try to situate their idea within two American democratic traditions. The first tradition, which I have already noted, is that they drew heavily on America’s Jeffersonian roots and argued that socio-economic class was justified and beneficial as long as it was merited (Lemann, 1999, p. 217). Secondly, they also drew on the Emersonian and Protestant roots that emphasized the importance of self-reliance, individual responsibility, and hard work. And while both of these traditions did not have the vision of creating a highly bureaucratized social order, they did provide an important political familiarity with and general sense of acceptance of the political ideas inherent in a meritocracy. \(^{(17)}\)

### 5.3 Meritocracy as Political Myth and the Case Study of Chris Gardner

As noted from the outset of this section, it is my contention that meritocracy is more than simply a theoretical guide to modern society; it became and remains a powerful political myth that is at the narrative core of our social imaginary. One way to understand the differentiation between meritocracy as social theory and as a

\(^{(17)}\) Despite the democratic appeal of meritocracy, one fascinating feature of the history of the meritocratic movement is that it was originally distinct from the mass-education movement that argued for equal access and opportunity for all citizens. In fact, it was not until the 1960s, with an increased concern about efficiently using our society’s talent pool in a competitive global market, that the idea to extend the possibility of social mobility to all citizens came into fruition (Lemann, 1999; Stamp, 1982, pp. 203–224). It was during this time that the creation of an open society was wedded to the liberal-democratic principle of equal opportunity for *all* citizens (Aronowitz, 1997). Moreover, it was through this union that our current education system solidified its role as the great equalizer of our current social order.
political myth is to look at the points of symbolic emphasis. For theorists, the focus is primarily on meritocracy as a system of social organization. And while the nature of the social system, as I will discuss, is important to citizens, the primary focus when looking at meritocracy as myth is understanding it as a narrative of human progress. More specifically, the meritocracy myth is a narrative guide to each of our socio-political ascents or descents within our established social hierarchy. Fundamentally, it tells the story of how individuals progress or regress within this social order based on their talents and effort set amidst an open and fair social system.

Of course, the meritocratic myth is ubiquitous to say the least. A notable example is the story of American millionaire Chris Gardner, famously depicted by Will Smith in the film *The Pursuit of Happyness*. The film tells the highly dramatic story of Gardner, who, graduating at the top of his class from high school and naval school, unwisely makes a large investment into x-ray equipment. His entrepreneurial failure leads to a number of unfortunate events, from his wife leaving him to being evicted from his apartment with his young son. At the same time, Gardner uses his intellect and drive to gain a prominent internship at a Californian stock brokerage firm. Unfortunately, the internship does not provide a salary and consequently Gardner, with his son in tow, is forced to take refuge in the streets, subways, and homeless shelters of San Francisco. Amidst this suffering, however, Gardner never loses his hope that through his talents and hard work he will achieve his goal of becoming a millionaire. Amazingly, Gardner distinguishes himself through his intellectual gifts, ingenuity, and sheer effort over his peers and becomes the top intern and is, in turn, hired by the firm. The film ends with a scene reflecting Gardner’s continued love for his son and a narrative update that reveals that he would go on to start his own successful stock brokerage company and become a multi-millionaire.
Regardless of the dramatic and fictitious qualities in translating Gardner’s life to film, his story provides a perfect example of meritocracy as myth. While depicting only a brief slice of Gardner’s life, the film reveals how the narrative of meritocracy embeds itself both within Gardner’s own account of his life as well as in the themes that are intended to resonate in the audience. At the most fundamental level, Gardner fits perfectly with the idea of someone striving within a meritocracy to reach the elite status in American society. In particular, he is depicted as a highly gifted individual whose natural talents are reflected both in his ingenuity and in his logical skill sets. More than simply having incredible, useful talents, a particular emphasis is placed on the extraordinary effort and determination that he possesses and displays through practice. To this end, while the risky entrepreneurial adventure for which he is responsible caused his temporary fall, through the conjunction of his talent and effort, he strove for, and eventually earned, his rightful place among the American elite.

The film reflects two additional features of the meritocratic myth. First, a particular emphasis is placed on Gardner “deserving” his success. In fact, the daunting obstacles that he faces serve to dramatically highlight and further legitimize that his social status and position are purely merited insofar as he is stripped away from any possible social advantage and left with nothing but talent and willpower. Just as important is the film’s emphasis on the openness of the American social order. In the film, there is very little conscious discussion of America’s structural organization and issues, such as racism, that may have impeded an African-American such as Gardner from being successful. Rather, “America” in the film is constructed as a purely open society where social mobility, although sometimes difficult, is always possible. Gardner’s individual socio-economic ascent thus serves to legitimize the structural “openness” of meritocracy: If he can find his merited location in the social order, anybody can.
Furthermore, one is left with the core thematic element of the myth of meritocracy: If Chris Gardner deserves his social position, then I deserve my social position whatever it may be.

More than simply another story, as a political myth, the meritocratic narrative functions by creating a sense of significance in Gardner and, in turn, the audience’s lives. Once again, Gardner does little theoretical waxing over the structural organization and theoretical roots of meritocracy. Rather, he is gripped by the narrative in such a way that it provides a heightened sense of meaning and relevance to his life experiences. Therefore, drawing on Blumenberg (1979/1985), I think his life guided by this myth creates significance through various operational means. In analyzing two particular examples of the mythical significance, I think it is important to note that this analysis of Gardner’s story is in no way comprehensive in terms of analyzing all the means of mythical creation that operate in the film. Instead, for the sake of brevity, I will focus on two particularly important modes of operation that I take to be at the core of the myth.

At the most basic level, Gardner’s story is one of human progress that leads to one’s destined place within the world. As I take it, this is an important part of the meritocratic myth. Much like orthodox Marxism, the meritocratic bureaucratic and economic order serves as the objective and neutral reality of our existence. Within this social order, Gardner’s successful story becomes legitimized and provides a sense of significance insofar as his place within the world is where it should be. In effect, his success was fated on the strength of his acceptance of the narrative itself. Of course, he could have failed if he had rejected the myth and given up or simply became complacent. However, as the meritocratic myth is fully received and accepted, his ascent to his position has a sense of personal destiny to it. His ranking and the corresponding financial, social, and political capital gained
through it are not to be understood as the consequence of fortune but rather is the necessary culmination of his talents and effort.

Another important means by which mythical significance is created in the story is through the narrative interpretation of the obstacles that he confronts. As part of the meritocratic myth, all social, political, or economic obstacles that he confronts only add to the sense of significance of his existence. More specifically, in the meritocratic myth, the obstacles faced heighten the importance of the strength of his will and subsequent success by providing dramatic resistance to his journey. In fact, the strength and force of this particular account of the meritocratic myth is directly the result of these dramatic obstacles. More to the point, the fact Gardner lives and accepts the myth wholeheartedly and works to overcome these obstacles increases the narrative significance of his talent, his effort, and most importantly, his success. It is primarily through his qualities of talent and effort, the core qualities of our social progress that the myth emphasizes, that he overcomes these forms of resistance and is rewarded with what the myth promises—namely, his proper socio-economic status as part of the elite. Once again, it is important to point out that by overcoming these forms of resistance, not only does the narrative create significance in his life, but it also serves to legitimize the meritocratic myth itself. Gardner’s achievement of his merited rank reinforces the narrative of progress that inspired him. In fact, in real life, Gardner’s speaking engagements and books as well as the movie itself serve as local works on the meritocratic myth that unquestionably confirm its cultural importance. In this way, his story is an extremely powerful work on the meritocratic myth.

The meritocratic myth is much more than a fanciful story that sells movies tickets and DVDs. As a political myth, it is one of the most powerful narratives that is (re)produced and received within our society. As a myth, meritocracy is understood as the narrative that describes our individual progress against the
backdrop of our “open” socio-economic system that has come to be widely received in the Western world. In particular, the meritocratic myth frames our lives in a narrative of how our talents and efforts will lead to our merited social status and corresponding accumulation of primary goods such as prestige and material wealth. And while each of our stories may be less dramatic than Gardner’s, it emphasizes the importance and value of struggling and overcoming difficulties to reach our goals. More than this, the meritocratic myth provides both narrative unity as well as significance to our society. Therefore, for large segments and groups of our society the myth serves as an important symbolic mode of orientation that infuses our socio-political order with significance that brings a heightened sense of meaning and importance to our lives within our society.

5.4 The Meritocratic Myth and Schools

One important aspect of the meritocratic myth is its relation to our socio-political conditions and the corresponding social, economic, and political institutions. At the most fundamental level, the meritocratic myth provides a sense of significance and unity through its narrative that our institutional systems cannot provide. As I argued earlier, this sense of significance is particularly important amidst the complex bureaucratic and indeterminate landscape of our modern order. Simply put, the myth collectively unites groups in a way that guides them both in thought and practices amidst what can potentially be interpreted as the Kafkaesque modern world. As we work up, down, or laterally through the various meritocratic institutions, we collectively act under the belief that our institutional movements are, or at least should be, correlated to our talents, and hard work. Moreover, such narrative significance is evident even in the most laborious and monotonous occupations and tasks in our culture.

Of course, our education system plays an essential role in the production and reception of the meritocratic myth. At a very early age, students inculcate and
produce this myth within the classrooms. At the most general level, much of the adult population who influence and interact with children in our schools, such as teachers, parents, and administrators, accept this myth as an important mode of articulating the purpose and goal of schools; as such, they inevitably convey to the students the importance of using their talents and effort to realize their full potential within our classrooms. Even at a young age, children and adolescents are told their efforts in developing their talents will lead to success through the open mobility within our classroom structures. We teach our youth that if they work hard in school and utilize their talents, they will progress in their classes. Moreover, we teach the students that they may, in fact, struggle and face certain obstacles, but their will and effort can overcome these obstacles so that they can achieve the merited grade or level that they truly deserve.

Further, as students move through school, their knowledge and experience of this myth and its ramification for their lives becomes more acute. More specifically, we see that through adolescence there is an increased emphasis within our school system on the students’ talent and efforts being correlated to their socio-economic status in the larger social system. It comes as no surprise, then, that as students increase in age, so too does the narrative emphasis placed on the competitive nature of grades and the importance of securing the highest educational status both in secondary and post-secondary institutions. This increased emphasis ensures that each student reaches his or her perceived rightful place in our society.

I suspect, having both gone through and taught in the Canadian school system, that meritocratic myth has become so entrenched within all of us and in our students that the narrative has become a rather obvious part of how we tell students to engage and symbolically orient themselves within the school system. Far from the obvious nature of this myth pointing to its insignificance, it rather
points to how powerful and fundamental this narrative has become as part of our educational and social culture in just over a half century. The radical nature of this myth in providing significance and unity to our students thus should not be underestimated. Only a short time ago, much of the Canadian population was taught that their talent and effort had very little to do with class; that one’s existing class, gender, or race would primarily determine both their social status and occupation within society. The fact that much of our student population receive and work on the narrative core of this political myth as an important mode of understanding their lives points to the sheer breadth of our reception of this myth, as well as to the strength of its grip on us.

This, of course, is not to argue that the myth of meritocracy is absolutely separate from social and political institutions. Much like other modern political myths, meritocracy emerged with and from both the theoretical work of the elite as well as the radical reorganizing of our social and political institutions over the course of the last 60 years. In and of themselves, however, the radical reorganization of modern institutions could not provide the populace with a sense of importance and significance in these social structures. However, as meritocracy became part of the social imaginary and took on mythic form, it provided an important narrative corollary to its theoretical mode of orientation as well as institutional organizations and practices. In particular, the unity between the meritocratic myth and our socio-political system has been so heavily intertwined and connected that it has become a crucial guide of practical engagement in the world.

The conceptual correspondence between the meritocratic myth and the creation of open institutions that engineers merited social mobility both strengthens the sense of significance that the narrative produces within the institutions and serves to further legitimize the myth itself. For instance, if an individual is open to
the reception of the myth and embraces it as an important narrative that guides her or his values, beliefs, actions, and goals then those institutional devices and structures that aim to sort, measure, and distribute meritocratic privilege are inevitably understood as necessary and valuable parts of the education system. Concurrently, these same institutional devices validate and strengthen the legitimacy of the meritocratic myth insofar as they explicitly provide institutional feedback to the individual that gauges her or his talent, effort, and corresponding merited position. The meritocratic myth, in this sense, is not revolutionary in terms of its relationship to the material conditions and practices in our world. On the contrary, the myth corresponds directly to the institutional organization of our society.

In terms of education, the Canadian school system has been constructed to be an essential institution in the creation of an “open” society that allows individuals to use their talents and effort to work their way to their rightful place in the social order. As students embrace the myth and begin to frame their lives as journeys of progress that are dependent on their hard work and talents, our schools provide a highly acute system of feedback that both affirms the relevance of the myth as well as is affirmed by the myth itself. Of course, the most important system of feedback in our schools is the grading system. At a very early age, the students are taught to correlate the progress of their talents and efforts with the assessment and evaluation of their various products, from quizzes, tests, and drawings to presentations. As a form of merited social sorting, grading aims to provide objective feedback to the student on the merited status of a particular piece of work. Through thousands of pieces of graded feedback, the myth of meritocracy is validated through the students’ experience of school as their talents and efforts are continually ranked and stratified. Ideally, then, the system of feedback confirms to the students that as they work harder and utilize their talents
they increase their ranking within the school system, and, conversely when they fail to work as hard and “waste” their talents, their level of achievement decreases.

At the same time, the meritocratic myth, by providing a sense of significance to the students’ journey through school, confirms the relevance and importance of the grading and ranking process itself. This sense of institutional affirmation through myth is an interesting one. Not only is the myth affirmed through its general reception by the student population as a positive, progressive myth, it is also evident when tensions with the institutional structure emerge. Suppose, for example, a teenaged student refuses to do her work because she finds it irrelevant to her life or simply pointless. A simple motivational appeal by the teacher or the institution at large is to frame the assignment in the larger context of the meritocratic myth itself. In embracing the meritocratic myth, students, by working through their lack of interest, are able to achieve certain grades, which will further open up their merited possibilities in the future. Hence, various aspects of our schooling system, from assignments to courses, while “pointless” or lacking specific interest to students, can gain meaning and significance in the students’ lives insofar as they can still provide students with educational feedback and marks that are necessary to achieve their merited rank within schools and subsequently in post-secondary institutions. In other words, for students the “pointless” assignment can presumably gain importance and is validated by the larger context of the meritocratic progress of their lives.

In discussing the relationship between the meritocratic myth and institutional grading, the sheer precision and detail in this process should be emphasized. More specifically, as a feedback loop that affirms and is affirmed by the myth of meritocracy, the grading and ranking system in our schools is set up to provide very precise sets of information and data to track nominal changes in merited progress amongst students. This is most evident, for example, in the Canadian
secondary and post-secondary move from a system of letter grades to numerical percentages. Through this change, the school ranking system moved from incremental ranges of fives and tens to the minute difference of a single percentage point. In the context of its relation to the meritocratic myth this bureaucratic precision and detail is important. Not only is a student’s merited progress confirmed in and through their general progress amidst the education system, such as her or his ability to successfully take college- or university-bound secondary school classes, it is also affirmed through the incremental changes in their grades. In this sense, a movement from a grade of 80 to a grade of 81 in a class or even on different assignments is perceived as a merited increase and is part of their progress in an “open” society. Through this constant correlation between the meritocratic myth and the detailed distribution of merited grades, our education system provides a powerful confirmation that the unity and narrative significance created by the myth is a necessary part of our social order.

5.5 The Myth of Meritocracy and Merited Materialism

The correlation between the meritocratic myth and merited progress is further affirmed as students, having gone through the rigours of the education system’s sorting system, move into the larger socio-political order. As such, not only does the meritocratic myth provide us with a sense of narrative significance to each of our lifelong merited journeys, but it also provides a sense of significance to the minute material and social practices that we partake in. The most evident example of the correlation between meritocratic mythic significance and the material practices occurs in our consumption of material goods and services. As we use our talents and efforts to progress within our society and reach our deserved status, our progress can be affirmed and symbolically reflected in our material progress in and through goods and services. To use an example inspired by my own life, my ascent from a university student to a teacher through the utilization of
my talents and efforts has provided me with the corresponding material means of purchasing goods that symbolically reaffirm this progress. When I was a student, my limited funds enabled me to purchase a relatively affordable CD player, but as I progressed and earned a higher merited status, I was able to reward myself with a significantly more expensive iPOD. Much like grades in schools, the material consumption that our merited status affords us provides a very acute and socially sensitive material affirmation of “deserved” progress. Moreover, the myth of meritocracy provides a sense of significance to our material progress by framing it as part of our merited progress.

Interestingly, in the film The Pursuit of Happyness, Gardner’s symbolic affirmation of the meritocratic myth is a Ferrari. In the film, Gardner, while beginning his meritocratic ascent, converses with a stockbroker entering into the prized car, which, in turn, inspires Gardner to strive to gain the same socio-economic position as the man in order to buy the same symbol of progress and success. Clearly, then, this correlation can take on many forms given the sheer complexity of our economic order, from the purchasing of homes, cars, jewellery to even the smallest things, such as eating at a slightly more prestigious restaurant or buying a golf club that hits a ball five yards farther than the old one. What matters is that, through these minute and nominal material gains and perceived progresses, the strength and sense of significance that the myth creates in our lives is provided with the perfect institutional reality for the receptivity of the meritocratic myth to flourish.

The second interesting feature of the meritocratic myth and its relation to our capitalist institutional order is that there is an inherent sense of openness in the myth that allows it to be worked on by both individuals and groups based on their individual desires and the specific contexts of a variety of institutional settings. This sense of plurality to the myth is most evident in the economy itself, as the
myth fits with thousands of jobs and occupations. Whether a person is a baseball player or a teacher, the meritocratic myth provides a constant narrative core that can be worked on and particularized based on the collective group that one is working within. Thus, while the particular details and parameters for determining what are talent, effort, and progress may certainly differ between playing baseball and teaching, both are framed by large groups in our population as part of the meritocratic myth.

Of course, this is not to say that there is not debate within North American culture about how the particular distribution of merited material gains works in our society. For instance, debate still occurs, both by political philosophers and the populace, about whether a baseball player could merit $25 million a year while a beginning teacher could merit $40,000 a year despite working equally hard (Nozick, 1974; Rawls, 1971/1999). As I argue further, this tension is in good part the result of democratic myth and practices in our culture whose call for fundamental equality always serves as a constant threat to the manufactured differences in our society. This omnipresent threat being noted, I think that this tension is also partly the result of the pluralistic work done on meritocratic myth within our various communities. Specifically, as people work on the meritocratic myth within complex communities, particular variations of the narrative are going to come to conflict despite sharing a common narrative core. For instance, one might find that middle-class graduates from university, such as teachers, resent and criticize the merited status of middle-class workers with less education such as auto workers. In such an instance, the criticism may not be a call for democratic equality but rather an appeal to the meaning and material practice of the myth itself. Specifically, it may be the perception that more education is perceived to entitle the former to a higher deserved social status than the latter. Such debates,
far from threatening the meritocracy myth, serve as fundamental to the narrative being received and constantly worked on within our communities.

Once more, I think even more telling of the reception and hold of the meritocratic myth is, despite aforementioned debates existing, the common acceptance of vast and glaringly absurd disparities of primary goods in our social order. More to the point, the strength of the current meritocratic myth is reflected in how it has become a common sense discourse of our age. We might point to communities of the past and criticize the absurd notion that a hierarchical chain of being serves as a transcendent justification for a King or Nobleman owning vast sums of money while the majority remain poor. However, it is widely accepted in North American culture that a baseball player or a captain of corporate industry deserves vast sums of economic and social capital because their talent and effort, within a manufactured economic market place, merits their position while eight million children starved to death in the past year. Hence, while there might be particular variations and contextualization of the meritocratic myth, the narrative core serves as an objective guide to understanding and even accepting, whether it is tacitly or somewhat reluctantly, the current distribution of primary goods. The strength and the scope of acceptance of these vast disparities reflect the strength of the meritocratic myth in our society and its accompanying beliefs, values, and practices.

Although much more limited than in society at large, this sense of narrative plurality and particularism also occurs in our education system. As students begin to choose specific desired subjects, post-secondary streams, or programs, they begin to participate and interact within groups that define particular forms of merited progress. It is within these particular strands that students begin to collectively work on the myth of meritocracy and align their individual progress within the context they work. For example, two university students enrolled in
different programs may be participating in academic and social groups that differ significantly in what they take to be talent, effort, and reward. Within their respective fields, however, both students may still work on the meritocratic myth in a way that particularizes the narrative and its ability to provide significance within their respective fields of study. Thus while the music student and the engineering student may differ significantly in terms of what they define as achievement, the meritocratic myth offers the possibility that the narrative provides a sense of unity and significance within both contexts. As a result, both the music and engineering students may share, receive, and work on the meritocratic myth despite largely distinct educational talents and interests.

5.6 A Critical Analysis of the Meritocratic Myth’s Conception of “Deserving”

Having outlined the myth of meritocracy and articulated the salient features of its myth and its relation to our existing social order, let me now turn to my critique of it. It is important to reiterate that, in critiquing this myth, my aim is to reveal its philosophical incoherence and how it undermines the possibility of democratic social transformation in and through the school system.

One of the revolutionary shifts in adopting a meritocratic education system is that the accompanying myth redefines the meaning of “deserving” in our socio-economic order. As noted, prior to this conceptual shift, an individual was seen to deserve her or his particular economic, social slot primarily based on her or his pedigree. In this social order, deserving is directly linked to hereditary entitlement where one’s circumstantial luck of birth (social class) justifies one’s socio-economic position. In contrast, embedded within the meritocratic myth and our corresponding education system is the view that in order to deserve one’s social class, one should have to earn it. As such, deserving cannot be linked to any form of luck but rather must be directly linked to the performance of the citizens (i.e.,
their talents, intelligence, and effort) within a fair social setting. In terms of the meritocratic myth it is this sense of “deserving” one’s social and economic status that provides an important link between our talents and efforts and the ascent and descent of our grades and ranking within the school system. Insofar as everyone has equal access to educations’ social ladder and each student is assessed fairly then students deserve the social status they have earned (Hinchey, 1998). Hence, those who fail to show ambition or the ability to perform have no reason to complain, while those who ascend to the middle or upper classes can take pride in their achievements.

I think one of the central problems with the meritocratic conception of “deserve,” particularly with regards to our education system, is that it conflates the individual in a way that oversimplifies how students are sorted through the distribution of grades. One consequence of this oversimplification is that there is little thought given to the formula: natural ability + effort = merit. In particular, students, educators, and parents alike tend to focus on the “effort” variable of this equation rather than discussing what we mean by intelligence and ability. It is now common in our educational discourse to hear slogans such as “make something of yourself” or “work hard and you will succeed” (Hinchey, 1998, p. 101). It comes as no surprise that these slogans are intimately tied to the narrative of success and merited progress that is exemplified in stories such as Chris Gardner’s. Within the meritocratic myth, particular focus is placed on the variable of “effort” and how our “will” is the central determining factor of being assigned our merited grade on an assignment or in a class. Interestingly, however, it is taken for granted that a “natural” ability, such as intelligence, is a clearly understood concept.

At the most general level, one of the interesting features of our natural abilities is that they are very much the result of fortune. On the one hand, the capacities and talents that we are born with are the direct result of genetic fortune
(constitutive luck); on the other hand, the development and value of these capacities and talents are directly dependent on circumstances beyond our control, specifically our spatial and temporal environment (Nagel, 1979). For example, not only are Einstein’s capacities and abilities based on the fortune of being born with a genetically gifted brain, but his ability to use these endowments was necessarily dependent on the luck of living in a time and place where he could utilize them. If he were born as a slave in Ancient Greece, his capacity to do abstract mathematics would be rendered useless. Thus, it is evident that despite meritocracy separating its conception of “deserve” from the luck of being born into a social class, it cannot completely remove fortune from the equation. To put it more bluntly, we earn our natural abilities and the social and temporal circumstances in which they are used as much as we earn the social and economic status of our parents.

One might argue that there is a significant conceptual difference between our fortune of being born with natural endowments and the luck of being born into a social class (Nozick, 1974, pp. 213–231). There is a certain sense that we own our natural endowments because they are part of us in a way that our parents’ social class is not. Consequently, in this sense the students use their agency in correlation with their natural endowments to earn their grades.

In addressing this claim, I think that it is important to note that regardless of whether or not we own our natural endowments, the meritocratic myth necessarily must rely on a sense of “deserve” that is not earned through individual effort and choice. More to the point, I think that this is one of the central indeterminate assumptions the meritocratic myth allows us to gloss over insofar as the narrative effectively provides us with a sense of significance to our political order. In other words, in the story of our merited progress, our talents and natural abilities are understood as part of who we are and are intimately linked to our identity. Hence, our personal identity and value is necessarily linked to what we do. As a
consequence, through the myth we understand and frame individual talents and natural abilities as a constitutive part of the narrative subject and inadvertently separate them from their contingent context.

In addition, in the meritocratic myth we interact in the world as if our natural abilities and their corresponding fit in the socio-political order are objective facts about the world. More specifically, an important part of the narrative is that there is believed to be a “natural fit” between our various talents and the reality by which we exercise them. To use a popular example, in the meritocratic myth, Wayne Gretzky’s talents in the sport of hockey are perceived to be an intimate and irremovable part of his identity, and these talents also seem to necessarily fit with the socio-economic order. As a result, his ascent to the status of an elite and wealthy athlete in Canada seems “deserved” in the strong sense of the word. Of course, Gretzky’s efforts and extensive practice certainly contributed to his success. I think we plainly accept, however, that much of his success is directly dependent on the superior and unique talents that he was genetically gifted with. This is especially evident given the amount of effort and practice thousands of Canada’s youth dedicate to the sport with little possibility of matching, even on a small scale, his accomplishments.

I want to suggest that this sense of deserving that is linked to our natural abilities is a narrative effect of the myth of meritocracy and the sense of significance that it provides to each of our lives, including Gretzky’s. Because we frame the narrative of our progress in the meritocratic equation, we take for granted that our talents will and should be adequately rewarded individually in our socio-political order. We work under the assumption that whatever financial or social benefits that we accrue from these talents are deserved because talents are understood as constitutive parts of who we are. To this end, students work under the same assumption and expectation. More specifically, it is taken for granted by
our students because of their immersion in the meritocratic myth that their individual talents are and should be adequately rewarded with the appropriate social ranking. And if their talent is reflected in an educational performance or product that is superior to their peers despite less effort, they still deserve higher grades, ranking, and the subsequent socio-economic benefits. What matters is that the individual, constituted by his or her talents and efforts, finds his or her rightful grade and ranking in the social system.

What is evident, then, is that while our effort is easily understood and rationally justified as part of meritocratic choice in our political order, it does not follow that, in any rational sense, our natural abilities are “deserved” in the same sense. One of the most important implications of this distinction is that it is open to debate how we perceive and treat our students’ natural assets and the benefits and burdens that these assets create. In the meritocratic education system, the students’ natural assets are completely individualized and linked directly to achievement through competition. In contrast, the students’ natural assets could be viewed as a collective body. Consequently, the education system and teachers could create classrooms and spaces where the students’ different talents and capacities are brought together in complementary relationships towards achieving more community or group-based goals through co-operation. In such a climate, there would be no need to radically individualize student achievement.

5.7 A Critical Analysis of the Meritocratic Myth’s Conception of “Natural” Sorting

In addition, I believe that there is also a danger in describing skills and intelligence as naturally owned. This feature of meritocracy is not only part of its theoretical underpinnings but central to the myth itself. As I noted with reference to the story of Chris Gardner, focus is placed on his talent, ingenuity, and extraordinary effort with little attention paid to the social mechanisms that make
his story possible. In terms of the education system, the “naturalizing” of student ranking through the meritocratic narrative is the normative backbone for the sorting of students. In the meritocratic myth, a secondary student’s grade point average is thought to be an objective measurement of his or her deserved rank within his or her institution.

Lost in this narrative is an understanding of the essential role that the education system itself has in selecting and valuing those abilities, and the bodies of knowledge that provide pathways for students to “earn” their grades and subsequent social and economic status (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). As earlier noted, our current education system is conceived as an objective and value-neutral institution that organizes and arranges students into hierarchical groups that they “naturally” inhabit based on their ability, work ethic, and individual interests. For instance, in Ontario secondary schools, students are “objectively” assessed and evaluated against a common body of curriculum expectations and in accordance to common standards of evaluation. Based on this system of assessment and evaluation, students are streamed into four different destinations (university, college, workplace, and locally developed) that directly determine their access to post-secondary institutions. Also, within each destination, students are evaluated and ranked through their correspondence to various objectively prescribed criteria. As a result, in accordance with the myth of meritocracy, all students are able to fairly achieve the grade and destination that they deserve independent of any political or moral bias.

In this way, the meritocratic education system aims to provide an objective and neutral setting that students can fairly compete within. And here we find, as I mentioned earlier, an important element to the relationship between the meritocratic myth and rational positivism inherent in the institutional control of the sorting of students. The rational and objective nature of our school system’s
ranking process is an important element that legitimizes the narrative of an individual’s particular status on an assignment, in a class, and in the school in general. More to the point, while the meritocratic myth provides an individual and collective sense of significance within the indifferent bureaucratic institution, it is also true that the rationally created and value-neutral setting is important in solidifying the view that a student’s ranking is objectively true. It is this sense of rational objectivity, evident even at the nominal level of the grading process that provides a sense of rational certainty to each of our narratives of merited progress. In other words the technocratic certainty and objectivity inherent in the education system further solidifies the narrative significance to one’s earned social status.

The problem with our meritocratic conception of student achievement is that it provides the illusion that our education system can be somehow separated from politics and value judgments. As Paulo Freire (1998, 1968/2000) argues throughout his collective works, there is no value-neutral ground for educators to stand upon. The truth is that our education system does not mirror any natural hierarchy but rather manufactures one through bodies of knowledge and standards that are necessarily value-laden (Beyer, 2001, p. 166; Husen, 1974, p. 25). In Ontario schools, the curriculum documents, the expectations and the standards for assessment, and the evaluation tools are value-laden political documents that determine what knowledge all students must learn, what performances a “deserving” student should display, what each performance is academically worth, as well as the corresponding destination they “deserve” to occupy.

Simply put, our education system is not an “innocent bystander” in the meritocratic social order. Rather, it creates and defines a normative system of rewards that fundamentally categorizes students as deserving x amount of merit. Thus, while the students certainly enter our schools with different capacities and put forth different degrees of effort, their success is entirely dependent on how the
school system values and treats these differences (Husen, 1974, pp. 25–27). Consequently, the legitimacy of the meritocratic notion of “deserve” cannot rest on analyses of the natural abilities and work ethics of students but rather on the fairness and equity of the normative rules that construct student achievement.

Herein is one of the great difficulties in challenging the existing meritocratic myth. As the myth is currently received and understood by much of our population, it provides meaning and significance to our education system and other socio-economic institutions. In doing so, however, the myth has the unfortunate effect of legitimizing the current meritocratic order regardless of its inherent contingencies or injustices. At its very essence, the meritocratic myth functions to provide significance to our individual use of talent and efforts in our struggle to obtain our rightful place and the corresponding social, political, material benefits that come with it. In this sense, one of the key elements of the meritocratic myth is that it always legitimizes and provides a sense of significance to an individual’s life regardless of circumstance. In the meritocratic myth one’s success and failure is always understood as a product of one’s talents and effort. And while this is may not be a problem for the Chris Gardners, Wayne Gretzkys, or Bill Gateses of the world, for those who may be oppressed, marginalized, and harmed by our institutions, the myth undermines the ability to effectively challenge the inherent biases in our education system.

In Michael Young’s (1958) sociological critique of a meritocratic system, this unjustified sense of legitimizing success and failure is central to his critique. He argues that while we view meritocracy theoretically we can view the legitimacy of each of our merited rankings with a sense of critical skepticism; as these ideas become part of how we systematically engineer society, this sense of critical reflection evaporates. As such, having received and worked on the meritocratic myth, we begin to really believe that we all deserve whatever socio-economic fate
is assigned to us no matter how harmful and unjustified. This point is particularly salient in discussing defenders of the meritocratic school system such as Herrnstein and Murray in their work, *The Bell Curve* (1994). In the work, the authors argue quite vigorously that elites in American society do not “deserve” their social status. They argue, however, that despite this fact we should collectively accept meritocratic social stratification and elitism because it benefits us all to have the people with the highest intelligence filling the most important roles in our society. What Herrnstein and Murray fail to understand is how this sense of deserving has become an important part of our mythic understanding of the world. As the theoretical ideas became part of the social imaginary and the mythic orientation of our political world, the elite along with the poor increasingly believed they deserve their status. Consequently, by embracing the meritocratic myth we no longer experience the meritocratic normative order as a human creation with inherent flaws, but rather as the objective setting for our destined ascent or descent. This feature of the meritocratic myth is particularly concerning if our education system does not supply a fair and just means of assigning the benefits and burdens of particular rankings and accreditation in our schools.

5.8 A Critical Analysis of Meritocratic Myths: Embracing Versus Manufacturing Difference

When critically analyzing how the meritocratic education system creates a normative system of rewards, a distinction should be made between embracing difference and manufacturing difference. When an education system attempts to embrace differences, it acknowledges its role as trying to meet the needs of a diverse population by opening up spaces for multiple forms of knowledge, capacities, and standards to equally exist in schools (Portelli & Vibert, 1997). It is important to note that by embracing differences one does not deny that there are different ability levels and the need to track and acknowledge student progress. On
the contrary, embracing difference should not be equated with promoting sameness. It is rather to argue that in order to create an equitable education system that provides students the opportunity to be fully engaged and to grow as learners, one has to acknowledge that the student body is composed of diverse types of intelligences, cultural backgrounds, sex orientation, gender, and classes that directly affect learning. Further, these differences should be valued and permeate the discourse of curriculum and forms of assessment and evaluation of the students. By embracing differences, then, the education system should strive to meet the needs of these diverse students by accepting an equally diverse curriculum and standards for deciding what it means to learn, as well as placing value upon the academic worth of individual and collective performances.

Instead, the meritocratic education system attempts to manufacture differences amongst the students. The primary aim of this education system is to create hierarchically stratified groupings of students by comparing them to one another and in accordance to common standards. Within this process, “difference” is radically individualized through the process of assigning a graded rank to each of the students (Labaree, 1997). Crucial in this process is the common standard to create individual differences amongst the students. It is implicit within our current meritocracy that by creating common standards that differentiate students we can justly determine their merited rank irrespective of their differences of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural background, etc. (Sacks, 1997). In other words, embracing difference becomes irrelevant because our education system manufactures a sense of “difference” that transcends diversity. Therefore, in our schools, students’ rankings are deserved insofar as the manufactured difference between them transcends other substantive differences amongst them. It is for this reason that the education system is perceived as the great equalizer in our society, as access alone provides a fair opportunity for social mobility.
It is very clear that after 60 years and various reforms, equal access alone is not enough to create a truly open society. More precisely, the idea that our education system can fairly manufacture common standards to differentiate and fairly rank students irrespective of their class, sex, gender, and culture is an illusion (Aronowitz, 1997; Hinchey, 1998; McLaren, 1989; Sacks, 1997; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). As Peter McLaren (1989) has noted, “[t]he myth of equal opportunity... masks an ugly truth: the educational system is really a loaded social lottery, in which each student gets as many chances as his or her parents have dollars” (p. 224). In Ontario, various reports have indicated that poverty has a significant effect on student achievement. The Canadian Institute of Child Health (1994) reported that, “poor children are almost three times more likely to drop out of school early than non-poor youth” (p. 122). In 1994, the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning (1994) reported that in 1991, “13% of poor 16- and 17-year-old students dropped out of school while only 5% of children who were not poor dropped out of school” (p. 51). While there are few numbers in Ontario tracking what percentage of lower-class students are entering the different streams, I think it is safe to infer from these dropout rates that the poor are more likely to be ranked and individuated at a consistently lower level than their upper-class counterparts.

Further, we should not underestimate how pervasive poverty is amongst our students. In a 2005 report, Campaign 2000 determined that, despite vast economic growth in Canada, one in six, or 1.2 million, children still live in poverty (Campaign 2000, p. 2). In Ontario alone, there are over 440,000 children who are living below the poverty level (Campaign 2000 p. 3). If these numbers are not disturbing enough, it is reported that 41% (330,000) of the people who currently use Canada’s food banks are children (Campaign 2000, p. 2). Suffice it to say, that insofar as class is one of the determining factors of student achievement, then a
significant number of students in our schools are unlikely to gain access to colleges and universities and to improve their socio-economic status, for reasons other than a lack of ability, intelligence, or effort.

Similarly, there are well-documented studies revealing that minority groups in Canada, particularly Aboriginals and African-Canadians, are also failing to reap the benefits of our “open” society. In their 2005 report, Campaign 2000 (2005) reveals that Aboriginals in Canada are the group most affected by intergenerational poverty (p.5). Sociologists Arthur Sweetman and Gordan Dicks reported in their work, “Education and Ethnicity in Canada: An Intergenerational Study” (1999) that there is a correlation between ethnicity, years of education, and income in Canada. Specifically, Aboriginal Canadians in the study averaged a national low of 9.5 years of schooling compared to other ethnic groups such as the British-Canadians (12.3), Chinese-Canadians (14.7), or Jewish-Canadians (15.0) (pp. 677–678). Moreover, their study also reveals that Aboriginals are far less likely to move up our society’s socio-economic ladder than their aforementioned counterparts.

There is also a serious concern that African-Canadians are increasingly becoming disengaged within a school system that fails to acknowledge their particular needs as a distinct ethnic group. Specifically, educational critic George Dei (1997) argues that Canada’s black youth are becoming increasingly alienated in schools where issues of race are largely ignored. Unsurprisingly, this sense of alienation has led many black students to perceive our education system as fundamentally inequitable. As a result, this alienation has negatively affected black students’ ability to achieve and has concurrently increased the number of said students being “pushed out” of the education system altogether (Dei, 1997).

To clarify: I am not arguing that the meritocratic educational system has the sole responsibility for ending poverty and all forms of social inequities in our
society. Rather, I am arguing that within our current education system the strength and legitimacy of a student “deserving” his or her rank and the resulting benefits is necessarily dependent on the set of value-laden standards differentiating students that is supposed to be fair irrespective of a students’ class, race, sexual orientation, gender, or ethnicity, etc. Insofar as the current common standards manufacture a graded hierarchy that is unfair to large segments of our society, the validity of “deserving” is concurrently undermined.

5.9 Meritocratic Myth and the Erosion of Democracy

Returning to our discussion of meritocracy as a political myth, we begin to see how in its current form it fundamentally undermines democratic pedagogical practice. In its current form, the meritocratic myth does not aim at challenging the inequalities and injustices that are an effect of our highly stratified economic order. On the contrary, the meritocratic myth is fundamentally conservative in this regard. It always serves as a narrative justification and foundation to this unjust social stratification. This inherent flaw would not be so glaring and consequential if the education system itself were reflective and critical. However, one of the insidious effects of our current system of manufacturing difference is that it is constructed to fundamentally ignore substantive differences amongst students in a way that justifies existing inequities (Portelli & Vibert, 1997). Specifically, embedded within the meritocratic myth is the misguided belief that the current value-laden and politicized standards are necessarily fair, objective, and universal and consequently the narrative’s notion of “deserving” is always legitimate. Thus, regardless of the lived reality of inequality in our society, schools continue to legitimatize and justify the stratification and distribution of privilege.

In this sense, there is no self-correcting mechanism in the meritocratic order when the myth combines to justify our existing sorting institutions. No matter which group(s) are marginalized by whatever magic standard educational gurus
create to transcend difference, whether it is intelligence quotient testing, standardized examinations, or marking schemes, our myth and corresponding system legitimates these oppressed groups’ failures. Consequently, meritocracy unjustifiably shifts the debate of success and failure in our education system to the students meeting the common standard of evaluation and differentiation rather than our education system meeting the needs of marginalized students.

Secondly, our meritocratic myth also contributes to the masking of social inequities by radically individualizing the relationship between the student and their grade or rank. Recall that the myth of meritocracy is a myth about the individual and his or her merited progress. The narrative focal point of the meritocratic myth is not a community or collective but rather the talented individual subject. Further, in our schools’ climate of radically individual differentiation and competition, students are put into a system of relations where they are supposed to focus narrowly on their performance and their earning of rank. As such, our meritocracy praxis directs students away from concerning themselves with the progress and rank of their peers, and concurrently the status of “deserving” their merited rank. Consequently, we create classes of privileged individual students, including myself, who fail to recognize that they have benefited socially and economically at the unjust expense of others. As a consequence of the meritocratic myth, students often overlook the failure of their poor, black, Aboriginal, or gay/lesbian/transgender peers or interpret their fate in the system as individually deserved.

In fact, given how highly competitive our school system is, it is actually in the best interest of every privileged student that these groups fail. More specifically, since the meritocratic system must manufacture failure (all students cannot have access to university) it is in the best interest of nonmarginalized students for “other” presumably less talented and hard-working students to fill
those allotted slots. Thus, far from nurturing students who care for one another and who seek to alleviate inequalities within their schools and communities, we intentionally construct an educational race in which individuals have a vested interest in overlooking and maintaining inequities. This harm is compounded by the fact that these privileged students are provided with access to social and economic leaders, such as teachers, business leaders, and politicians, who can influence and transform institutions that perpetuate systemic inequities.

This aforementioned point leads to what I take as an important feature of the meritocratic myth that puts it at odds with our democratic aspirations. Despite the fact that the myth originally tapped into certain democratic values of fairness and self-reliance to challenge a clearly unjust aristocratic order, it is ultimately a narrative for and about the elite. As a symbolic mode of orientation, it justifies, legitimizes, and provides significance for much of our population, but at its narrative core, its true mythic force is wielded by the privileged class in our society. In other words, the production and reception of this myth disproportionately provides the elite with vast social, economic, and political capital within our society. Consequently, the elite have a clear, vested interest in perpetuating this myth and solidifying its narrative role within our schools and society at large. To use a rather obvious example, while the meritocratic myth may provide a sense of significance and even some hope for the adult working in poverty at a minimum wage job, its real narrative force comes in justifying the “natural aristocracy” within our society. The ability of the myth to provide narrative significance that secures economic and political privilege makes it advantageous for those in power not only to accept this myth but to continue to promote and use it within our society to further their own ends.

As a consequence, we have a small segment of privileged elite in our society who have benefited significantly from the meritocratic school system and
economic order, who use the myth to unjustly solidify the oppression of
meritocratic losers, and who at the same time resist reforms that may actually help
those in need. On the one hand, the ugly underbelly of the myth emerges as those
in power turn the narrative against those in need and the oppressed. We have seen
the myth wielded against our society’s vulnerable, from those on welfare, whose
perceived laziness wasted away their equal opportunity to be successful and
wealthy, to Aboriginal communities that have been largely viewed by the elite of
Canadian culture as economic leeches to our harmonious, meritocratic order. On
the other hand, the meritocratic myth has been used by the elite to elicit support to
the view that the vast inequalities in our society are morally justified. As such, to
increase the upper class’s financial role in securing a more just and fair society has
become meritocratic blasphemy in the eyes of our society’s elite; it fundamentally
rejects the idea that the elite deserve the economic and political benefits that their
merited status has granted them. By using the myth in this manner, elites make
helping to create a more just social order and helping those in need supererogatory
and thus merely part of their chosen philanthropic work.

In terms of our education system, the myth of meritocracy’s inherent
undemocratic bias is evident on many levels. One highly contentious example is
funding for post-secondary schooling. In Ontario, we have experienced substantial
increases in the expense of all university and college programs over the course of
the last 15 years, which began in the Mike Harris era with his government’s desire
to curb government debt. Aside from the economic justification, the meritocratic
myth continued to be embraced and promoted by the government. Of course,
rather than increasing the taxes of the economic elite of our society to secure social
mobility, the Harris government created a system of secured, government-backed
loans to students in need. Consequently, while the meritocratic myth continued to
be accepted and pushed by our government, in large segments of our education
system, students had to either incur a large amount of debt or abandon their “deserved” opportunity out of economic prudence. As a result, the elite class during this time believed they had no moral or financial duty to keep the post-secondary system fair and open to everyone who deserved it. On the contrary, despite the fact this same group used the system to secure their own status, they, along with the Harris government, believed these economic and material benefits from their progressive journey were deserved and should be immune to tax increases. Consequently, while upper-class Canadian’s children would be able to secure such an education with few problems, the same education became, and continues to be, a crippling economic burden for large portions of the Ontario population and an illusion for many more.

Far from the meritocratic myth being the sole powerful socio-political myth that is being received and worked on in our education system, there is also the more recent development of the neoliberal myth within North American schools. In the next chapter of my dissertation, I will examine the neoliberal myth as prominent mode of symbolic orientation in our schools. As I will argue, although the meritocratic and neoliberal myths coexist in our schools, particular emphasis should be placed on the unique normative vision that the neoliberal myth inculcates in our educational policy-makers, administrators, teachers, and students alike. Moreover, mirroring my examination and critique of the meritocratic myth, I will examine the historical and theoretical roots of the neoliberal myth and subsequently critically examine how the narrative core of the myth fundamentally undermines the possibility of critical democratic transformation. In particular, I will argue that a fundamental problem with the neoliberal myth is that its inherent normativity is not adequately understood, and as a result the reception and work on this myth in schools has become increasingly problematic.
Chapter 6
The Neoliberal Myth and Education

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I turn my analysis of myth to a second political myth that is embedded within our education system. In particular, I will critically examine the neoliberal myth as another socio-political myth that has come to be not only a predominant mode of symbolic orientation in our schools but also one that is at fundamental odds with critical democratic education and the possibility of democratic transformation.

Understanding neoliberalism as a political myth is particularly pertinent insofar as many critical pedagogues, including Paulo Freire (1998), Michael Apple (2001, 2004a), and Henry Giroux (2004), have interpreted the neoliberal ideology as a powerful “ethical” force in our social order, a force that is very much the antithesis of critical democracy’s vision of social transformation. However, if the critical pedagogical tradition has overlooked myth, in the Blumenbergian sense (1979/1985), as a substantive mode of symbolic orientation, then it follows that it has also overlooked how neoliberal myth is received and worked on in schools in a way that provides narrative unity and significance to its community members. Thus, while much has been said by critical democratic pedagogues about neoliberal theory and policy, very little has been said on how this economic theory informs people’s mythical orientation.

It is within this context, I will contend, that the neoliberal myth is a powerful narrative within our education system. Although the neoliberal myth coexists with its meritocratic counterpart, it must be understood as distinct from the latter insofar as it radically reconstructs the narrative ideal of the self as well as the significance of school by reframing the institution as an instrument of infinite economic
expansionism. More than this, I will argue that the neoliberal myth is particularly problematic insofar as its normative roots are morally vacuous. Far from this moral vacuity being benign, it is my contention that, as the neoliberal myth was and is received, its normative core is at odds with democratic beliefs, values, and practices. As a consequence, educational policy-makers, administrators, teachers, and students have embraced the neoliberal myth and corresponding values, beliefs, and practices that continue to erode the very possibility of nurturing critical democratic pedagogy in our schools.

Consistent with my analysis of the myth of meritocracy, I will open this chapter with an examination of the historical and theoretical roots of the neoliberal myth. Specifically, drawing on the work of Nancy Auerbach (2007) as well as neoliberal theorists Arthur Denzau, Ravi Roy, and Thomas Willett (2007), I will outline what I take to be both the socio-historical roots of the neoliberal political era as well as the theoretical core of neoliberalism as an economic theory.

I will argue that neoliberalism should not be understood simply as a theory or what Denzau and Douglass North call a theoretical shared mental model (1994); rather, central to this chapter will be an analysis of how neoliberalism moved from a positivist and descriptive economic theory into a normative myth that became embedded in what Taylor (2007) describes as our social imaginary. From the analysis, I will identify what I take to be the central problem with the neoliberal myth: Its moral neutrality as a theory has been inherited by its mythical counterpart, and as a consequence the myth propagates a normative narrative that includes values, beliefs, and practices that are at fundamental odds with a critical democratic vision of our social order.

In the second half of this chapter, I will provide a critical analysis of the neoliberal myth and its influence as a predominant mode of symbolic orientation in our schools. Specifically, I will examine three areas of education where I think the
myth’s false moral neutrality is particularly detrimental to the nurturing of democratic education and pedagogical practices: the neoliberal myth’s aim of education, its conception of quality in education, as well as the narrative ideal for the relationship between teachers and students.

6.2 Neoliberalism’s Historical and Theoretical Roots

One of the great difficulties in critically discussing neoliberalism is coming to a coherent and accepted version of the theory. More specifically, while it is easy to identify certain characteristics that accompany neoliberalism, such as positivism, individualism, and a narrow conception of rationality, it is much more difficult to identify the core theoretical foundation and principles that make up this dominant “ism.” For many, neoliberalism is equated solely with the increased harm brought on by the corporate globalization of the world (Auerbach, 2007). Within this context, neoliberalism is understood as the monolithic economic policy that has privileged corporate hegemony of the Western markets and, subsequently, resulted in the exploitation and oppression of millions of people in less privileged markets and the concurrent marginalization of the public’s voice (Auerbach, 2007; Harvey, 2005).

Neoliberalism has also been interpreted as a historical era in economics. Although the dates that define this era are debatable, generally, neoliberalism is viewed as the economic era of the 1980s and early 1990s that began with Thatcher and Reagan’s application of economic policies that were entrenched in the Washington Consensus and ended in the late 1990s with Blair and Clinton (Auerbach, 2007; Harvey, 2005). During this period, economic policies, under the rhetorical guise of a crisis of an overburdened state, shifted away from Keynesian liberal economic policies and began radical cuts in public programs, the financial liberalization of the free market, and the deregulation of market competition. For
Canadians, such as myself, this era was most notably represented by the Chrétien/Martin era of liberalism at the federal level, as well as Harris/Eves’s “Common Sense Revolution” in Ontario in the late 1990s. This radical shift in economic policy aimed to stimulate economic growth by loosening the chains of government taxation and regulation that prevented captains of industry from adequately investing and reinvesting in the economy.

It should also be noted that understanding neoliberalism in its historical context does not provide absolute theoretical clarity. As Auerbach (2007) and notable neoliberal theorists Arthur Denzau, Ravi Roy, and Thomas Willett (2007) note, within this time the variance of different strands of neoliberalism is equally complex. On the one hand, we have the “laissez-faire” strand of neoliberalism that Thatcher and Reagan initiated, which is characterized as a full-fledged return of “classical liberal” economic theory and a full-fledged commitment to the undermining of the welfare state in favour of a capitalist, market state. On the other hand, as Denzau, Roy, and Willett (2007) explicitly point out, there is also the Blair and Clinton era that cast neoliberal policies with a concurrent reinvestment in social programs. Moreover, if this conception of neoliberalism were not complicated enough, there is also the Washington Consensus (WC) policies that informed both groups, as well as global policies via the World Bank (Denzau, Roy, & Willett, 2007). And while there remains controversy about how, in fact, the WC’s policies were implemented on the world stage, they theoretically share Blair and Clinton’s model of advocating marginal reinvestment of capital in health care, education, and the infrastructures of their respective countries (Denzau, Roy, & Willett, 2007).

Lastly, neoliberalism is also conceived as an economic theory that provides social scientific predictions regarding capitalist growth; in turn, these scientifically grounded predictions provide the theoretical basis for the aforementioned policies
of economic institutions. This conception of neoliberalism is most notably defended by economic and social theorists Denzau and Douglass North (1994) in their work “Shared Mental Models: Ideologies and Institutions.” According to Denzau and North, neoliberalism should be conceived as a shared mental model (SMM). They (1994) argue that a SMM is best understood as shared systemic sets of ideas and related principles that individuals use to interpret the world (Denzau & North, 1994, p. 2). Within mental models, we share meanings and understandings of our environment through common language, symbols, analogies, and references. As such, shared mental models and their corresponding relations to institutions “are essential to the way that humans structure their environment in their interactions with it” (Denzau & North, 1994, p. 2). Neoliberalism, then, is a new variation of neo-classical theory that uses shared mental models that “refine interest-based and rational choice approaches” to economic theory (Denzau & North, 1994, p. 2).

Crucial to Denzau, Roy, and Willett’s model is using a “constrained vision” of humans as rational, self-interested utility maximizers. By “constrained vision” they (2007) are referring to Thomas Sowell’s view of theoretically conceiving the human state as having a specific limited content (pp. 5–7). In this sense, a constrained utopian vision requires a certain type of human to make it possible. In contrast, an “unconstrained vision” sees humans as mutable and perfectible. For neoliberals, their constrained utopian vision conceives of human beings as perfectly rational utility maximizers. Roy, Denzau, and Willett (2007) further argue that through this constrained vision, humans “create institutions to further their interaction and reduce the cognitive and behavioral requirements that an unconstrained vision might require” (p. 7). By using a constrained vision of humans as self-interested, utility maximizers, Denzau, Roy, and Willett are presumably able to create an SMM that attempts to accurately predict and describe
market-orientated ideas within both theoretical and real political contexts (Denzau, Roy, & Willett 2007, p. 7). In doing so, neoliberalism *qua* SMM provides an organized set of market-orientated language, ideas, symbols, analogies, and references that can inform and frame economic theory and policy.

What, then, is the essence of neoliberalism that unites the varying neoliberal projects employed over the past 20 years with its theoretical conception? Interestingly, Denzau, Roy, and Willett (2007) claim that there is a philosophical commonality between their theoretical conception and the different strands of neoliberal policy enacted. Specifically, they (2007) argue that “most share the broad similar philosophical positions regarding the superiority of the market mechanism over state intervention in sustaining growth and tend to emphasize the principles of individual entrepreneurial freedom ahead of more collectivist approaches” (p. 8). For Denzau, Roy, and Willett the success of this SMM along with the clear victory of market-oriented polices over the command-and-control system of the Soviet model has all but confirmed the dominance of neoliberalism as the only significant model of economic theory. Denzau and North (1994) argue that despite the fact that their model of substantive rationality has been under attack by a “few economists, as well as other social scientists and philosophers for decades…there has been no serious alternative that incorporates successful applications of the substantive rationality optimization model while still dealing within some productive manner its shortcomings” (p. 18). Thus, not only has the collapse of the Soviet empire shown the vast superiority of freemarket–oriented ideas and policies, but the lack of any clear alternative to the neoliberal SMM mutes their critics.

The relationship between Denzau, Roy, Willett, and North’s conception of neoliberalism and corresponding public policies enacted by institutions is a precarious relationship at best. While the theorists point to the philosophical
commonality that underlay their projects, they argue that the “experiments” and “manifestations” of neoliberalism are distinct from their broad neoliberal SMM. More specifically, they argue that the various strands of neoliberal policy and their manifestation in their particular contexts have caused sometimes divergent policies, ranging from the laissez-faire approaches of Thatcher and Reagan to John Williamson’s Washington Consensus, which, as noted, rejects the former’s view of financially dismantling social welfare and public programs such as education, welfare, and healthcare (Denzau, Roy, & Willett, 2007, p. 7). Hence, while the neoliberal SMM provides the market-oriented ideas with a framework to understand and predict the real manifestations of policy, it does not, in itself, provide any particular set of public policies.

6.3 Neoliberal Theory, the Social Imaginary, and Political Myth

It is my contention that over the course of the last 20 years neoliberalism has become much more than an economic model to make predictions with or a set of theoretical principles that guide public policy. As various critical theorists have pointed out, neoliberalism has become an important part of our common public discourse (Bourdieu, 1998; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2004). In fact, I contend that neoliberalism has become an important part of our social imaginary, and, concurrently, it has emerged as a powerful political myth that provides an important mode of symbolic orientation and significance for large groups in North American culture. Much like the meritocratic myth, neoliberalism began as a theoretical construct but became part of a mythic understanding of the world. Specifically, as neoliberal economic theory became implemented as public policies, the normative values, beliefs, and ideas, as well as the narrative of economic progress began to be worked on as a myth by economists, politicians, and bureaucrats alike over the course of the last 30 years. As neoliberalism
became part of our socio-political discourse, the myth emerged as an important and distinct narrative that provided and continues to provide an important mode of symbolic orientation and sense of narrative significance to our socio-political order.

At the most general level, the neoliberal myth is a narrative of individual and collective progress. Central to the narrative of neoliberal progress is the archetype of *homo economicus*—the ideal of human behavior that can lead to individual and collective betterment. To this end, in accordance with the myth, we are all understood as potential *homo economicus*es who are able to direct our self-interest towards economic ends by rationally maximizing our choices both as consumers and as entrepreneurial producers. In this way, I am arguing that as neoliberal theory became accepted as a myth by large groups, they did not simply try to make accurate positivist predictions based on a shared mental model of the world. Instead, people embraced the view that they should act in accordance with this political and economic archetype. In so doing, groups were able to frame their individual existence within a myth of individual and collective realization through economic prosperity and progress within their socio-political order.

The neoliberal myth offers a unique possibility for those who receive and work on the narrative of *homo economicus* as the archetypal human. If one embraces this myth within a proper capitalist setting, it is possible for every individual to progress through material wealth via consumption and production. As a consequence, if we act as self-interested and utility-maximizing economic agents, the neoliberal myth purports that we can live a fulfilled economic life that progresses indefinitely to our deaths. Where traditional religious myths secured happiness through transcendental reward or progress, neoliberalism offers the promise of individual prosperity and happiness in and through this material world. The neoliberal myth’s ability to provide significance to the individual in this world
should not be dismissed or taken lightly. Amidst an indifferent reality and complex socio-political order, the neoliberal myth offers in its narrative core the possibility of self-fulfillment and happiness by acting out of one’s own economic self-interest. For instance, if Bill Gates embraces the neoliberal myth, his constant striving to expand the profitability and productive power of Microsoft is not simply an effect of his ingenuity, it is an important measure of his own growth as an individual. Similarly, in embracing the neoliberal myth, Gates’s consumption of goods and services is also indicative of said progress. Thus, Gates’s investment portfolio, $147 million mansion, and other purchases also provide material indicators of his progress. Moreover, it is through the consumption of these goods and services that he grows as an individual. Thus the neoliberal myth infuses our socio-political order with a sense of significance as we act as *homo economicus* and constantly struggle towards material prosperity through self-interested production and consumption.

Once more, while the individual is at the fundamental core of the neoliberal myth, his or her progress through self-interested production and consumption is necessarily tied to the prosperity of humanity in general. More precisely, also central to the neoliberal myth is the narrative that humanity’s collective prosperity and progress is *only* possible through our collective assimilation of *homo economicus* as our ideal. In other words, our individual progress as *homo economicus* not only promises us individual material fulfillment, but it also carries with it the added ideal and promise of worldwide prosperity through more and more groups embracing the narrative core of the myth. To use Bill Gates as an example, in embracing the neoliberal myth his consumption and production of goods is tied to the narrative of our collective material progress. Specifically, Gates, by acting as a self-interested, utility-maximizing economic agent, increases Microsoft’s profitability, invests in various companies, and purchases luxury
goods; consequently, his consumptions, production, and investments leads to the United States’ and even the world’s collective betterment as this capital is distributed through various economic avenues. It is important to emphasize the distinction between neoliberalism as a very popular myth and its theoretical counterpart. As a theory, the idea of vast, global economic growth is a positivist description that can never really exist. As a myth, however, neoliberal ideas, values, and beliefs gain real normative force as groups collectively embrace it as a narrative to live by. The myth compels individuals to reflect and act in the world as if their economic prosperity will secure their own material fulfillment while concurrently contributing to the material fulfillment of others.

6.4 Points of Comparison: The Neoliberal Myth and the Meritocratic Myth

From the outset, it is important to note how the neoliberal myth fits with its meritocratic counterpart. At the most fundamental level, both myths are progressive and offer the possibility of significance through prosperity in our socio-political institutions. Moreover, it is clear that the neoliberal myth is compatible with the meritocratic narrative that there exists a “natural aristocracy” and that our schools are institutions where individuals, through talent and effort, gain their destined social ranking. This compatibility being noted, the neoliberal myth describes and understands the individual in two fundamentally different ways. In the meritocratic myth, individuals are constituted by their various talents and their efforts allow them to achieve their destined social ranks. The neoliberal myth fundamentally narrows and thins this notion of the individual to a purely economic agent. To this end, all of our talents and efforts and corresponding ranking are radically reduced to those understood as instrumental to our economic order.

This distinction is an important one, especially in discussing education. In
fact, the early pioneers of the meritocratic myth naively did not believe that economic interests would be the primary means of conceptualizing one’s progress (Lemann, 1999, pp.185–186). More specifically, both Conant and Chauncey believed that the creation of the meritocratic order would result in natural leaders emerging from the school system (Lemann, 1999, p. 25). These natural leaders, in turn, would guide American society out of a sense of duty and obligation rather than economic interest. Even in the early stages of meritocratic reform, talents such as artistry were presumed to have social value independent of these talents’ contribution to the economy. Consequently, during this time, university programs still set out to rank and sort artists and humanities students with little concern for their fit into the economy. With the advent and growth of the neoliberal myth, however, all ranking is intimately tied to socio-economic status; as such, human progress is understood solely as material progress and economic gain on both individual and collective levels.

Another important distinction between the neoliberal and meritocratic myths is each narrative’s respective relationship to the existing social institutions. As I argued earlier, one of the inherent problems with the meritocratic myth is that it attempts to naturalize social hierarchies in ways that legitimize the manufactured differences between students. In this sense, at the core of the meritocratic myth is the view that there has always been a socio-political hierarchy amongst humans, and that the existing social institutions are simply trying to objectively reproduce a hierarchy through social engineering. In contrast, the neoliberal myth is transformative. Much like Marx’s myth of the proletariat revolution, the neoliberal myth includes the added demand that individuals and groups act to ensure that all institutions encourage them and allow them and others to act as homo economicus. In the neoliberal myth, it is not enough that schools sort and rank students accurately. More specifically, students must be taught the narrative that
their progress is dependent on their self-interested pursuit of material progress, and, in turn, the school’s institutional structure should also ensure that students *qua homo economicus* can flourish and grow. Failure to do so comes at a cost: Students will ultimately fail to properly fit into our economy and thus will fail to reach material prosperity, and their failures collectively threaten our individual and collective economic prosperity.

The transformative nature of the neoliberal myth was most evident in Ontario schools during the Harris/Eves government. As the government and much of the public embraced the neoliberal myth, schools became the focal point of the economic woes of the province. Subsequently, despite any factual evidence, schools were perceived as economically inadequate—they were institutions that did not provide the necessary training for students to fit into the “modern competitive economy.” Of course, in the neoliberal myth, it is assumed that all students are striving as self-interested economic agents, and that the role of our education system should be to ensure their development as *homo economicus*es in our economy. Within this myth, our collective struggles and economic failure were framed, at least in part, as our inability to create a competitive institution that adequately trained our producers and consumers. Ultimately, then, politicians, educational policy-makers, administrators, and even teachers collectively embraced, and continue to embrace, the view that schools should be reformed to ensure that economic growth in the country was secured along with the promise of our individual and collective material prosperity. Further, it came as little surprise, given the neoliberal myth’s theoretical roots, that those receiving and working on this narrative turned to various business models as a means of restructuring and reorganizing schools to secure prosperity.¹⁸

¹⁸ Critical theorist Mark Olssen argues that what distinguishes neoliberalism from
6.5 Neoliberalism and the Problem of Moral Neutrality

Let us now turn our discussion to neoliberalism and the notion of moral neutrality. In this part of my analysis, I will turn to the implications of neoliberal theory for its mythical counterpart. In this section, I will reveal that neoliberalism, as an economic theory, is understood as conceptually independent from moral issues and concerns. However, I will argue that as the theory became part of our mythical understanding of the political world, its lack of moral core had, and continues to have, serious implications both inside and outside the classroom. Specifically, it is my contention that one of the fundamental problems with the neoliberal myth is that it is, at its narrative core, a normative mode of orientation that denies its own normativity. More than this, while those that embrace and work on the myth deny its normativity, the neoliberal myth’s morally vacuous narrative core has embedded itself within popular educational discourse and its neo-classical counterpart is that while the latter “represents a negative conception of state power in that the individual [is] taken as an object to be freed from the interventions of the state,” the former has become “a positive conception of the state’s role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation” (Olssen, 1996, p. 340). He argues (1996) that this marked difference can be seen in how each different theory views the individual: “In classical liberalism, the individual is characterized as having an autonomous human nature and can practice freedom. In neoliberalism, the state seeks to create an individual who is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur” (p. 340). It is my contention that, while Olssen is certainly correct to point to the manipulative power of the state in creating *homo economicus*, he fails to understand how neoliberal myth has become an important part of our community’s symbolic orientation in our socio-economic order. This is not to deny the power of the state or the significant moral and political consequences of the neoliberal myth’s production and reception. Rather, it is to acknowledge that the strength of this myth and its particular hold on much of North America’s population is due to the fact that it creates a sense of unity and narrative significance in people’s lives.
policies in ways that negate and undermine the possibility of democracy being nurtured in and through education.

Notably, we can consider a theory morally neutral in two distinct ways. First, a theory can be considered morally neutral insofar as it provides an objective discourse, description, and sets of normative prescriptions regarding morality. By morality or ethics, I mean any discussion of issues concerning this crucial set of questions: What should we make of ourselves? How should we live? What should we do? What kind of persons should we become? (Kagan, 1998, pp. 1–11). In this sense, any theory that provides an objective and impartial account of how to answer these questions and/or provides an objective normative framework that guides our thoughts and actions has been traditionally considered morally neutral. Of course, in moral philosophy, the two most notable theories that claim to be objective in the non-partial sense are utilitarianism/consequentialism and deontology. Both theories claim that through proper moral reasoning, each of their respective meta-ethical and normative views provide objective, impartial, and universal accounts of the moral life. In this sense, moral neutrality is directly tied to the interrelated notions of moral reasoning, objectivity, universality, and impartiality. This problem of false neutrality in this first sense is often a lightning rod for critics of liberal, political, and social theory.19

However, this aforementioned philosophical problem does not plague neoliberalism. Neoliberal theory does not claim to provide an objective account of the moral life. On the contrary, neoliberal theory is thought to be distinct from the

19 For instance, modern liberal theorists, such as John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin, have been criticized by various theorists for defending a particularly biased moral point of view via an equally biased set of philosophical tools and criteria (moral reasoning, objectivity, universality, and impartiality) (Benhabib, 1992; Young, 1990).
moral realm altogether. In this sense, a theory is morally neutral if and only if it does not pertain to the realm of moral issues and questions that I mentioned above. The most obvious illustration of this type of moral neutrality would be in science and mathematics. For example, the Pythagorean theorem \((a^2 + b^2 = c^2)\) is morally neutral insofar as it is necessarily distinct, in and of itself, from all moral matters. And while the history of science is riddled with epistemological debate concerning the objectivity of scientific theories, it is quite clear that Einstein’s general theory of relativity is morally neutral inasmuch as its language, assumptions, principles, and corresponding predictions are outside the scope of moral discourse.

It is precisely this second sense of moral neutrality that neoliberalism \textit{qua} SMM attempts to achieve. More specifically, Denzau, North, Roy and Willett’s neoliberalism (1994, 2007) is framed as a social scientific theory that draws on behaviourism and public choice theory. As such, their constrained vision of a neoliberal order aims to provide a scientifically grounded account of humans as individual, selfinterested maximizers acting within a capitalist free market. Denzau, North, Roy, Willett and other neoliberal economic theorists are concerned with accurately describing how \textit{homo economicus}’s beliefs and desires subsequently lead to utility maximization within a free market environment. In other words, they systematize \textit{homo economicus}’s expectations about markets and industries and provide supposedly accurate predictions of the aggregate of those beliefs, desires, and actions that will maximize economic growth. And while they note that actual humans do not act in strict accordance to their vision because real humans act in part “on the basis of myth, dogmas, ideologies and ‘half-baked’ theories,” they concurrently claim that their scientific account of “substantive rational” behaviour provides the most scientifically sound description of how we act within the free market (Denzau, Roy, & Willett, 2007, pp. 1–2).

As a scientifically grounded shared mental model, neoliberalism is purported
to be a morally neutral theory. More specifically, Denzau, Roy, and Willett elaborate descriptions of *homo economicus*’s market-driven beliefs, desires, and corresponding actions are grounded within a discourse of social science/economic theory. As such, their description of individual behaviour within the SMM is grounded in the same way as every other scientific theory and thus beyond the purview of moral discourse. In this sense, neoliberal theory claims to provide a scientific analysis of how *homo economicus* acts in the free market rather than a normative and meta-ethical analysis of how we should live and act in the real world. Moreover, the corresponding predictions concerning human actions and the best means of maximizing the aggregate utility of individuals is also portrayed as a description of how to best create economic growth within a free market system rather than a normative discourse on the actions individuals and groups should take as moral agents.

Crucial, then, for neoliberal theorists, such as Denzau, Roy, Willett, and North is understanding their theory as a positivist economic discourse rather than a normative one. In other words, Denzau and North and the like intentionally avoid drifting into moral discourse by innocently seeking the answers to morally neutral questions: How will *homo economicus* act to maximize its utility in various free market contexts? What is the best means of creating institutional structures and regulations that maximize *homo economicus*’s utility in a way that creates and sustains aggregate economic growth? In answering these questions, neoliberalism is absolutely silent on the moral front. More precisely, the neoliberal theory and/or SMM provides no language, set of assumptions, symbols, analogies, or references that capture moral discourse. In this sense, *homo economicus* is an exclusively amoral economic creature rather than a human one; its environment is one of a
utopian free market that is free of oppression, harm, kindness, altruism or empathy.\(^{20}\)

If neoliberal theory is scientifically grounded in a way that makes it distinct from all moral concerns, then how should we understand the popular view of a “neoliberal ethic” that dominates our society and insidiously undermines democratic values and institutions (Bourdieu, 1998; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2004). In fact, the problem occurs as neoliberal economic theory became understood, received, and worked on as a political myth. As a political myth, neoliberalism is not understood to be a positivist account of our economic order but rather a normative narrative that orients us and compels us to act and interact within our social order. Moreover, as a myth, neoliberalism does not factually explain the economic events that make up one’s life but provides a sense of narrative unity and significance to our self-interested desires, production, and consumption. As a

\(^{20}\) The significance of neoliberalism’s schism with all forms of moral discourse is all the more evident cast within the light of moral theory. Regardless of the school of moral philosophy one wishes to compare a neoliberalism vision with, one is left with a language barren of the moral good. For consequentialists, this means impartially weighing the overall consequences of one’s actions in the world as a whole. For deontologists the moral consideration of others can take a number of different forms, including Kant’s categorical imperative and principle of treating all humans as ends in themselves rather than means. For Humean naturalists, it means empathizing with those beyond the scope of our own narrow relations (Hume, 1748–1751/2000). Furthermore, for feminist Iris Marion Young, it means all individuals and groups of individuals should have the opportunity to equally negotiate and consider the needs and desires of others in a substantive way (Young, 1990). Regardless of which of the aforementioned views you may subscribe to, if any, the view that we have both the capability of considering others beyond our self-interested view of the world and, in turn, should do so, is essential to humans being moral beings. As I argue further, it is not without great significance, then, that the morally barren world of the neoliberal constrained vision of humans negates the possibility of understanding humans as moral beings.
result, as neoliberalism moved from the halls of Ivy League schools and
government think tanks to the general public and to government itself, it
concurrently transformed from a positivist theory to a normative myth. Hence, the
economic and social policies of Thatcher, Reagan, the Washington Consensus, and
the Harris/Eves government turned neoliberal descriptions into public
prescriptions. Moreover, large groups of the North American population turned to
neoliberal myth as a narrative guide to their lives. In embracing the neoliberal
myth, politicians, policy-makers, and large sections of the public accepted
wholeheartedly the language, symbols, analogies, references, and vision of
neoliberal economic theory. By doing so, the goal of all such societies,
communities, and individuals became to maximize economic growth. In this
political myth, optimal economic growth can be achieved if and only if the market
is free from government regulations, and individuals act as self-interested, rational
utility maximizers. Therefore, both deregulation of the market and homo
economicus’s beliefs, values, and actions should be pursued. The problem with
this view, of course, is that the neoliberal myth sounds suspiciously like answers to
the moral questions life poses to us:

i. What should we make of ourselves? Answer: A materially affluent group of
individuals.

ii. How should we live? Answer: As self-interested, utility-maximizing
consumers and producers.

iii. What should we do? Answer: Rationally maximize our individual utility.

iv. What kind of person should we become? Answer: Homo economicus.

Thrust into the realm of the social imaginary, neoliberalism no longer clings to its
scientifically justified moral neutrality; homo economicus becomes an ideal of
human behaviour and the free market becomes the ideal amoral environment that
we are encouraged to strive to create in a world fraught with human suffering,
exploitation, oppression, and violence.

As a political myth in the Blumenbergian sense, then, neoliberalism provides a narrative and corresponding sense of significance that unites individuals and groups within a common moral view. Through this moral view, people reorient their narrative understanding of themselves and how they relate with one another, as well as how they interact with the socio-political order in general. In other words, as large groups embrace the neoliberal political myth they also embrace a narrative that has no moral language, adequate set of values, or moral decision-making process. The myth’s moral grounding is highly indeterminate to say the least and simply encourages groups to always act as self-interested producers and consumers and to transform existing institutions to ensure that their material interests are secured. As a myth, the highly indeterminate features of neoliberalism’s moralism are overlooked or dismissed as our individual and economic progress becomes the primary narrative of our existence. To this end, moral concerns about our self-interested pursuit of the neoliberal “promised land” are perceived as subsidiary problems that are ultimately secondary to securing our economic interests.\(^\text{21}\)

\(^\text{21}\) Let me briefly address neoliberal theorists who argue that neoliberalism is rooted in American, democratic notions of freedom, choice, and liberty (Friedman & Friedman, 1981). This, of course, is argued to be part of the normative core of neoliberalism. As Milton Friedman (1981) argues, the neoliberal vision embraces American values of freedom, liberty, and choice. Aside from Friedman drawing on America’s strong libertarian, democratic history, it does not follow that his account of the moral foundation of neoliberalism is adequate enough to fill in the normative gaps inherited from its theoretical counterpart. More specifically, as important as a negative conception of freedom is to being able to act morally, it does not follow that securing free market liberty concurrently ensures that we act either with care for others, avoid harming others, or strive for a sense of collective justice. It is evident that freedom and choice is only morally positive in our society
6.6 Neoliberal Myth and the Aims of Education

In turning my discussion to neoliberal myth and education, I aim to identify three specific areas in modern schooling in which I believe the neoliberal myth, and particularly its problem of false moral neutrality, undermines the possibility of democratic pedagogical practice. To reiterate, it is my contention that by shifting our critical understanding of neoliberalism to include a Blumenbergian (1979/1985) conception of myth, we can better conceptualize and consequently critique how the morally barren normative core of the neoliberal myth is being received, worked on and providing narrative unity and significance to members of our educational communities. Throughout this analysis, while I will certainly focus on how students receive the neoliberal myth, particular emphasis will be placed on how neoliberal myth has been embraced by school boards, administrators, policy-makers, and many teachers as a powerful normative mode of symbolic orientation that fundamentally opposes democratic values and practices.

At the most general level, we can see the neoliberal myth penetrate the narrative discourse concerning the aims of education. By aims, I mean the articulated ends that education systems as a whole aspire to achieve through directed schooling (Dewey, 1922/1974, pp. 70–80). It is the articulated aims of education that subsequently guide how our institutions, curricula, pedagogy, and modes of assessment and evaluation are designed in order to achieve these aims.

if, and only if, we use this liberty to try to make moral choices based on substantive concern for others and fundamental moral values. Therefore, securing a negative sense of freedom and liberty, although clearly beneficial to growing our economy, should be understood and valued only in conjunction with a critical understanding of how this freedom is used and the types of choices that are being made.
To put it in the form of a question, in articulating aims for education we must ask ourselves: Education for what? (Portelli, 2001). In articulating an answer to this question, one is expressing the reasons and justification for schooling in our existing social, economic, political, cultural, and moral contexts. Furthermore, in articulating the aims of education, one is also identifying the desired effects of directed learning both within the educational institutions themselves as well as within our various communities.

What is the neoliberal myth’s aim for our education system? Simply, the neoliberal myth aims to integrate the schooling system, like any other institution, in its narrative of our optimal individual and collective economic growth. As such, all institutions and government policies are forged to achieve this goal (MacEwen, 1988). Of course, the primary means of achieving this aim is the active development and promotion of individuals into the *homo economicus* ideal as well as the deregulation of private business. For neoliberals, schooling is much more than a location of individual learning. Rather, education is a crucial institution that actively directs “human capital” towards achieving its single aim of immense and constant economic growth (Friedman & Friedman, 1981).

Within the neoliberal myth, our education system becomes one of the primary institutional venues for what Olssen (1996) calls the “manipulation of man” towards becoming *homo economicus* (p. 340). More specifically, to ensure the success of the neoliberal, the education system must ensure that all of the students embrace and receive the *homo economicus* narrative of individual and collective progress and, consequently, must be trained to be self-interested, utility-maximizing, and productive entrepreneurs. According to our current neoliberal model of education, optimal economic growth can only occur by actively developing both the individual’s capacity to produce, as well as by promoting free market values and dispositions of egoism, individualism, competition, and
consumerism within our schools.

The radical engulfing of education by the neoliberal myth has fundamentally altered the current discourse on the aims of education to a discussion concerning economic growth. And while educational discourse has always contained within it an important and crucial view of education as a means of training students for the economy, the current incarnation of the neoliberal myth in our schools has overwhelmingly privileged this view at the cost of others. There is currently an overwhelming consensus in our society that our education system should be designed to train students into highly productive and competitive entrepreneurs. As Murray and Herrnstein argue in their neoliberal treatise *The Bell Curve* (1994), our education system’s primary role should be to properly sort individuals to ensure that the most talented individuals are placed in the most productive and important economic roles in our society (p. 92). More than this, however, our schools have actively embraced and promoted the neoliberal values of radical, self-interested individualism, competition, and consumerism. As Linda McQuaig argues in her work *All You Can Eat* (2001), never in the history of any civilization has *homo economicus* values of self-interested greed and consumerism been so readily accepted and promoted to large portions of society than it has in North American society over the course of the last 30 years.

While I can identify numerous anecdotal examples that reveal the dominance of the neoliberal myth from my own experience as a teacher, the most startling one occurred during the period of my teacher training. Placed in a grade 7/8 split class in London, Ontario, I had the privilege of teaching the students both math and science. It was during this placement that my students were forced to partake in a school program entitled *Building Futures Network* (Canadian Foundation for Economic Education, 2007). The program, created by the Canadian Foundation for Economic Education, was presented by a former bank manager.
During the one-day program, the students were systematically led through a series of interrelated booklets. The students began by checking off all the material things that they desired in the future, ranging from a house to a car, etc. Having chosen their material needs and wants, the students, in turn, had to calculate the total cost per year of these items based on a price list provided at the start of the booklet. Once the students calculated this total, they then had to choose the profession that earned an average income that sustained this lifestyle. Finally, the students had to find the corresponding educational program that would lead to their chosen profession. The program was unquestionably trying to promote education. However, it was also trying to promote and reinforce the neoliberal myth’s narrative view of education in which learning is explicitly connected to educational accreditation, economic production, and economic consumption. In other words, these 12- and 13-year-old students were encouraged to receive and work on the myth’s narrative that they should be young *homo economicus*, whose self-interested desires to acquire numerous material goods would spur their competitive drive to be productive students and economic agents. Of course, implicit in this exercise is that indefinite self-interested consumption is the locus of human progress and individual and collective fulfillment. Unsurprisingly, the program was unanimously embraced by the school, the administration, my associate teacher, and the students involved; it was embraced by everyone except for a young girl who was laughed at for announcing that she did not want anything when she grew up.

I suspect that the near unanimous support for this program is directly linked to how dominant the neoliberal myth has become. Our current education system’s primary aim, informed by the neoliberal myth, is to create a highly competitive institution in which students strive to “earn” socio-economic advancement and thus entitlement to an increased amount of social, economic, and political capital. To
this end, the Building Futures program fits seamlessly in the neoliberal mode of mythical orientation. Of course, the widespread acceptance of the neoliberal aim of education raises serious questions about of how substantive moral and ethical values and dispositions fit into our educational system’s pedagogical landscape. More to the point, if neoliberalism is devoid of any positive moral vision of human beings, the integration of moral and political values within neoliberal-inspired schools raises significant concern.22

While some individuals who embrace and receive the neoliberal myth may believe that the aims for education necessarily must coexist in an institutional system that has multiple aims. In this view, neoliberal aims for education coexist with other aims, such as the inculcation of moral and political values (Winch, 1996). Hence, our education system can promote economic growth via the promotion of *homo economicus* and also aim at the moral and political development of our students. One advantage of framing neoliberalism’s influence on education this way is that it is seemingly able to maintain its traditional theoretical neutrality concerning the moral realm. For instance, neoliberal theory can be applied to education in the sphere of economic development and training

22 It is important to note that one should not confuse the neoliberal educational vision with one that promotes vocationalism and training in schools. Undoubtedly, as many critics of neoliberalism point out, training and learning the skills necessary to effectively work in our society are an important part of our education system (Freire, 1998). However, one can promote vocationalism as one of the aims of education without holding the neoliberal view that we should limit our students to striving towards the *homo economicus* ideal and neoliberal narrative of progress in general. One can also value training and the development of career-orientated skills without holding the view that we should pursue free market economic growth without concern for substantive moral issues such as equity and justice both inside and outside our classrooms. In this sense, the aims of vocationalism should never be removed and separated from moral and political issues such as class, gender, sex, race, and cultural oppression.
while students ethically develop through a separate sphere of classes and initiatives. For instance, currently in Ontario there has been an emerging government push for character-development education to coexist within our neoliberal influenced schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006). In this sense, neoliberalism remains neutral on political matters as the political development of students is relegated to civics classes and participation in student-body democratic practices.

I think that this proposal, however intuitive on the surface, returns to the fundamental problem of the false moral neutrality that lies at the core of the neoliberal myth. As Freire (1998, 1968/2000) argues throughout his works, there is absolutely no political and moral neutral ground in educational policy. When neoliberals implement their set of policies and programs, such as the Building Futures Network, in the education system, these policies and programs are necessarily political and determine how students should learn, what they should learn, and why they should learn it. Furthermore, with these value-laden prescriptions they also prescribe ways in which students interact with one another competitively, as well as how they treat and perceive others based on their successes and failures both within and outside schools. As a particular normative myth that gains its prescriptive force through political policy, the aims promoted by neoliberals are thus necessarily moral and political in nature. Consequently, the argument for promoting a neoliberal aim along with our other political and moral aims is equivalent to pitting the neoliberal moral and political values, beliefs, and proposed actions against its political and moral counterparts.

A significant effect of conceiving neoliberal myth as separate from moral and political issues in education is that current educational discourse often fails to see a real fundamental tension and conflict between the moral values, dispositions, and views of those who receive and work on the neoliberal myth that has saturated
our schools. For instance, as a teacher in a publicly funded Catholic secondary school, I have noticed that there is a significant tension between Catholicism’s embrace of altruism and equality rooted in a collective and spiritual struggle for social justice and a neoliberal myth that has entered into the narrative goals of my school that stresses mass, individual competition for grades, consumerism, and the sorting of students into hierarchical classes. And while it might be comforting to think that we can somehow square the neoliberal’s narrative of progress by believing it can coexist with moral and democratic cultivation of an equitable and just society, it is evident that over the past 30 years the former normative myth has come at the cost of the latter. We have undoubtedly created highly advanced economic societies with highly trained and productive citizens who have more consumer goods than ever could have been imagined a short time ago. We have done so, however, without relieving the suffering, exploitation, and oppression of millions of people in both our own respective societies and throughout the world. We also have done so, in many cases, on the backs of those who have had to sacrifice their land, resources, basic human rights, and lives to ensure *homo economicus* can maximize our wants and needs.

### 6.7 Neoliberal Myth and Educational Excellence

In addition to neoliberal myth providing a refinement of the primary aims of our education system, it has also played a significant role in how we understand the notion of “quality” in education. I hope few people interested in educational discourse would deny the importance of having a “quality” education system. As an adjective, “quality” here denotes having a high degree of excellence (Winch, 1996). What is a more contentious issue, however, is the philosophical debate about what constitutes a high degree of excellence in our education system. Unsurprisingly, where neoliberals and their critics differ significantly is regarding
what it means for our education system to have a high or low degree of excellence and subsequently how to determine the degree to which this excellence is achieved.

One significant way in which neoliberals frame the issue of quality and education is in terms of the creation of a product that is fit for its purpose (Friedman, 1981; Murray & Herrnstein 1994; Winch 1996). Of course, the notion of quality being defined as fit for a particular purpose dates back to Plato and his view of creating a hierarchically stratified just society. This basic similarity being noted, the neoliberal narrative radically narrows this notion of quality to economic growth via class stratification and the creation of *homo economicus*. To this end, to be properly fit for a neoliberal purpose means that students should acquire the highest socio-economic position that is possible for them through the development of their talents and skills of production. Further, students are to always maximize utility in the consumption of goods and services. In this sense, the excellence of our education system is directly determined by its ability to create individuals who can maximize the economic growth of our society (Murray & Herrnstein, 1994).

It is this neoliberal myth’s conception of quality that has informed our education system and has determined it is in a state of crisis. Particularly, for individuals who embrace the neoliberal myth, our current education system is of low quality insofar as it fails to effectively produce enough individuals who are highly trained and productive entrepreneurs and consumers (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). According to this narrative, our watered down progressive education program has failed to provide *homo economicus* with the requisite skills (entrepreneurial training) and values (hard work, competitive spirit, and a yearning for consumption) to ensure mass collective production and consumption. The consequence of such a low-quality system, as the narrative goes, is the creation of an inferior workforce, a weak consumer market, and inevitable economic stagnation.
Once more, we find that as neoliberalism enters into public debate concerning education, the normative force of the myth becomes truly evident. Certainly at the root of this logical tension is that the concept of “quality” in education is an evaluative term that carries with it a normative view of what students should strive to be and what the role of education is in our society. The very fact that neoliberals wade into a critical discussion concerning the notion of excellence in education reveals the implicit normative force of their political myth. In other words, without translating the positivist model to a normative model that informed public policy, neoliberals would have no ideological means of commenting on the “misguided” progressive vision for education. Unfortunately, while neoliberals have waded and continue to wade into education’s normative waters, they do so without discussing the moral significance of their mythical view as well as the political context and moral consequences of this myth.

More than simply redefining the notion of excellence in education, neoliberals also incorporated business discourse amidst their myth of individual and collective progress. In doing so, neoliberalism works to redefine the way that we determine and understand excellence in education. Drawing on business models that emphasize quality assurance and quality controls in production, neoliberals argue that educational excellence must be measured against a standard (Winch, 1996). Neoliberals argue that the only way to ensure that students are gaining a high-quality education is to measure their progress or lack thereof against a common and objective standard. In this sense, the narrative of our individual and collective progress through the myth of neoliberalism is ingrained with sets of “scientific” and “objective” evaluative standards. It is precisely these measurable standards that attempt to solidify the sense of quality and progress by constantly tracking and providing feedback to students, teachers, parents, and bureaucrats alike.
In this way, quality assurance in our schools is no different than in the creation of any other complex product. Just as one constantly measures and compares a car against a standard during various points of manufacturing, neoliberals argue that we should also constantly measure and compare students. One does not have to look too hard to see the corresponding educational policy that neoliberalism has spurred within our schools. In both the United States and Canada, we have seen an unprecedented movement towards the standardization of curricula, modes of evaluating, and testing to ensure that students are properly and consistently measured. For instance, currently in Ontario, we have both a standardized curriculum, standardized exemplars of evaluation, and standardized testing (EQAO). Of course, implicit in this analysis is that high-quality schools cannot be created without a mode of evaluation or assessment that does not objectively measure students’ progress; nor can it be achieved without a single common and universal standard to measure against. Similarly, the intimate link between student progress in the neoliberal myth and standardization also implies that one cannot understand educational development, growth, and excellence without providing measurable data and feedback. As a consequence, amidst a school system that is engulfed with the neoliberal myth, teachers, students, administrators, and parents believe that the standards and corresponding data is the normative confirmation of their individual and collective progress.

It should be noted that evaluation and the idea of measuring students against and through standardized curricula and tests predates the advent of neoliberalism (Lemann, 1999). One only has to survey the history of the public schooling and intelligence quotient testing during the 1960s to see the popularity of standardization. That said, what makes the neoliberal narrative discourse regarding standards unique is its emphasis on framing the issue in the context of quality and education. In accordance with the neoliberal myth, all meaningful
learning and progress should be measurable against a standard in our schools. Of course, this radical shift in the notion of quality in education has led to significant problems in framing educational projects in terms of the political and moral development of students. Democratic and moral values and dispositions, such as critical thinking, altruism, open-mindedness, and a deep, profound reciprocal respect for each other, are immeasurable. There is no standardized test that can measure a student’s ability to be an active democratic citizen who reflects and actively seeks to transform our world into a more just, caring, and loving social order. Similarly, there is no standardized test that can measure how open-minded and critical students are. Within the neoliberal myth, all of the political and moral values and dispositions that are necessary to nurture within ourselves an ability to resist and overcome injustices in the world are meaningless. Or to put it another way, the democratic and moral dispositions and values nurtured in students have no bearing on the quality of our schooling for those embracing the neoliberal myth.

The neoliberal conception of quality assurance has become so predominant in our education system that it has come to frame our goals and vision for a future education. More specifically, our goals for student achievement in the future and improvements in curricula and pedagogy in the future are necessarily framed within the discourse of quality assurance and measurement. For example, currently in many school boards across Ontario, schools and departments are required to create SMART goals to ensure the constant progress and development of students, teachers, and schools. SMART is an acronym for framing goals: Simple, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely. Adopted directly from entrepreneurship classes throughout North America, SMART goals ensure that any goal administrators and teachers set for their schools are bound by a normative vision of simplicity, measurability, positivism, and economic efficiency. Any goal that cannot be framed in such a way, in effect, does not contribute to the quality of
our schools; any goal that cannot be measured and justified based on quantifiable data does not contribute to the quality of our schools; any goal that we collectively have to constantly struggle towards does not contribute to the quality of our schools, nor does any goal that must be constantly striven towards throughout our individual and collective existence. Based on this neoliberal mode of framing goals for our future, we do not and should not set goals for the ethical nurturing of teachers and students, or the creation of a just and democratic school and world order. All such goals are vague, unachievable, and immeasurable and thus are irrelevant in the dark neoliberal fatalism of educational progress.

The neoliberal, normative, political, and amoral narrative core fits extraordinarily well with the discourse on quality assurance and control. In the neoliberal myth, the only measurement of the success of *homo economicus* is individual utility maximization through self-interested competition. As such, neoliberals argue that by creating a standardized curriculum, system of evaluation, and testing in schools, it is ensured that students are constantly and consistently ranked and measured against one another. To this end, a student’s movement through the hierarchical compartments of knowledge and sets of learning skills in schools is the education medium by which young *homo economicus*es are individually ranked and sorted against measurable standards. And while gaining knowledge and requisite skills are important in the neoliberal myth, what is more important is that the competition for scarce grades and ranking in the gauntlet of “impartial” measurements in our schools assures that *homo economicus* continues to strive for individual economic achievement, mass production, and maximizing their consumption of goods.

As noted earlier, as various critics of standardization have pointed out, there exists no politically neutral ground concerning education, including the creation of curricula, evaluation, and testing. In Ontario, all standardized curriculum
documents, all rubrics and exemplars and prescribed tests are value-laden documents that are created by politicians, bureaucrats, and educators with a normative vision of society in mind. More to the point, the fact that these documents and policies are standardized and justified on the basis of fitting students into the economic world reveals the fact they are offspring of the neoliberal normative myth rather than a truly democratic one. In contrast, a democratic conception of quality and excellence in education embraces the view that there is a significant amount of learning and development that is essential to our moral and political development that is immeasurable. Moreover, a democratic conception also fundamentally rejects the notion that by measuring students against a single, politically informed, value-laden set of standards, we are treating students equitably (Portelli & Vibert, 1997).

6.8 Neoliberal Myth and the Relationship Between Teachers and Students

In the final part of my analysis of the influence of the neoliberal myth on common educational discourse, I would like to turn the discussion to the relationship between teachers and students. As any teacher would concede, the relationship formed between teachers and learners is one of the most fundamentally important aspects of learning. The way in which we define and form the relationships between teachers and learners will inevitably have a significant effect on the educational environment. Keeping this in mind, we find that the dominant neoliberal myth has had a significant role in transforming the discourse and subsequent relationship between teachers and students. Drawing directly on the business discourse of neoliberal theory, the neoliberal myth describes the relationships within any private or public service industry as instrumental interactions between service providers and consumers. At the most basic level, this discourse conceives the teacher as the service provider and the
student, along with her parent(s)/guardian, as the consumers. However, as philosopher Christopher Winch argues in “Quality and Education” (1996), this conception of educational relationships becomes increasingly complex as each category lends itself to multiple overlapping roles: the various levels of involved governments, the school boards, the administration, and the teachers all can be considered interrelated and crucial service providers; and the taxpayers (corporate and private), the parents, and the students can be considered as interrelated and crucial consumers to whom the former are to be held accountable (pp.100–101).

Further, in the neoliberal myth it is quite possible for groups, such as teachers, to be both service providers and consumers insofar as they are the providers of educational instruction as well as taxpayers.

Taken in the context of an amoral and apolitical myth, the neoliberal view of relationships may, in fact, seem intuitive to many. I think on closer analysis that we find the way neoliberal myth frames educational relationships is devoid of a proper moral and political foundation to deal with substantive educational and social issues such as marginalization, exploitation, and oppression. By the proper moral and political foundation, I do not simply mean the current popular rhetoric of contractual obligation and accountability between service providers and consumers. On the contrary, I mean a moral and political understanding of our educational institutions as a mirror of the inequities, asymmetrical power relations, and various injustices of society at large.

If we take substantive moral and political issues seriously in our discussion of relationships in education, then we quickly see problems in the neoliberal myth service provider/consumer relationship as it manifests itself in our education system. Once again, while such a model may serve well in economic thought experiments, when neoliberalism comes to tell the narrative of educational progress as one defined by the roles of service providers and consumers, it
overlooks fundamental inequities that underlie these roles. For instance, it is
dechitfully naive to think that students and corporations are equally powerful and
influential consumers of education. On the one hand, we have a group of
individuals with a limited set of rights and economic power based on their age and
who have yet to “earn” a significant amount of social, political, and economic
capital. On the other hand, we have powerful organizations that wield an
extraordinary amount of influence over all aspects of our communities and lives.
Thus, when neoliberals state that teachers and other service providers are being
held accountable to both corporations and students, they fundamentally ignore
these glaring inequities. Consequently, I do not think it is any coincidence that,
while vast reforms occur in education on the basis of creating a well-trained and
competitive work force, few of these reforms take into account the voice of the
student community. In our current educational culture students either accept the
fundamental narrative of the neoliberal myth and adapt to the neoliberal policies
and reforms presented to them, or they are sorted into socio-economic oblivion.

Equally problematic is how the neoliberal myth creates a significant divide
between teachers and students. By limiting the language of relationships to an
economic exchange, the neoliberal conception of the teacher and student
relationship fundamentally limits the moral and political possibilities of our
education system. One significant problem with the neoliberal conception is that it
reinforces a significant hierarchical, epistemological, and political divide between
teachers and students (Freire, 1998). Within the neoliberal myth, teachers, like
other expert service providers, use their expertise to impart standardized
compartments of knowledge and skills to the students. Consequently, the students
qua consumers are epistemological customers who learn the requisite knowledge
and skills that are taught by the service providers.

Far from being a politically innocent framing of the teacher and student
relationship, neoliberal myth defends a view that undermines the possibility of blurring or even removing the epistemological and political divide between teachers and students. In the neoliberal myth, the teacher is fulfilling his or her role if he or she is adequately delivering the information and skills to consumers, while the students are fulfilling their role if they adequately act as self-interested, utility-maximizing consumers who properly take in the information and skills provided as the foundation for their personal economic fulfillment. As a result, neoliberalism eliminates the possibility of teachers and students learning together and from one another as teacher-learner. In a democratic relationship, teacher-learners, while certainly differing in roles, construct and reconstruct knowledge of the world through a shared community of dialogue, discovery, and praxis (Freire, 1998, 1968/2000). In such a classroom, I learn with my students and from my students, who bring a wealth of experience, knowledge, and wisdom into our community. Thus, the epistemological equity of such a classroom and the democratic embracing of different voices, ideas, and experiences in the classroom are in direct conflict with the notion that the teachers’ contractual obligation and training makes them the resident expert of a classroom.

6.9 Conclusion

In this chapter, it has been my contention that we must take seriously neoliberalism as an important and powerful myth that has embedded itself within our education system. More than simply an educational theory or discourse, the neoliberal myth continues to influence how policy-makers, administrators, teachers, and even students understand themselves, their relation to others, and the role of school in their lives. Moreover, I argued that this powerful myth also has had and continues to have significant influence on how educators orient their understanding of the aims of education—improving the quality of education as well as the relationship between teachers and students. Far from the mythic
influence on education being benign, the neoliberal myth, through its reception, has created normative views in those areas of education that fit with the creation of homo economicus as well as our individual and economic pursuit of endless economic prosperity through mass production and consumption. Consequently, the myth has unfortunately infused the normative core of this narrative in the education system without the moral implications of the narrative itself being taken seriously. More precisely, the neoliberal myth, despite its positivist and descriptive origins, is a normative narrative that fundamentally opposes nurturing not only critical democratic pedagogy but a moral life in general.

Keeping this important point in mind, the next chapter of my thesis will try to articulate and examine democratic myth as narrative alternative to our current reception of the meritocratic and neoliberal myths. I take this transition to be essential, insofar as it is not enough for critical pedagogues, such as myself, to understand and critique political myths through the theoretical lens of critical democratic theory. On the contrary, as I argued in my chapter on the relationship between myth and critical pedagogy, even if the critical engagement of said myths cause resistance and even their abandonment, it does not follow that critical reflection and theory can fill the conceptual gap left by these narratives alone. Rather, critical pedagogues must begin to articulate and then nurture a mythical mode of orientation that is a part of their normative aims of nurturing democracy as a way of life and the social transformation of the existing socio-political order. It is thus in the next chapter that I will articulate and examine democratic myth as narrative corollary to the critical democratic perspective. In this respect, I will be providing a positive account of democratic myth that can provide narrative unity and a sense of significance that is tied to the normative aims and vision of democracy.
Chapter 7
Democracy and Myth

7.1 Introduction

It would be prudent for me, at this point of my thesis, to recall the importance of myth in establishing a normative mode of orientation in our schools. As I have argued from the outset of my thesis, philosophers of education and educators in general must move beyond the mythos and logos antinomy that has led to a significant amount of misunderstanding on both the symbolic function and relevance of myth as well as reason. In embracing a more substantive account of myth through the work of Hans Blumenberg (1979/1985), I argued that as critical democratic pedagogues we should embrace the view that both myth and critical reason/theory should be wed as important, but conceptually unique, modes of symbolic orientation that can complement one another in our normative vision of creating a more just democratic social order. Moreover, far from this unity between myth, theory, and praxis being foreign to critical pedagogues, it has been implicit within much of the work of critical democratic theorists from Paulo Freire (1998, 1968/2000) and Henry Giroux (1983, 2004) to Michael Apple (2001, 2004b).

In analyzing both the meritocratic and democratic myths, I tried to reveal how understanding myth in the substantive sense reveals new insights into how certain narratives unify and provide significance to large portions of our administrative, teaching, and student populations. More than this, being consistent with my critical democratic perspective, I have attempted to reveal through critical reason how these narratives are fundamentally incoherent with our goal to nurture and develop democratic values in and through the education system. If one agrees with both my conceptual framework and my critique of these myths, then one must
take seriously the importance of articulating and nurturing an alternative myth in our schools; a myth that can serve as narrative corollary to the critical democratic theoretical perspective. Therefore, this chapter will attempt to provide this very articulation; it will outline and examine the narrative core of democratic myth.

Further, I will provide a positive account of the relationship between democracy and myth. At the foundation of this account will be the view that democracy, as Dewey (1939/1976) and others have argued, must be understood as a way of life rather than simply popular suffrage or a form of parliamentarism. Thus, drawing on Blumenberg’s (1979/1985) conception of myth, I intend to defend democratic myth as a unique form of socio-political narrative that provides orientation, unity, and a sense of significance to our social, moral, and political lives. At its core, democratic myth embraces a struggle for universal equality, for the necessity of human liberty and freedom, and it provides a narrative means of legitimizing authority through the collective empowerment of the people. Furthermore, it is my contention that democratic myth, unlike many other of its theoretical counterparts, has the advantage of being far more inclusive to diverse democratic perspectives. Specifically, I examine how democratic myth provides the symbolic means to include democratic perspectives rooted in religious foundations (West, 2004), as well as those democratic traditions, exemplified in the Canadian Aboriginal peoples, that find epistemological legitimacy in inherited oral traditions rather than theoretical writings (King, 2003; Price 2004).

Having outlined the fundamental narrative core of our democratic myth, I will turn my analysis to how democratic myth provides a narrative corollary to critical pedagogy. To this end, drawing on my early analysis of praxis as a unity between myth, reflection/theory, and practice, I will argue that a democratic vision for schools must take seriously the role this myth has within critical pedagogical practice. As part of this analysis, I will attempt to reveal the essential elements of
the democratic myth that have embedded themselves within the democratic
tradition. Moreover, far from rejecting these narrative elements, I will argue that
they should be embraced as part of the critical pedagogical tradition’s work on
democratic myth.

In articulating our democratic myth, it is important to acknowledge from the
outset that my positive account is in no way meant to be understood as a dogmatic
and absolutely comprehensive articulation. On the contrary, given the extensive
debate about the nature of democracy, both historically and theoretically, it is with
a sense of humble curiosity that I aim to try to offer an examination of the narrative
core of our democratic myth. To this end, as I will discuss further, I am open to
challenges to the democratic myth in general as well as to particularist conceptions
of the myth that may challenge elements of its narrative core. Furthermore, I am
also open to further articulation and debate on the narrative core of myth itself, and
the implications it may have for how we understand democratic education. In
other words, I want to suggest that if we take democratic myth seriously then
further debate and discussion about its narrative core and the particularist versions
of the myth are an inevitable philosophical consequence of said democratic
tradition.

7.2 Democratic Myth, Progress, and Education

Unsurprisingly, at its very narrative core, democratic myth is progressive. In
this very basic sense, then, democratic myth is similar to its meritocratic and
neoliberal counterparts. It provides a sense of significance and unites people with
a narrative of individual and collective socio-political progress. However, while
the meritocratic myth progresses towards our “natural aristocracy” and
neoliberalism progresses towards individual and collective material prosperity,
democratic myth’s progress aims at creating a just political world; it is a progress
directed towards creating a world where democratic values of equality and freedom are precariously balanced within all of our communities.

Despite this basic similarity, democratic myth’s sense of progress differs significantly in an important way from both of its aforementioned counterparts. For the neoliberal and meritocratic myths, the reception and realization of their mythical core by individuals and society in general necessarily ends political tensions, struggles, and debates. More specifically, if we are to receive and work on these myths, and we realize our merited rank or achieve individual and collective material prosperity, then our political needs are presumably met. Interestingly, democratic myth does not have such a state of pure individual and collective realization. In the democratic myth, even as communities progress towards embracing substantive notions of freedom and equality, this political order will necessarily have political debates, questions, and struggles. In other words, one of the unique features of the democratic myth is that it provides communities with a sense of significance in its progressive element, but it concurrently offers no firm possibility of absolute resolution to conflicts and political struggles. A notable example is evident in the radical democratic myth that has been embraced in the Arab Spring political movements. Within these various communities the democratic myth has become a narrative means of expressing and motivating people’s desire for political autonomy and freedom against the various dictatorial regimes in Libya, Egypt, and Syria. It is clear that within these revolutionary communities, these movements are thought to be progressive and aim at creating more just political and socio-economic communities. This being noted, the democratic myth inevitably carries with it a sense of openness to pluralistic debate and irresolvable struggles within these democratic groups. Hence, as we individually and collectively embrace the democratic myth and transform our various communities, the democratic progress made implies that subsequent
substantive democratic struggles will emerge as part of our democratic political order.

I think, in fact, this unique feature of democratic myth is particularly significant when one contrasts it to the technocratic and managerial discourse that has accompanied the neoliberal movement. In particular, as the neoliberal myth has increased in influence within North American institutions, technocratic control has come to dominate much of the management of education. Implicit within the neoliberal myth is the belief that all conflicts, debates, and substantive moral/political issues can be simply managed away through educational “stakeholders” embracing the myth and corresponding bureaucratic decisions. To put it more simply, the ideal neoliberal school system presumably results in the end of all conflict; all that is left in these neoliberal communities is a competitive race where self-interested *homo economicus* move efficiently towards individual material growth and collective material prosperity.

In contrast, in the democratic myth this sense of individual and collective realization is the political equivalent to taking Huxley’s soma; by embracing democratic myth we necessarily invite and embrace this lack of efficiency and struggle. In fact, it is within these instances of debate, discussion, protest, and struggle that we acknowledge and realize the fundamental individual and collective elements of our democratic narrative. Thus it is these very democratic moments and events that the democratic myth itself highlights and celebrates by infusing them with a sense of progressive significance.

The democratic myth’s unique sense of progress, in contrast to neoliberalism’s, has important implications within our education system. Let us take as an example the issue of the inherent socio-economic bias of standardized testing. Within the narrative of the neoliberal myth, the issue of bias is interpreted as either an unjustified threat against neoliberals’ faith in the creation of objective
measurements in education, or it is an issue that can be managed away through technocratic changes to teaching methodology. In the democratic myth, however, critical judgment, discussion, and action on such an important and substantive issue as equity is expected and desired in order to ensure that all students are treated equitably. Even if this issue is resolved, if for example the testing was cancelled, it does not follow that through this progress all tensions and issues of class bias will suddenly disappear. On the contrary, as part of the democratic myth we will necessarily continue to debate and discuss these substantive issues as part of our individual and collective progress.

Another implication in embracing democratic myth’s sense of progress in education is that we must critically challenge certain pedagogical modes tracking and instituting alternative modes of progress in our schools. Specifically, the immanent feedback loop of student growth through rigorous marking and testing that lay at the heart of the meritocratic and neoliberal narratives is at fundamental odds with developing democratic progress in the classroom. Democratic progress necessitates that students embrace a certain sense of indeterminacy and openness in their movement towards a democratic way of life. In other words, as students and teachers alike receive and work on the democratic myth within their classroom and the world outside it, they have to give up the notion that there will be positivistic and linear progress. For example, if a student enters my history class and he or she embraces democratic myth and reads Emerson or Tocqueville, it does not follow that he or she will necessarily democratically progress forward x amount. In fact, democratic progress would necessitate an awareness of the constant struggle and continuous need to devote oneself to the democratic myth, reflection, and action. Such progress would move back and forth, north and south, east and west, and would at times ebb and flow with our individual and collective acts.
It is important to note that I am not arguing that a democratic education system should not set any standards or evaluate students on the development of various skills, knowledge, and understanding of curriculum. On the contrary, teaching and providing constructive and meaningful feedback to students is an important element of encouraging and nurturing the development of any learner. Rather, I am suggesting that, in embracing and nurturing democratic myth along with critical praxis in schools, we must fundamentally abandon the notion that all meaningful educational progress is both linear in nature and can and should be measured and evaluated based on a single objective standard. While we can point to certain values and dispositions that are crucial to the development of a democratic way of life, it does not follow that this progress and growth should justify the sorting and ranking based on this growth.

7.3 Democratic Myth and Power To and From the People

Further, at the heart of the democratic myth is the narrative of political progress through the people. While this might come across as rather obvious, it is important to recall that fundamental to the current conception of the meritocratic myth is a belief in socio-political progress through the “natural aristocracy.” In the democratic myth, political and social progress is believed to reside in and through the entire population of a community. In fact, the myth of our democratic progress through the people casts part of its narrative drama and sense of significance in rebelling, resisting, and overcoming various forms of injustice that undermine the political progress of the people (Rancière, 2009). There are numerous instances of this sense of collectivity inherent in the myth that saturates much of the world’s democratic narrative. The narratives of the United States’ or India’s populist rebellions against British colonialism are two examples. In both movements, rebellion and political revolution were framed in the name of the people, whose collective will against colonial oppression undermined the political authority of
Great Britain and legitimized the democratic rule of subsequent national
governments. More recently, the democratic movements of the Arab Spring reveal
the significance of democratic progress that is created, maintained, and spurred by
the people. Throughout Libya, Egypt, and Syria, democratic myth frames the
narrative and provides socio-political unity and significance to revolution of the
people against the tyranny. Further, even at the individual level, the heroism and
martyrdom of rebels, such as Gandhi, is framed as part of the larger collective
struggles by the people against the oppressors and a fight for the people. In this
sense, the narrative of our democratic progress frames political struggles by
individual members of a political community as the struggle for the political and
social interests and needs of all people.

In understanding democratic myth as political progress through the people, I
am not defending the idea of the tyranny of the majority at the expense of the
minority. On the contrary, at the narrative core of the democratic myth is the view
that the political power and legitimacy of all communities resides in all people. As
a result, far from the struggles of oppressed minorities within communities being
understood as a threat to democracy, they and their struggles are the heart of our
collective commitment to take seriously the issues and harm done to all members
within their communities. For this reason, we rightly understand the civil rights
movement and women’s suffrage movements as part of this democratic progress,
since both represent oppressed members of our democratic communities
challenging and successfully transforming oppressive beliefs and practices that had
fundamentally undermined the socio-political power of people. In both cases, the
legitimacy of the state’s authority as a representative of the people was
fundamentally challenged and the rights of women and black communities had to
be entrenched in our society in order to maintain any meaningful sense of
democratic progress.
The fact that democratic mythic progress resides in and through the people has important implications within our political order. First, as Chomsky (2005) argues, the idea that the political legitimacy resides within the people casts a critical and skeptical doubt on any relationships or institutional structures that undermine this sense of democratic progress. He (2005) argues, and I believe quite rightly, that the onus lies on those in power or those inhabiting roles of authority to legitimize themselves to the people, not the other way around (p. 178). At any point, the people have the legitimate right and democratic duty to challenge this authority if the interests and needs of all the people are not adequately met. This does not mean that certain challenges and struggles might be misplaced insofar as they harm another group, or that certain positions of authority can subsequently provide sufficient justification for certain practices. Rather, it means the people, such as politicians or educational administrators, who inhabit these authoritative roles have a responsibility both to be open to such criticism and to provide reasonable response to such communities.

Of course, because democratic myth posits authoritative legitimacy in the people and through the interaction between autonomous groups of individuals and positions of authority, various questions inevitably emerge in the landscape of our current education system. Most notably, it is quite clear that our current education system legitimizes its authority thorough a hierarchical system of technocratic roles rather than with and through its community members. Currently, the authoritative roles assigned in our system, including teachers, principals, superintendents, and directors, as well as their corresponding discourses and practices are determined by a complex hierarchical web of expectations, rules, and disciplinary practices. This system of authoritative legitimacy is consistent with the meritocratic myth that stresses the necessity of fulfilling certain deserved roles in society, including those with power over others. It also fits nicely with the
neoliberal myth that tries to frame all practices of schools as objective and value-neutral constraints that guide *homo economicus*. In contrast, in embracing democratic myth, the legitimacy of these practices is open for the people to reflect upon, criticize, openly challenge, and even change.

The consequence of re-evaluating the mode of legitimating practices through democracy would inevitably have radical and sweeping consequences throughout our current education system. Far from decisions and practices flowing uninterrupted downward from the top of our current bureaucratic mountain to the teachers and then the students, the legitimacy of these practices would flow nefariously uphill. In such communities, teachers, parents, and students would be openly invited to debate, criticize, and shape educational policy along with principals, superintendents, directors, and ministers. Perhaps most controversially, students, far from being passive products of educational policy, would be part of the legitimizing process. They would be encouraged and nurtured into bringing about thoughts and criticism about educational policy and practices that are directed towards both the education system in general and the classroom practices particularly. This is not to suggest a laissez-faire educational apocalypse in which students choose to play video games and watch movies for hours on end. Rather, it is suggesting that the onus be on the teachers and school in general to provide reasonable justification for any practice that affects the students. In such a climate, it is no longer sufficient to tell the students that they must wear a uniform, go the bathroom with a teacher’s permission, or even learn a particular curriculum because the bureaucratic rule tells them to do so. In such instances, the teachers, principal, or superintendents who are traditionally in charge of making said rules and practices must invite and take seriously challenges and feedback to their decisions. As such, in embracing democratic myth we also embrace and try to
nurture with students an openness to questioning and trying to change such rules and decisions.

Further, the fundamentally collective nature of democratic myth also has important implications in the nature of democratic movements. As Freire (1968/2000) argues, democratic change and social transformation cannot be applied to people, but rather must be with people (p. 168). More specifically, democratic change and progress through the resistance and fight against all forms of oppression cannot simply be done for the sake of the oppressed; the oppressed, marginalized, and exploited must be a real part of their particular community’s democratic progress. This point is particularly pertinent if we take seriously the role of myth in critical democratic praxis. As I have already noted, all political myths cannot simply be applied to people; they must, as Blumenberg (1979/1985) argues, be received and worked on within communities. However, democratic praxis, unlike other political myths, such as neoliberalism, must take seriously the human dignity and autonomy of all people equally. As a consequence any political movement that receives and works on the democratic myth must take seriously and respect the necessity of individuals and communities to receive and embrace the democratic narrative in their own way, and on its own merits. Thus, while critical pedagogues may encourage students to embrace democratic myth and praxis, they cannot simply indoctrinate students nor act as vanguard democratic agents who work in their pupils’ name and interest.

7.4 Democratic Myth and Equality

In addition, embedded within the democratic myth is a fundamental belief in the universal equality and freedom of all people (Dunn, 2005). More specifically, more than simply a struggle for the empowerment of the people, democratic myth frames our progress in terms of our individual and collective need to embrace both ourselves and others as fundamentally equal and worthy of liberty. As such,
whereas the meritocratic myth understands the individual as a combination of talents and effort and neoliberalism understands the individual as *homo economicus*, the democratic myth understands the individual as free and equal.

In terms of equality, the democratic narrative radically posits that all humans are fundamentally deserving of human dignity and respect by virtue of them being human (Dunn, 2005; Rancière, 2009). I think that it is important to emphasize how revolutionary and radical this idea was and is when embraced and received as part of the mythical orientation of the world. Amidst a world where differences are accentuated and even created by our socio-political order, to embrace the democratic myth is to act as if we are truly equal; to believe and act in a way that acknowledges and nurtures a deep sense of respect and dignity for all people regardless of their class, sexual orientation, gender, talents, race, or religion. It is this narrative sense of significance posited to all people that is, in many ways, the most challenging and difficult aspect of embracing a democratic way of life.

Historical evidence abounds of humanity’s individual and collective struggles to coherently embrace this very feature of the democratic myth and its substantive and radical notion of equality. For instance, Thomas Jefferson famously solidified democratic equality in the constitution while concurrently owning and oppressing slaves and supporting the repression of the Haitian slave revolts; Kant embraced robust notions of democratic freedom and enlightened equality but held the view that Aboriginals were savages and inhuman. These examples not only reveal the difficulty in living with democratic myth’s conception of the individual but also point to how other political and social myths, such as those that degrade communities based on race or class, can be received and worked on by even the most rational defenders of democracy.

As part of our democratic myth, this substantive sense of relational equality need not be theoretically justified and rationally substantiated to the point of
epistemic certainty. And here I return to the Blumenbergian (1979/1985, 1996; Bottici, 2007) view that amidst a highly indeterminate socio-political order myth provides a sense of significance to socio-political order. Not only do I think that trying to ground this sense of equality in epistemological certainty is futile, but trying to do so also fails to account for how, as part of a mythic orientation in the world, the narrative need only provide a sense of significance to our relationships and corresponding struggle to contribute to the development of a democratic political order. This, of course, is not to say that we should not debate and discuss the implications of this sense of equality on issues such as the role of authority and equality in schools. It is rather to acknowledge that when we embrace democratic myth, we receive and work on a normative narrative that posits a deep and ingrained sense of dignity and respect to all humans. Moreover, this deep sense of dignity and respect is a normative element of our orientation irrespective of the soundness and validity of arguments for and against the view, or the sets of statistics or “facts” that are lined up to show how truly unequal we are. Here we find the narrative force of democratic myth in providing significance to those embracing the narrative. An oppressed worker should be treated with equal dignity and respect as Barack Obama; starving refugees in Somalia should be treated with equal dignity and respect as a Canadian citizen; the special-need student or the student that hates school should be treated with equal dignity and respect as those that hang on a teacher’s every word and have a 95% average.

In its strongest and most vibrant form, this substantive sense of equality that arises from democratic myth can be described as a democratic “love” between people. Here, by “love” I am clearly drawing on the Greek and Christian etymological distinction between love as eros (sensual and sexual love) and agape (a stronger communal bond between God and the people and the extension of this bond between neighbours) (Benedict XVI, 2005). Interestingly, more philosophers
have turned to the relationship of love when particularly describing the transformative power it creates between people. Most notably, Freire (1968/2000), citing Che Guevera, argues that there must be true “love” between teachers and students to ensure the possibility of liberation and democratic transformation (p. 170).

It is amidst a state of democratic love that oppression and systemic injustice can no longer be rationalized away as an unfortunate but necessary effect of our collective march to our merited material progress; it is rather a fundamental crisis to the bond between a community of equals and must be collectively transformed in order to maintain our democratic relationship with one another. To this end, democratic love always strives to create and maintain this profound egalitarian bond between one another. Concurrently, democratic love directs all people to fundamentally reject the various forms of injustice that undermine the dignity and deep sense of respect nurtured between people in our collective pursuit of a democratic way of life and corresponding world order. As a result, people united with one another through democratic myth can no longer view the current model of meritocracy as tenable insofar as it legitimizes the marginalization, exploitation, and systemic oppression of “undeserving” people; they can no longer view neoliberalism as the only relevant socio-economic myth while the West exploits developing nations for cheap labour and the expropriation of resources. In short, when we embrace the democratic myth and embrace the radical egalitarian qualities inherent in its narrative core, we concurrently must begin to rethink and critically explore alternative models of development that are more fitting to our democratic way of life.
7.5 Democratic Myth and Autonomy

As noted, in democratic myth it is also apparent that freedom, framed as individual autonomy, is at its narrative core. More specifically, in receiving and working on democratic myth, it is not enough that we treat people as equals; we should also treat them as autonomous and free agents who should be able to freely exercise particular sets of values, beliefs, and actions. Before wading deeper into the murky waters of discussing political freedom and liberty, let me be clear that I am discussing the fundamental philosophical importance of freedom to our democratic myth and socio-political order. In doing so, my philosophical discussion is rather indifferent to any proofs of hard or soft social determinism. Rather, I am arguing that, regardless of these rational proofs, when we receive and work on the democratic myth, we must believe and embrace the view that people are free agents acting in our socio-political order who, in turn, must be granted a sense of liberty to develop themselves to influence the world around them. In fact, it is this mythical notion of freedom that provides a sense of significance to democratic rituals such as voting. As an important symbolic exercise of democratic equality, voting is dependent on a belief that we are autonomous free agents who should be granted certain political liberties. This belief, however, does not preclude believing that many people’s political thoughts, beliefs, and actions, such as voting, can be, ill-informed and coerced. On the contrary, lack of informed voting and coercion, in fact, implicitly reflect the belief that individuals can act as informed and un-coerced political agents. What this belief does reject, however, is other myths, beliefs, and practices that challenge and undermine this sense of individual autonomy and agency. This would include models of governance that limit freedom on the fallacious belief of the people’s immaturity or have the view that the elite class needs to first enlighten its citizens. Similarly, this inherent sense
of autonomy would be at fundamental odds with limiting individual freedom and autonomy based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, age, or religion.

To argue that democratic freedom brings an important sense of significance to our actions as political agents in the world is not to advocate that all acts of freedom can be justified under the guise of democratic myth. This point is particularly important when addressing the oft critical position that the democratization of schools is a call to “laissez faire” education in which empowered students demand and receive whatever they desire (Rancière, 2006, pp. 26–27). On the contrary, while democratic freedom brings a sense of significance to our critical praxis, it does not follow that anything goes. In the myth of democracy, our freedom is exercised both towards our individual ends but concurrently to our collective political ends as well. For this reason, democratic freedom cannot be understood as pure neoliberal self-interest or individual merited goals, but as a means towards securing a democratic way of life for all people. Democratic freedom in this sense can be understood as the inversion of Nietzsche’s superman freedom: Our exercise of freedom must always be conscious and aware of the struggle of pluralism between equals and the need to negotiate freedom for one another and between one another. To use an example from schooling, the method of imposing rituals and collective practices to create order in discussions, such as raising one’s hand, is not, in and of itself, an oppressive practice that limits the students’ freedom to express their views. Rather, they are practices that can and should ensure that all students’ voices are effectively heard by the community. The challenge, then, for critical democratic educators is not to “manage” letting students do whatever they want but rather to struggle to effectively work with students to negotiate their individual autonomy and freedom in a community of equals.
In surveying our political landscape, the democratic myth’s call for the individual and collective struggle to secure freedom in our socio-political order is evident everywhere. The most obvious examples occur when someone unjustly harms us or others. When a sweatshop opens and exploits people, we do not understand this harm as an exercise in democratic freedom; on the contrary, not only does such depravity fundamentally undermine the possibility of democratic progress insofar as it undermines the deep and substantive sense of equality in the narrative, but it also severely and unjustly harms the oppressed in a way that negates important elements of their liberty. In a similar vein, advocates of democratic education argue, in fact, a democratic way of life commits teachers and students alike to fundamentally rejecting values, beliefs, and practices by any member of our educational communities who unjustly harms others.

Aside from these rather obvious examples, we also see how democratic myth’s narrative frames various conflicts such as the exercise of religious freedom or freedom of expression. In the myth of democracy, religious issues such as Muslim women wearing the burka are understood as an individual and collective struggle to negotiate a community’s religious and cultural traditions with specific concerns about women’s rights and issues of civic safety (Nussbaum, 2010). Of course, included in this discussion would also be issues of racism and xenophobia. What is important here is that by embracing the democratic myth we frame these types of conflicts as part of our complex and difficult task of negotiating the limits of freedom between communities and individuals. In other words, whereas the “clash of civilization” myth frames the conflict surrounding the Muslim women wearing the burka as an irrevocable fight between the West and Islam that cannot be resolved, the democratic myth frames this struggle as a necessary and socially significant part of our individual and collective growth as free and equal peoples. While the “clash of civilization” is a call for the West to frame the exercise of
Islam’s freedom necessarily as a threat to “Western” social and political values, the democratic myth orientates us in such a way that the significance in the conflict is not understood as a threat but as a part of our collective effort to create democratic political communities where we are open to embracing the moral and political complexity of free and equal people exercising their religious and cultural freedom. To embrace democratic myth is thus not to embrace some sense of passive tolerance, but rather to embrace an active participation by all individuals in engaging substantive issues within our communities.

7.6 Democratic Myth and Rights

The relation and unity of freedom and equality in the democratic myth is also clearly evident in the development of human rights. As the vast theoretical and legal debate continues over the epistemological foundation of rights as normative constraints, they have become a necessary condition of any democratic political order. Interestingly, despite the fact that the rational foundation of rights has changed and continues to be contested by many theoreticians and philosophers, those who embrace democratic progress rightly and proudly cling to rights as essential normative guide to the struggle to create a democratic order (MacIntyre, 1984). As philosopher Leszek Kolakowski points out in his work *The Presence of Myth* (1972), rights have become an important part of mythical orientation in the world despite this logical indeterminacy. Kolakowski (1972) argues that our collective commitment to human rights as universal truths without a single transcendent or rational foundation reveals the power of such constraints as modern mythical entities that are embedded in our political order. In effect, our individual and collective narrative to realize universal human rights parallels and became intertwined with our myth to realize a democratic way of life.

In this sense, human rights are an important means of understanding our democratic progress through equality and freedom. At its conceptual core, rights
capture democratic myth’s normative narrative of our struggle to realize human equality and to enter nonhierarchical relations with others that are characterized by profound reciprocal respect and dignity. As we struggle to realize human rights, we are concurrently struggling to embrace the mythical narrative that all humans are worthy of respect and dignity (Rawls, 1995). When we acknowledge someone’s rights, we concurrently affirm our respect and sense of dignity for him or her.

Moreover, at its conceptual core, rights also capture democratic myth’s link between democratic progress and freedom. As Lloyd Weinreb argues in his essay “Natural Law and Rights” (1992), rights can be understood as a normative consequence of both acknowledging and trying to realize the belief that humans are able to act as autonomous political agents who are free to act and choose as responsible political agents. Because we are free, rights are understood as constitutive elements of realizing this freedom in our political order (Weinreb, 1992, pp. 284–286). In terms of understanding the mythical aspect of democracy, I would argue that the same point holds true: Insofar as we frame the narrative of democratic progress as a collective struggle to affirm freedom for all people, our progress in securing rights between people is understood as an important part of our historical and contemporary realization of this progress.

Let me reiterate, however, that in discussing the idea of rights and the narrative core of democratic myth, I am not advocating for rights as a form of pure legal and institutional positivism. To embrace democratic myth and the struggle for human rights is to incorporate the narrative of democratic progress as a way of life and part of our praxis. For this reason, while embracing institutional rights is an important condition to our democratic progress, it certainly cannot be a sufficient one. Case in point can be found in the Aboriginal Canadian’s civil rights movement. While the struggle and realization of the legal rights, such as gaining
the ability to vote in 1960, was a watershed moment in Canada’s democratic myth, just as important was and is trying to move large groups to accept the normative implications of embracing substantive notions of freedom and equality in their everyday lives. To this end, long after the legal battle was over, racism, oppression, and intolerance still cling to Canadian beliefs and practices. For this reason, the myth of democracy has to penetrate the hearts, minds, and relations that reach far deeper into our political consciousness and spirit than the law demands. As a myth, democratic political progress is only possible when freedom and equality become an essential part of political praxis, and when as a mode of symbolic orientation its narrative informs our being in the world beyond existing legal constraints. To put it another way, it is democratic myth and our narrative understanding of our political progress in this world that brings significance to legal rights and to our battle to realize freedom and equality through law, rather than the other way around.

### 7.7 Democratic Myth, Pluralism, and Particularism

When discussing the unity of freedom and equality that is at the heart of democratic myth, let me reiterate that much of the debate concerns how these elements of our symbolic orientation should be balanced and related. In doing so, we can understand, for example, both Thoreau’s libertarian tradition and other socialist traditions as very distinct groups that are both contextualizing and working on democratic myth. For Thoreau (1969), democratic progress both on an individual and collective level comes through embracing freedom and equality as crucial elements of our mythic orientation in the world. For this reason, his skepticism and criticism of the state sprang from both the nation-state’s oppressive nature and his commitment to live a democratic life rather than simply giving tacit acceptance to quasi-democratic representative government. By recasting democracy from its traditional state-run apex to the wilderness in Walden, Thoreau
emphasizes the importance of individual liberty in securing a democratic mode of being in the world outside our institutional constraints. For advocates of democratic socialism such as Paulo Freire, particular emphasis is placed on how vast inequalities in our society have not only fundamentally undermined the dignity and respect of our fellow citizens but also limited millions of people’s freedom. For this reason, particular emphasis is placed on critical issues of distributive justice and systemic oppression as barriers to realizing a democratic life and just political order. The debate between such traditions is not a debate between which one is the true democratic view and narrative, but rather how each one can capture a specific account of the unity of freedom and equality in a way that provides a meaningful sense of democratic significance to our existing political conditions and our hope for a democratic socio-political order.

One of the great conceptual links between democracy and Blumenberg’s sense of myth (1979/1985) is the important process of contextualizing pluralistic views that are inherent in both democratic politics and within the myth itself. More precisely, while with any myth there is a narrative core, which I have tried to quite generally capture, we must take seriously how democracy is worked on within different contexts, by different groups and individuals to meet the needs of their particular socio-political communities (Bottici, 2007). In this way, unlike theories that attempt to reify various models, such as parliamentary or participatory models, democratic myth embraces the contextualization and particularism of its narrative core within the vast, complex, and unique communities that receive and work on this myth. The pluralistic and particularist work on myth penetrates all our communities: university and secondary school communities, urban and agrarian communities, as well as secular and religious communities alike. For instance, from the perspective of democratic myth, many religious traditions have made and continue to make important contributions in the democratic
transformation of the world. Various religious leaders, from Martin Luther King Jr., Bishop Romero, and Gandhi, to Buddha have contributed significantly to democracy as a myth and as a lived praxis. For all four figures, their religious beliefs only solidified their drive to receive and contextualize democracy within a narrative of justice and equality to meet the political needs of their communities, within their particular contexts. In doing so, far from distorting democracy by providing it with an “irrational” spiritual core amidst a secular world, they solidified democracy as part of their lived praxis in order to fight injustice and transform the status quo. This also holds true with many of our religious communities within our pluralistic culture. To think, for example, that the Catholic community and its call for social justice and equality are not active members in contributing to our democratic progress is not only short sighted but also misses how democratic myth becomes contextualized within such communities.

Similarly, a recent attempt to particularize democratic myth is made by Canadian philosopher and intellectual John Ralston Saul in his own work on the narrative of Canada’s democracy. In his work *A Fair Country* (2008), Saul provides a historico-political account of Canada’s particular democratic tradition that emphasizes consensus and pluralism. In the work, Saul argues that despite its colonial roots, Canada’s democratic tradition has primarily been influenced by the Aboriginals and their democratic roots. He (2008) argues that amidst the early stages of colonial expansion in Canada, the French and British imperial powers could not simply apply their politics to the Aboriginal peoples. Saul argues that, in fact, the British and French needed certain Aboriginal communities for economic, military, and political gain in the area. As a consequence, both the British and French began integrating their colonial political aspirations within many of the Aboriginal’s socio-political structures. Saul (2008) points to the arranged marriages between French and Aboriginal leaders’ children as well as to the
acknowledgement and understanding of Aboriginal modes of governance to reveal the extent of this cultural integration (pp. 9–16). He (2008) argues that, far from these early integrations and alliances being one sided, they led to the development and flow of Aboriginal political ideas, such as the importance of egalitarianism, discussion, negotiation, and consensus, to penetrate early Canadian communities; the very same ideas that continue to be essential to contemporary Canada’s unique democratic narrative and practices.

What is interesting about Saul’s account is that it works on Canada’s democratic myth in a unique way by trying to realign its historical roots so that we take seriously alternative accounts of democracy and their influence on contemporary politics. Saul attempts to challenge not only the view that democracy is a European invention but also the archaic view that Aboriginals were “backwards” politically and socially. As such, he (2008) argues that Canada’s contemporary democratic character is more closely aligned to the lived and pragmatic praxis of Aboriginals rather than the progressive visions that emerged out of Europe (pp. 55–80). Although one may question the scope of the reception of Saul’s narrative work, it offers the possibility for those receiving it that we should take seriously the influence of Aboriginal culture on our understanding of democracy as a lived praxis.

7.8 Democratic Myth and Ways to Work on Myth

It is also evident that in understanding democracy as myth, we concurrently must open up our understanding of how alternative forms and modes of communicating our individual and collective democratic progress contributes to the myth’s manifestation in particular communities. In other words, in understanding democratic myth, we have to understand how narrative work is done not only in academia or in the political elite circles on Parliament Hill but also in the alternative oral and written traditions that are often overlooked. One
particularly important example can be seen in a discussion of the role of oral traditions as a legitimate mode of communicating and working on socio-political myths. All political myths are worked on through the stories, conversations, dialogues, and debates that reside within our communities. It is within these acts and practices that important elements of political myths, such as the relationship between freedom and equality in democratic communities, are received, challenged, and worked on within particular contexts. And while capturing these conversations and dynamic mythical changes in any comprehensive way is a conceptual impossibility, they should not be consequently ignored.

One notable example of the importance of the oral modes of work on myth is the Aboriginal Canadian contribution and work on democratic openness. In particular, Aboriginal Canadians have made great strides in convincing Canadian institutions to accept this mode of narrative work as important amidst a political and legal order that traditionally emphasizes the written word and documentation. Just as the oral tradition was crucial in communicating and working on traditional Greek myths, so too is the oral tradition in communicating the myth of democracy as manifests itself in distinct Aboriginal communities (King, 2003; Price, 2004). By delegitimizing oral traditions and practices’ ability to contribute to our democratic myth, we fundamentally degrade and overlook their contribution to our collective democratic progress.

The idea of inclusion and working on democratic myth within our political landscape is an important one. One of the inherent problems with many theoretical models of democracy, such as parliamentarism or other representative models, is that they do not take seriously the importance of the people participating in the creation and recreation of democracy. As I have already alluded to, one of Dewey’s more interesting insights into the education system was the realization that any democratic order had to be dependent on the democratic spirit of the
people and each of our receptions of democracy as a way of life (Dewey, 1939/1976). In the same vein, democratic myth, as an essential mode of conceptually orientating ourselves in the world, is necessarily dependent on our active reception of the myth. It is only through this reception and work that democratic myth can provide a narrative unity and a sense of significance to our individual and collective lives. Just as the power and social force of democratic myth resides in this process of production and reception, so too does its weakness; if we do not receive and work on the narrative, then democratic myth is nothing but an irrelevant story of ages past. Hence, without meaningful reception of the democratic myth we may point to our representative government system and our Charter of Rights and Freedoms as important icons of our democratic society, but they threaten to become nothing more than legal instruments that are stripped of narrative significance in each of our lives.

Furthermore, it is one of the great illusions of our culture that our democratic history secures our democratic progress. In the light of understanding democratic myth as an important element of this progress, such an illusion masks the erosion of democracy within our communities. If democratic myth is ultimately dependent on our constant reception and work on the narrative core through praxis, then our historical roots, while always a possible source of our political growth, do not, in and of themselves, make us live democratic lives. At any point within our political existence democratic myth can be received or abandoned by individuals or communities. Likewise, each successive generation must participate in the reproduction and reception of democratic myth within their spatiotemporal contexts in order to renew and maintain the myth’s ability to provide narrative unity and significance in their communities. As a consequence, everyone who is thrown into this complex and indeterminate world exists amidst the constant flux of mythic possibility. Within this world, regardless of our history or institutions,
there is no guarantee that democracy will reign supreme as a mythical mode of orientation. Within this world, there is no certainty that individuals will choose to embrace democratic justice and progress through freedom and equality over embracing a world of economic expansionism where widespread oppression, domination, and indifference are effects of our narrative existence.

If anything, our democratic heritage reveals just how very precarious the myth of our democratic progress is. As much as we have experienced large movements that embraced and worked on democratic myth, we have also experienced communities abandoning it for other mythical modes of orientation. The rise of the Aryan myth amidst democratic Germany, the rise of the myth of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia amidst democratic reform, and the rise of the myth of the “clash of civilization” more recently in France, Britain, Canada, and the United States are only a few of the many narratives that threaten to replace democratic praxis. Similarly, as I have tried to articulate in reference to our education system, existing versions of meritocracy and neoliberalism carry with them mythical orientations that are at fundamental odds with our struggle to embrace and live a democratic life in order to create a democratic social order. In embracing democratic myth, we cannot simultaneously embrace the view that the natural aristocracy of our merited progress should supplant our democratic equality and our belief that political legitimacy should reside in all the people, nor can we embrace the view that our self-interested pursuit of consumer goods and services will lead to our individual and collective fulfilment as this myth fundamentally undermines our faith in democratic progress through more substantive ideas of human equality, dignity, and freedom. Insofar as these myths circulate and become forged in and through various mediums of discourse and various institutions, including schools, the reception of democratic myth is always threatened.
7.9 Democratic Myth and Institutions

At this point in my discussion of democratic myth, it is prudent on my part to address more clearly the relationship between democratic myth and the institutional structures within communities. At the most fundamental level, it is evident that insofar as I understand myth as an essential part of human praxis (myth, theory/reflection, and practice) then our institutional practices play an essential role in both the (re)production and reception of myths. In fact, as I revealed in my analysis of meritocratic and neoliberal myths, I take it to be one of the powerful aspects of our worldly praxis that we have been able to design and create institutional systems and sets of practices that nurture, reinforce, and, in turn, strengthen the reception of particular myths and the sense of significance and unity they may bring to the modern world. This is, of course, the crowning achievement of our capitalist economic order. More specifically, in our capitalist order, humans were and are able unite under a myth that offered sets of narratives that could be reinforced and substantiated through the institutional control of knowledge and material goods. Thus, institutional structures play an important role not only in a myth’s dissemination but also in creating the institutional structures and the corresponding practices that affirm the myth itself.

Undoubtedly, then, institutions and their corresponding structures and practices play an important role in not only nurturing democratic myths within our society but also in affirming the possibility of real democratic progress in our society. The implications of this are quite consistent with traditional calls for the democratization of many of our public institutions. Once more, what is important is that whatever the institution may be, democratic praxis and myth cannot be nurtured without the participation of people. In other words, we cannot work on democratic myth nor force its reception on others through institutional change. We must rather provide an institutional framework that allows people to both
participate in the process of the working on and receiving of democratic myth and concurrently participate in the creation of the democratic institutional practices themselves.

Political myths, however, also contribute a sense of narrative significance to our institutional relations that would be otherwise void of meaning. As much as institutional structure helps myths to grip us, myths help bring narrative unity and significance to institutional power structures and social systems. In this way, democratic myth functions no differently than its neoliberal or meritocratic counterparts. If students embrace the democratic myth as part of our social imaginary and begin to act as political agents who embrace substantive notions of freedom and equality and the political power of all people, then they would inevitably affirm and reinforce democratic institutions and practices. A good example of this can be seen in voting within communities. Within a democratic institution where people’s voices, choices, and views are taken seriously, embracing democratic myth affirms the power of voting and each member’s participation within its institutional framework. Ideally, the symbolic affirmation of the vote in our mythical orientation would affirm its practical importance in the decision-making process of a democratic institution.

Although myths are intimately tied to political institutions, they must be, however, understood as distinct from them. More to the point, we should not understand democratic myth as merely the conceptual effect of an institution and its structural arrangements. More than simply an institutional effect, our struggle to embrace a substantive sense of equality and freedom as part of democratic progress is part of our struggle and capacity to live a democratic life with others regardless of the institutional structures in which they take place. By embracing the democratic myth, we receive and progress as free and equal people within our communities in ways that influence our values, beliefs, and actions with others.
Consequently, what the separation between myth and institutions implies is that
democratic myth, as part of my critical praxis, should not only determine and
influence my relationships and practices within institutions, such as my role as
teacher, but also those relationships and practices beyond the scope of institutional
control, such as my role as a brother or son.

As a consequence, democratic myth is important in the creation of a truly
democratic institution, while the creation of democratic institutions is not a
necessary condition of embracing the democratic myth. By way of example, we
might collectively arrange a school to ensure that teachers, students, and
administrators have equal participatory roles in the creation of the curriculum, the
design of teaching methods, and other pertinent matters. If, however, the
administration and teachers do not view students as fundamentally equal or are
autonomous free political agents, and they consequently dismiss, marginalize, or
even use their power to oppress them, then a democratic institution is, at best,
partly undermined. Worse yet, the institutional facade of a democratic system may
function to hide the undemocratic beliefs and practices within such a school. In
such a state, however, the adoption of the democratic myth by these members
could nurture and create a mode of orientation and democratic praxis among its
members in such a way that individuals and their corresponding institutional
groups can embrace a democratic way of life. This reception of the democratic
myth, in turn, would be affirmed by its institutional arrangements. The fact that
democratic myth is not simply a structural consequence of our institutional
arrangements means that democratic change and progress is always possible even
in the worst institutional conditions. To this end, we have seen even in the most
tragic and institutionally oppressive times, from the age of slavery to the
Holocaust, that when the democratic myth is embraced, the struggle to secure a
substantive sense of equality and freedom can be created and sustained.
Let me now turn to addressing the relationship between critical pedagogy and democratic myth. As I have argued, by understanding myth as substantive and essential mode of symbolic orientation, the critical pedagogical tradition must not only better understand how certain myths grip us but also embrace myth as an important part of our ability to transform our existing social order. For critical pedagogues, then, the challenge of myth is not how to rid it from our education system but rather how to ensure that we actively work with students to embrace the democratic myth as part of our social imaginary and as part of our lived praxis that aims to transform the world.

Further, democratic myth as the narrative corollary to critical pedagogical theory fits intuitively in the existing discourse of the critical pedagogical tradition. As I have argued, various critical pedagogues, especially Freire himself, have relied and continue to rely on myth as an important part of their narrative orientation in the world. It is also evident that fundamental to this narrative orientation is the social imaginary of our individual and collective democratic progress that defines the narrative core of the modern democratic myth. As Giroux (1983) argues, critical pedagogy is not an educational theory that is critical for its own sake. Rather, critical pedagogy dissects and critically analyzes the world and its complex sets of relations in order to transform it into a more democratic state. Thus, critical pedagogues argue that education should ultimately aim at nurturing democratic relationships and institutions through the transformation of our unjust world. I want to suggest that, far from this goal-oriented political position being the conclusion of pure theoretical speculation, it implicitly intertwines with the
myth of our democratic progress and our struggle to realize substantive notions of freedom, equality, and collective political empowerment in our world.\textsuperscript{23}

Following Blumenberg, I am suggesting that amidst an indeterminate and indifferent world, democratic myth provides an important normative framework to the critical pedagogical tradition that provides narrative unity and a sense of significance to our beliefs, thoughts, roles, and practices as we immerse ourselves in our current socio-political order. For instance, in understanding the birth, life, and death of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his struggle to help overcome the oppression of millions of African-Americans, we make normative sense of his

\textsuperscript{23} One alternative to fusing democratic myth more tightly together with critical pedagogy and theory is philosophers’ traditional attempt to begin with articulating a vision of the ideal democratic citizen and then theoretically reconstructing an ideal democratic state to fit. This philosophical position is articulated by various political philosophers from Rousseau (1755/2009) to C. B. Macpherson (1973) to Noam Chomsky (2005). For all three philosophers, one begins by articulating characteristics of human nature that are important to democratic practices, such as reason or creativity, and then moves to rationally constructing practices and institutions that correspond to these democratic qualities.

As fruitful as this process may seem, I suspect several problems remain with this philosophical approach. At the most basic level, this conception of democracy works under the enlightened assumption that reason and theory can simply replace all forms of political myth in our social order. As a response to nondemocratic views, this articulation of democracy fails to see how various myths may grip us despite their lack of democratic ideal. Consequently, it assumes that, by philosophically deducing the ideal democratic citizen, groups will simply abandon the political and social myths that provide unity and a sense of narrative significance to their lives. The current problems in our political order are not the result of a lack of democratic theorizing but are the result of the inability of our democratic ideals to penetrate the thoughts, beliefs, and actions of all people beyond the towers of academia. It is, of course, my contention that this failure is, at least in small part, due to the fact that critical pedagogues have not taken seriously how socio-political myths, both democratic and undemocratic in influence, have embedded themselves within our social imaginary.
actions as part of the myth of our critical democratic progress. In doing so, his struggles for freedom and equality through his words, actions, and leadership are set as important examples of what it means to live democratically. Further, it is precisely the mythical dimensions of our reception of democratic myth and King, Jr.’s actions within our collective struggle that bring a normative sense of significance to his life as a democratic citizen. It provides narrative significance to his perseverance against the racist elements of the US that resisted democratic change, his inspiring calls to situate the civil rights movement as a necessary part of the American democratic dream, as well as his own heroic martyrdom, which became a tragic lesson on the ever-present threat of those resisting democratic change. As a set of historical events, King, Jr.’s story is undoubtedly important. However, as part of our democratic myth his story gains a more important normative force in guiding our lived democratic praxis. The democratic myth not only orients our view of other’s lives within our political order but also serves as a narrative mode of orientation that provides significance to our own individual and collective democratic struggles and progress.

Thus, far from democratic myth being anachronistic to the critical pedagogical tradition, it is an essential ally in our aim to recreate and rethink our education for democracy. At its very essence, democratic myth provides a mode of orientation and a sense of significance to our world that makes intelligible and highlights the importance of our collective struggle to overcome oppression and injustice in our slow march towards freedom, equality, and collective political empowerment.

More than this, however, it is evident that critical pedagogy provides an important philosophical element to democratic myth itself. As a part of the leftist political tradition, at the core, critical pedagogy is taking seriously the material and institutional practises of communities that create, recreate, and sustain democratic
transformation. To this end, critical pedagogy aims to challenge existing material conditions and practices that undermine democracy, and, in turn, it works to transform these conditions and practices to meet our democratic aims. Now, as I have already argued, this appeal to democratic institutional transformation is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for democratic myth to be produced, worked on, or received by various groups. This being said, given our current political conditions and the radical bureaucratization of our technocratic socio-political order, I contend that this important part of the critical pedagogical tradition has become an essential element in the democratic transformation of Canadian society.

More to the point, our society’s material and institutional conditions pose a unique set of challenges to democracy that negate the narrative significance and effect of various articulations of the democratic way of life. One such example can be found in the work of Thoreau (1854/1969; 1849/2001). At first glance, important elements of Thoreau’s work on democracy can be seen as not only relevant but revolutionary. Specifically, his (1849/2001) call for democratic civil disobedience remains an inspiring articulation of how democratic resistance is not only possible but necessary amidst a state power that is fundamentally immoral and authoritarian. Similarly, his (1854/1969) rejection of the dehumanizing effects of consumerism in favour of a more profound and simple life continues to resonate in a contemporary society fraught with the perils of greed and environmental destruction. The problem, however, with Thoreau’s articulation of democracy is, as Chomsky argues, that it occurred in a “precapitalist” time of American history. As such, his work was created in a time prior to large-scale expansion of industrialization and the globalization of nation-state economies (Chomsky, 2005, p. 135). Consequently, Thoreau’s call for democratic libertarianism could not possibly have foreseen the hegemonic effects of this expansion. He could not have
foreseen the large-scale moral and political consequences this expansion would have on not only the ruling classes of the world but also the exploited and marginalized as well. For this reason, Thoreau’s libertarian call for democracy inevitably is a call to protest or turn away from the material conditions of oppression without offering a way to transform them for the benefit of the people. To this end, in his narrative of democracy, government institutions are taken as something to be recoiled away from rather than to be actively engaged and transformed.

While this position had and continues to have proponents, I cannot help but view this position with an untenable sense of fatalism concerning our relations to the material conditions and practices in the world. For good and bad, the radical transformation of the world over the course of the past century has thrown us into a socio-political order of our own creation. However, as part of our creation, we can either work to recreate it for the benefit of all people or continue perilously down our current path. And while I am open to the possibility that the recreation of our existing order may include a large, widespread slowing down of economic growth and the freedom to live a self-sufficient life, critical democracy must also include an engagement of these material and social conditions to ensure that substantive issues around various peoples’ freedom and equality are taken seriously and struggled for. A struggle for democracy thus must include not only a story of our economic distribution but also a plan for how we overcome and end systemic inequalities, from racism to sexism. To this end, I take critical pedagogies’ engagement of the material and social conditions and practices of our time as an important element of our democratic struggle today and consequently an important part of our mythical orientation in the world. As part of the theoretical core of critical pedagogy, this engagement of our existing socio-political order is a crucial element in our hope and realization of a democratic world.
Having articulated what I take to be the narrative core as well as the unique features of the democratic myth, I will provide a more detailed account in the final chapter of my thesis of the practical implications and possibilities of receiving and working on democratic myth in our education system. In this way, the next chapter I take to be a more detailed and practical extension of this chapter’s discussion of democratic myth and education. As such, my final chapter will explore the practical challenges that educators and students will have in trying to receive and work on democratic myth in their classrooms. Of particular note, educators must struggle against both the traditional accounts of teaching democracy as well as very narrow notions of educational progress. Finally, my final chapter will also articulate how democratic myth, unlike its utopian counterpart, can be engaged and can work within our education communities in a way that can provide narrative unity and a sense of significance to our individual and collective democratic experiences of the past, present, and into the future.
Chapter 8
Democratic Myth and Education

8.1 Introduction

In the final chapter of my thesis, I aim to address the practical implications of receiving and working on democratic myth in our current education system. As such, this chapter aims to broadly outline how critical democratic pedagogues can begin to nurture and work on democratic myth, in the Blumenbergian (1979/1985) sense, with their students. In addition, I aim to address the specific challenges that teachers and students will inevitably face given the current understanding of democracy in schools and the alternative myths that grip teachers and students alike. Central to this chapter, then, will be analyzing how teachers can work with students to ensure that democratic myth is individually and collectively worked on within their particular communities, and, consequently, that the narrative core of the myth provides what Blumenberg (1979/1985, 1996) denotes as unity and a sense of significance to our individual and collective past, present, and future.

It is important to note that from the outset of this chapter, particular emphasis will be placed on teachers and students and the learning process between them. This point of emphasis should not be interpreted as overlooking the role and importance that government agencies or educational administrators have in the process of democratizing our school system. On the contrary, these powerful bureaucratic levers of education obviously play an essential role in the policies and procedures that govern schools. This being noted, I assert that the relationship between teachers and students is the primary nexus by which myths can be not only critically challenged and resisted but also reinforced, received, and worked on as well. And while such fundamental change to our political orientation must occur at every level of our educational experience, I take the role of the teacher and
his or her pedagogical relationship to students as central to democratic myth and praxis being nurtured in and through our schools.

In the opening of this chapter, I will address the challenge of understanding democratic myth as a mode of orientation that must be received and worked on beyond the scope of formal engagement in schools. Next, I will turn my examination to the challenges that emerge from nurturing democratic myth’s sense of progress in our schools.

Furthermore, I contend that central to this process of mythical engagement of democracy is creating curricula and educational opportunities that unify: (a) a meaningful engagement of democratic myth and critical democratic praxis by teacher and students alike that is situated in their current and lived experiences in their various communities (Portelli & Vibert, 2002), (b) an understanding of the historical roots and tradition of democratic myth as well as how this tradition can inform our praxis, and (c) an understanding of democratic myth’s current engagement of the social order. In the final part of my analysis, I will focus on how teachers and students can practically engage democratic myth and critical democratic praxis to nurture this very narrative and temporal unity.

8.2 Democratic Myth Beyond the Classroom

Before beginning my examination of some of the specific pedagogical possibilities within education for nurturing democratic myth, it is important that I reiterate the role of critical democratic praxis. As I have argued in the previous chapter, democratic myth should be understood as an important corollary to the critical democratic tradition’s conception of critical analysis of our socio-political order. As a consequence, it is important to note that as I discuss the nurturing of democratic myth, I am not arguing for the abandonment of curriculum and pedagogical strategies that develop critical democratic praxis on substantive social issues. On the contrary, as teachers begin to integrate the means of critically
analyzing current political myths and renew the reception and work on democratic myth within their communities, they must also continue to advocate and develop students’ ability to critically engage in the socio-political issues that are at the core of the existing social order. To reiterate, the nurturing of democratic myth should be understood as a necessary narrative framework that is informed by and informs our critical reflections and actions.

One of the most difficult challenges in engaging democratic myth for teachers and students alike is rooted in the very strength of the systemic roles assigned to the category divisions “teacher” and “learner.” Here, I am not referring to the epistemological and authoritarian divide between the two (Freire, 1998, 1968/2000), although this continues to be problematic, but rather to how this categorical division locates and constrains both teaching and learning within the public space of our schools. In this respect, educators are able and expected to take on the role of “teacher” within schools while removing such a role from their private lives; likewise, students are to take on the role of “learners” in schools while having the space to abandon this role in their private lives.

As I suggested in my analyses of both meritocratic and neoliberal political myths, such division is very much an illusion. In both of these myths, the narratives and the accompanying sense of unity and significance that they provide are produced, reproduced, and received in and through the various social institutions, including our schools, and they also penetrate every part of our public and private beings. The fact that I can locate my meritocratic and neoliberal progress in my dramatic movement from single-ply toilet paper in my poorer university days to my current use of triple-ply, lotion-infused paper as a fully employed teacher attests to the banality of such myths. The education system, through both teachers and students, is able to provide an ideal institutional environment in which these political myths are communicated and received, but
the reception and accompanying narrative significance produced by these myths is not contained solely within these roles. In other words, part of the strength of both of these political myths is that individuals embrace the meritocratic and neoliberal narrative as teachers, students, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, workers, and friends, etc.

I want to suggest that one of the challenges to educators and students alike is to understand democratic myth in the same sense. For instance, one of the temptations of educators is to think of nurturing democratic myth as something we do as teachers in our classrooms. Hence, we teach students how to do calculus, how to write an effective essay, and how to understand democracy. If we take the need for nurturing democratic myth seriously and understand myth, in the Blumenbergian (1979/1985) sense, as a substantive mode of symbolic orientation, then such a view of democratic pedagogy and education is doomed to failure. Instead, teachers and students must understand democratic myth as a mode of being and of understanding the world both inside the classroom as well as in the larger community.

Educators, as both teachers and learners, thus must understand their pursuit of democracy as part of their larger struggle to live a democratic life. Central to receiving and working on democratic myth as an essential part of one’s lived praxis is doing so not simply as a teacher but rather as a political agent in a larger community context. As teachers for democratic being, the context of our praxis and mythical work must not be limited simply to the discourse and walls of our classroom but must include our political engagement of local, national, and international communities. As such, fulfilling the role of a teacher and living this vocation offers a unique pedagogical opportunity and responsibility to work on myths with fellow teachers and students, but it also includes working on democratic myth as a part of our wider political and social relations within the
various communities that we inhabit. It is for this reason that as a person strives to embrace democratic myth and democracy as a lived form of praxis, he or she does so not only as a teacher but also as a student, a worker, a son, a daughter, and so on.

In the aforementioned sense, Dewey was right to argue that as democracy becomes part of our lives, it must penetrate all of our relations (Dewey, 1939/1976). Most notably, he argues that democracy must penetrate our personal life so that each of our lives “signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character, and determining desire and purpose in all relations of life” (Dewey, 1939/1976, p. 226). In this sense, democracy as a lived form of praxis cannot be understood as merely an effect of voting in every election or entering a political occupation; instead, one must critically take part in the active and direct participation in the lived values, beliefs, and actions that are fundamental to creating and maintaining democratic relations with others.

Consequently, I can make sense of my own multiple roles in this existing socio-economic order, along with my struggle to live a democratic way of life, by understanding the implications of embracing democratic myth in my role not only as teacher/student but also as a foreman of a landscape construction crew, as a friend debating the merits of particular issues with another, or as a father deciding the types of relationships that are formed with my wife and daughter. In each of these roles and corresponding spaces, the call to work on democratic myth should not be diminished nor should its narrative demands and sense of significance that it brings to my life. Therefore, it is not enough that I treat my family or friends as democratic equals who are endowed with a deep sense of autonomy, dignity, and respect qua human, but also my fellow teachers, students, educational assistants, secretaries, custodians, and administrators regardless of their institutional assignment.
Interestingly, Dewey provides insight into the ever-present struggle to realize and renew democracy by actively engaging in the world as political agents. Specifically, he argues that, as a form of life, democracy “cannot stand still,” and it “must be constantly discovered, rediscovered, remade and reorganized” (Dewey, 1937/1991, p. 182). As part of this process, it is evident that as teachers, it is not enough to extol the virtues of democratic myth and the narrative of our struggle to progress democratically. On the contrary, a political myth that is no longer worked on is inevitably stripped of its narrative significance to our lives and becomes a relic of the past; it becomes a story that no longer is a mode of orientation in our complex world but a tale of what has been or an irrelevant dream of what could have been. This holds true with any political myth, from the clash of civilization, the proletariat revolution, the myth of meritocracy, to the neoliberal myth. Hence, the mythical force and its ability to provide a meaningful mode of orientation and significance to respective socio-political orders is necessarily dependent on the myth’s reception and the subsequent work done on the myths to contextualize them to meet the political needs and conditions of particular groups in their specific contexts (Bottici, 2007).

Democratic myth is no different in this regard. Regardless of our democratic heritage, democratic myth is ultimately dependent on our individual and collective engagement of the narrative by one another, and with one another. Without the reception of democratic myth and our collective struggle to work on this myth as part of our praxis with the world, it is stripped of its relevance and significance to our current political order. Rather than a myth that frames our political progress through our struggles to realize the precarious balance of freedom, equality, and political empowerment between all people, it becomes a story of our ancestors’ past struggles and, ultimately, it loses its narrative force. Of course, as Blumenberg (1979/1985, 1996) argues, amidst an indifferent and indeterminate
world, the lack of reception of a particular myth does not mean that we will collectively abandon myth altogether, but rather it means that that we will seek, find, receive, and work on alternative myths in order to provide orientation and significance to our lives. To this end, it is not a coincidence that a lack of force of democratic myth, both inside and outside our schools, has come at a time when the growth of nondemocratic myths, such as meritocratic and neoliberal ones, have become powerful narrative modes of orientation in this unjust world.

As teachers dedicated to the democratic renewal of our political order, we can no longer be spectators of others’ political engagement of democracy; we must engage in democracy now, both inside and outside of the classroom. Our failure to embrace critical democratic praxis and work on democratic myth necessarily means being complicit in perpetuating the nondemocratic alternatives that penetrate our schools. Thus, to be a teacher devoted to critical democratic praxis that includes embracing democratic myth demands that we receive and work on this myth in a meaningful way with others, including students.

8.3 Democratic Myth and Critical Pedagogy—Unique Challenges

It is important that, in defending a work on democratic myth, we, as teachers and students, should take seriously the unique features of this myth. Although democratic myth certainly does not mean that anything goes in terms of our narrative engagement of the myth, it does not supply us with a single universal narrative nor does it promise a utopian world free of all conflict. As myth, democracy is always particularized and contextualized within the various communities it is received into and worked on. More than this, democratic myth contains within it a unique sense of progress. As I argued earlier, unlike neoliberal and meritocratic myths, democratic myth does not equate progress with the absolute elimination of all social, political, and economic conflicts but rather with
accepting the inherent tension, debates, and discussion, as well as a certain degree of conflict that comes along with it.

This unique facet of democratic myth poses at least two important challenges to our work on it in education. First, unlike other political myths, democratic progress does not offer us a socio-political magic bullet that can end all conflicts and resolve all of our political dilemmas. And, at first glance, this certainly captures the dynamic nature of democratic politics. While this may be a virtue to many people, it runs the risk of creating apathy and pessimism as teachers and students try to locate and track how they are progressing or regressing on a day-to-day basis. In other words, while it is easy to locate the narrative core of democratic progress in large rupturing events and movements, such as in an election or a civil rights protest, our work on democratic myth in our daily interactions both inside and outside of schools is far more nuanced, given the nature of our collective struggle to constantly engage its narrative core.

This sense of indeterminate progress, as noted, will pose unique challenges to critical democratic educators as they engage democratic myth in schools. At times, it may appear to both the teacher and students that because of the conflicting nature of our collective work on and through democracy, a class is not progressing or our teaching practices are ineffectual. For instance, a class might receive and work on the democratic myth through engaging the issue of globalization and its effects on developing nations through a variety of activities. Amidst the inevitable divergent views and ideas on how globalization relates to people’s freedom, equality, and empowerment in these areas, it may appear to a teacher that a particular debate and lack of consensus is a mark of a lack progress. Amidst this narrative engagement, however, teachers and learners must ensure they continue to embrace and engage the narrative core of democratic myth and let the narrative of democratic progress bring a sense a significance to these inevitable struggles; our
progress must be through our everyday discussion, debates, and practices, insofar as they are the only means by which we can embrace substantive notions of collective empowerment, equality, and freedom. Because of this, while teachers and students can look to the development of their various skills and talents, such as writing or critical reading skills, as a part of their progress, a certain sense of openness to the indeterminacy of their democratic progress should be accepted and encouraged.

Secondly, and just as important, insofar as working on and particularizing myth implies a certain level of conflict, teachers and learners must be careful to avoid turning democratic myth into dogmatism. Students must be able to work on democratic myth as autonomous individuals situated within particular spatiotemporal contexts. To this end, it requires teachers to have patience and open-mindedness as they, along with the student, individually struggle through an indefinite number of factors and issues in order to progress democratically. Thus, teachers must work with students to nurture a classroom and school community in which democratic myth can be openly and genuinely received and worked on. Consequently, teachers must resist the temptation to curtail this reception and work through the reification of certain narratives of our democratic progress or by rejecting others outright based on the force of particular democratic conceptions in our own lives. Such dogmatism threatens to undermine the importance of our progress through democratic conflict. This, however, does not mean that teachers and students should not discuss and critically analyze the real and philosophical implications of these positions in our schools, such as Ralston Saul’s account of Canadian democracy or Thoreau’s libertarian democracy. Rather, it means we should not simply reject them outright on the merits of our own narrative work on democracy. To silence this work and these narratives is an attempt to silence how democratic myth provides a sense of significance and unity in other people’s lives;
it is to silence the active renewal of the democratic myth in order to ensure narrative certainty for ourselves. This last point is particularly important, as a teacher’s current institutional role and authority over students lends itself to the possibility of encouraging dogmatism and/or the parroting of particular socio-political viewpoints.

In addition, explicit in my previous analysis of the meritocratic and neoliberal myths, teachers and students must become more critically aware of the particularly unique and powerful ways schools function in the communication, reception, and working of socio-political myths. Teachers and students alike should be aware of not only the current myths that occupy schools but also the narrative possibility of democratic myth in them as well. As we re-engage democratic myth within the education system, we must begin to rethink our schools as places where socio-political myths have so tightly ingrained themselves that their inherent artificiality and conventionality only appear to make such systems appear immutable. The problem with our current educational climate is not that the neoliberal or meritocratic myths exist per se, but that they have become so powerful and dominant within an institutional setting that reinforces them; they have become so powerful, in fact, that they have all but silenced and strangled mythic alternatives, including the myth of democracy. For instance, even in the myth of meritocracy’s inception during the 1940s and 1950s, it was conceived amidst numerous theoretical and mythical views of what education and society could look like (Lemann, 1999). Even more recently, during the 1980s, neoliberalism was a contested narrative of education. As such, my point is that, as meritocratic and neoliberal myths have come to collectively grip our education system, we have inadvertently strangled the idea that our schools are locations where political myths should be or even could be challenged. In embracing democratic myth, teachers and students alike have to concurrently reject this sense
of mythical entitlement; we have to embrace democratic myth in such a way that we look to school as a necessary, although not sufficient, part of our democratic engagement of the world through myth, reflection, and practice. In doing so, we must demand, both in thought and action, that our collective narrative of democratic progress is not only relevant to education, but has a rightful place at the core of our struggle for social justice.

8.4 Democratic Myth and the Curriculum of Life

The central question, then, is how we can individually and collectively work to nurture democratic myth as part of lived praxis in and through our education system. How do we develop or conceive of a pedagogy that will nurture what Blumenberg (1979/1985) calls the production, reception, and work on myth both within ourselves and in our students? Central in answering these questions is to look at our education system and our teaching practices within the larger contexts of our social and political lives. In this respect, the work on democratic myth and its reception as a symbolic mode of orientation differs little between teachers and students. For both roles, democratic myth must traverse the illusory institutional limits put on us by our traditional understanding of education. As noted from the outset, to engage in democratic praxis, we must individually and collectively work on this myth, whether we are teachers, students, or administrators, as part of our larger social and political engagement within our various communities. Therefore, central to receiving and working on democratic myth through education is connecting schools to the broader communities and lived experience of its students.

In understanding democratic myth as part of our narrative engagement and lived praxis of all our communities, including schools, I think that we can understand this reframing of education in what philosophers John Portelli and Ann Vibert (2002) denote as the “curriculum of life” (p. 36). They (2002) argue that
the curriculum of life is “a central, organizing stance that informs pedagogy, knowledge, school and classroom procedures and dispositions, evaluation, and how students, teachers, administrators and staff engage in the school” (p. 39). Central, then, to the curriculum of life is grounding all fundamental aspects of education, whether curriculum content, discipline, and/or community relations, within the larger political and social lives of the students. Included within this stance is the critical engagement of issues of “power, difference and marginality” within educational projects (Portelli & Vibert, p. 39). Through the curriculum of life, students would engage in fundamental political and social issues that make up important elements of their individual and collective experiences. In their work, Portelli and Vibert (2002) provide an interesting example of how the curriculum of life manifests itself within the Emily Carr Elementary School in Nova Scotia:

On one occasion in a grade six classroom, one boy said to another, "Don't be such a girl." When several of the girls—and the teacher—took offense, the comment was taken up by the class. All words used to refer to males and females were written on the board, analyzed, and categorized according to connotations. The children were amazed at the sheer number of negative connotations used to refer to females in comparison to males; but, unconvinced that the way in which language is used can be a serious gender issue, and uncertain about whether language reflected or constructed reality, the class launched a study of gendered language, including a school-based research project. They took a survey of girls and boys to see how many found the male terms used in common sayings inclusive. The children tabulated their results and charted them in percentages and percentiles (thus also addressing proportion and graphing in their math curriculum), and presented their findings at Town Hall. Children, who had argued that the language included girls and women, learned through this research that the
majority of boys and the vast majority of girls they surveyed didn't feel this way. (pp. 37–38)

Portelli and Vibert thus argue that in this pedagogical instance the school, teachers, and students were actively engaged in the curriculum of life as the content, its pedagogical delivery, and the subsequent participation of the students in learning was framed in the larger context of their real life experiences. Through the curriculum of life students still learn important educational content, and they still learn and develop important skills, but they do so in the wider context of engaging the real, lived experiences and issues of their lives. As such, schools become important locations where students can learn how to critically and morally engage their lived experiences, rather than simply learning skills that are instrumental to their ascent or descent of the school merited ladder.

I want to suggest that Portelli and Vibert’s conception of the curriculum of life provides an essential pedagogical landscape in which to effectively embrace democratic myth within our education system. Recall that democratic myth is connected but necessarily distinct from its theoretical counterparts. As myth, democracy must be understood as our active engagement of a specific political narrative that is part of our lived praxis. As a consequence, work on democratic myth must not be received and worked on in academic isolation from teachers’ and students’ lived experience. Democratic myth, rather, must draw on and engage the lived experiences of communities in all their particularities and complexities. Moreover, as the Portelli and Vibert example also elucidates, work on democratic myth can only occur if we critically engage in substantive moral, political, and social issues that lie at the heart of a narrative core of democratic myth. Thus, a necessary consequence of embracing democratic myth in the context of the curriculum of life is that our schools must engage social and political issues such as power, difference, and marginality, both inside and outside their classrooms.
By engaging in these core issues through the curriculum of life, teachers and students are provided with the necessary context to work on democratic myth. The curriculum of life provides the socio-political landscape for students to collectively challenge, struggle with, and even change their democratic notions of equality, freedom, and community empowerment within the particular context of their communities. For instance, as Portelli and Vibert’s example illustrates, students should critically engage in the issue of gender equality within their classrooms and in the larger context of their community. More than simply memorizing a set of rules or being lectured on the inappropriateness of sexism, the students engaged in a process of lived democratic praxis through their various classes. In this process, the students both participated in the construction of their knowledge of the moral and political topic and actively engaged and worked on democratic equality, both in the classroom and in society at large. In particular, the students reflected on the social force and power of language to reinforce and perpetuate inequalities in their community. In addition, the students engaged the notions of freedom and autonomy through this exercise in two meaningful ways: They addressed and critically examined the relevance and importance of creating constraints on autonomy and freedom if one’s actions harm others; also, this educational moment was itself an exercise of the students’ democratic freedom and autonomy as the students were able to direct their agency towards challenging the status quo in order to make the world a more just and equitable place.

Moreover, as the Emily Carr students engaged in critical reflection and action, implicit within this exercise was the fact that democratic progress was made insofar as they learned that the assumptions that justified their view of gender inequality were fundamentally flawed. Central, then, in the students’ learning process is the reception of democratic myth’s sense of socio-political significance: That we individually and collectively progress in our world by accepting as part of
our lived experience that all people are equal and deserving of respect and human dignity. The engagement of democratic myth through the curriculum of life, of course, does not ensure that all students are embracing this narrative or that the myth is part of our students’ lived praxis; in fact, this is a pedagogical impossibility. What it means, however, is that the curriculum of life provides the necessary context for teachers and students to consciously struggle for democratic progress on an indefinite number of issues and topics.

Further, as much as the curriculum of life provides teachers with an important context for working on the core elements and issues at the heart of our democratic myth, our concurrent reception and subsequent work on the myth, in turn, provides an important symbolic mode of orientation that allows us to view and understand certain pedagogical methods and practices as a contributing part of our progress towards democracy. Specifically, Portelli and Vibert (2002) frame this pedagogical stance as part of our education’s role as an institution of “critical and democratic transformation” (p. 39). As such, it is evident that the democratic myth provides a narrative unity and sense of significance to democratic change in and through education. In other words, the curriculum of life provides the ideal pedagogical landscape to receive and work on democratic myth, and, concurrently, democratic myth provides a narrative sense of unity and significance to relationships, exercises, and rules within the critical and democratic schools that are devoted to the curriculum of life. Therefore, democratic myth should not be understood solely as the narrative effect of critically engaging in the curriculum of life but also as a necessary element of informing how we engage pedagogical practices in schools.

In this aforementioned way, democratic myth is an important narrative element in the curriculum that guides us towards democratic transformation. As teachers and students engage a curriculum of life through various pedagogical
practices, they are united collectively in the reception of democratic myth, and they contextualize its narrative core to their experiences. In this process of particularizing democratic myth, all members of the educational community are both receiving and working on democratic myth and being oriented and guided by its narrative core. To this end, the students and teachers should learn to situate themselves as an essential part of the creation of a narrative of democratic progress. What is crucial is that as teachers and students engage in this content, they understand their work and experiences as part of our slow but determined march towards democracy through democracy.

It is important to note that, in viewing democratic myth as a crucial part of the curriculum of life, particular emphasis must be placed on teachers working with students and students working with each other in critically engaging their experiences. Portelli and Vibert (2002) are careful to point this out in discussing the curriculum of life, as they argue that such a pedagogical approach and stance “centres on the possibilities for the co-construction and co-production of knowledge, rather than on knowledge as simply teacher transmitted or simply student created” (p. 39). This epistemological approach to teachers and students co-creating and co-producing knowledge, given the particularist and contextualized nature of myth, is essential to our collective reception of democratic myth. More to the point, democratic myth should not be a narrative that merely is transmitted or deposited as a story onto students. Rather, democratic myth must be a narrative that teachers and students receive and work on together. In this sense, both teachers and students must be active and participating members in the educational community who receive and work democratic myth as part of their lived praxis.

This aforementioned point is essential because any meaningful work on democratic myth with students will inevitably lead to important disagreements between students and between students and teachers on substantive matters and
how they relate to democracy. Amidst this conflict and disagreement, it certainly may be tempting for a teacher to try to create unity by forcibly silencing more radical views or by trying to dogmatically impose his or her view on the students. In such instances, it must be remembered that unity through democratic myth comes from collectively embracing democratic progress with the students, not by applying a single vision of democracy on them. Yet it must be added that working with students on the reception of democratic myth through lived praxis does not imply that the teachers and students passively accept all voices, views, and practices that are at odds with democracy. For example, by working with students to reveal the harm in sexist language or the oppression of Aboriginals in Canada, it is not implied that we uncritically accept and permit sexist or racist behaviour. On the contrary, it means that as teacher and students engage these substantive notions and issues, they critically examine these issues while also affirming the narrative core of democratic myth. In certain instances, this engagement might necessitate a critical response by the teacher informed by democratic praxis. In other cases, it may be appropriate for the teacher to try to correct student practices that are intentionally aimed at undermining democratic progress in our communities.

Further, the students’ role in working on myth is important for several reasons. At the most basic level, simply bombarding students with the story of democracy does not mean that students receive the myth as part of their narrative orientation of the world. I think, in many respects, that this is the current democratic climate in our schools and particularly in our secondary educational institutions. Specifically, democracy is currently understood as part of our inherited past and as a set of inherited institutions that we learn facts about. However, teaching our students facts about democracy is not sufficient to make them embrace democratic myth in a way that it is part of their everyday reflection and practice in the world. In fact, in many ways, the studying of democracy as a
cultural artefact can undermine its reception insofar as students believe that
democracy is dependent on institutional arrangements alone rather than on their
collective participation and engagement in a democratic way of life. Further, in the
cases where the story of democratic progress is imposed on students, these
impositions undermine the myth’s ability to serve as an important core element of
democratic praxis. In such cases, not only does the teacher undermine a student’s
ability to act as an autonomous agent in embracing democratic myth, but the
student’s reception of the myth is significantly weakened and risks becoming
stagnant as the narrative significance cultivated in him or her is dependent on the
authority of teachers rather than on their individual and collective reception and
work with one another.

8.5 Democratic Myth and our Temporal Unity

Another important element in nurturing democratic myth in our schools is
the provision of pedagogical links that help unify the temporal trajectory of the
narrative. Although democratic myth must always be received and worked on in
order to progress in the future, one should not overlook that democracy is an
inherited tradition that brings with it a vast set of works, practices, events, and
archetypes. To divorce democratic myth from history would be to overlook the
socio-historical struggles that make this myth possible. Moreover, given the
current educational climate that emphasizes the here and now as a means of
legitimizing the future, I think rehistoricizing democracy is a particularly pertinent
challenge today. Unlike its neoliberal and meritocratic counterparts that
dehistoricize education for the sake of legitimizing students’ present progress,
democratic myth does not have such a luxury. In particular, the highly
indeterminate nature of the struggle for democratic progress makes unifying its
historical roots essential to both our present and future democratic practices. For
instance, the struggle for racial equality is an important part of our Ontario
communities. This particular struggle for equality has taken on many forms in our past, whether it was through workers’ rights, suffrage movements, or struggles to mitigate unjust social and economic disparities. These historical events must be interpreted and framed in schools as a part of our democratic heritage that tells the narrative of the obstacles, failures, and tentative successes that are part of our struggle for democracy. The mythical elements of our democratic past provide insight and significance to our present-day struggles; our current struggles will inevitably be fraught with uncertainty, failures, resistance, and controversy just as those before us. Our history thus shows that it is through these struggles that democracy is discovered to be not only possible but integral to humanity.

More than this, the sense of contingency and the various obstacles that people have faced in the past add to the sense of significance of current struggles for freedom, equality, and collective empowerment by students. Not only do our democratic struggles resemble those of the past, but they can be viewed by teachers and students as part of a larger movement to realize democracy in our communities. I would suggest that this aspect of the deep democratic myth is most vibrant in many of our communities that continue to fight for equality and freedom. In the United States, one can see how the election of Barack Obama took on this mythical element. The events of his election and his presidency have become part of the larger democratic myth of many Americans. In particular, specific emphasis was and is placed on the narrative continuity between the American civil rights movement, which has slowly struggled for equality, and the election of the first black American President. However, large segments of the American population, by placing Obama’s election to the American presidency as part of the United States’ democratic myth, infused the event with a sense of narrative unity and political significance; it is understood as a monumental moment of democratic change, as a once racially oppressive government and equally
dominant socio-political racist public had been transformed by decades of struggle for democracy. And while his presidency did not or will not end racial divisions and inequality in the United States or in the world, as an event in our myth of democratic progress, it is emblematic of the importance of our struggle for collective empowerment, freedom, and equality. It is in this way, historically situating ourselves and our students within democratic myth’s historical tradition, that we can create an important sense of significance and subsequent unity in our current struggles to embrace a democratic way of life through the curriculum of life.

Let me be clear about my position in rehistoricizing our democratic myth in our education system. I am not defending a superficial romanticism of our past or present by situating people or events within our democratic myth. On the contrary, as I have been advocating all along, democratic myth must not be detached from critical praxis. As such, it does not follow that because we situate Obama’s election within the larger historical narrative of democratic progress, we concurrently remain uncritical of him and his administration’s policies. In fact, embracing democratic myth as part of critical democratic praxis moves us to reflect, question, and challenge any policies that fundamentally fail to contribute to our democratic progress regardless of whether the source of such policy is Obama, George W. Bush, Jean Chrétien, or Stephen Harper. Consequently, it is my contention that it is entirely justified, on the one hand, to embrace the democratic significance of Obama’s election and, on the other hand, to fundamentally question and protest, for example, the democratic legitimacy of maintaining an oppressive and morally repugnant prison system in Guantanamo Bay. If anything, I would suggest that one of the difficulties with the Obama administration is that because both his election team and the public situated his election within the larger democratic myth of America, his failures to affirm equality, freedom, and
collective empowerment both at home and abroad have become even more glaring and significant.24

Once again, let me reiterate that to embrace democratic myth does not mean that one has to forgo reason and/or truth altogether; it means, rather, that we teach and embrace the narrative of democratic progress even though we do so without a complete sense of certainty. To this end, our students’ ability to critically reflect and act on the historical validity of political narratives is part of living a democratic life. As a result, while I think we should be quick to critically denounce the inconsistencies and oppressive views of many people who embrace democracy, we should, especially having reflected on our own failures in leading a democratic life, be careful in dismissing and ignoring those that have contributed to democracy.

In uniting our deep democratic tradition of the past to the present in our classrooms, we also open the real possibility of a democratic future for ourselves. As we begin to rehistoricize our curriculum in humanity’s deep democratic tradition and engage in praxis through the curriculum of life, democratic myth is able to orient our students’ actions for the future. As we receive and work along

24 Similarly, I am not advocating for a romanticism of the past nor claiming that we ignore historical facts for the sake of mythical force. On the contrary, I am arguing that democratic myth must both openly embrace the full scope of our ugly and often tragic past and take the truth of these events as important elements of our democratic tradition. A perfect example of this is teaching and learning the history of the Canadian Aboriginal population and their continued struggle for cultural empowerment, equality, and freedom. In embracing democratic myth, I am not advocating ignoring or simply sugar-coating the complexities of this group’s struggles for students or overlooking the utter failure of privileged peoples of this country in addressing historical and present-day harm done. In fact, I would argue that it is only by understanding these complexities and the true harm done that Canadians can address this profound injustice that necessarily hinders our democratic progress.
with students on democratic myth, and it becomes an important element of our social imaginary, the narrative of our democratic progress is projected into the future; it becomes a narrative in which our thoughts, plans, and actions both inside and outside of the classroom are united in the ongoing struggle for democracy. And while this point may seem obvious to many, I think it is important in teaching our youth today. By projecting their democratic roles in the future, students struggle against neoliberal and meritocratic fatalism that privileges and enforces obedience to the status quo.

This struggle against fatalism is particularly salient in adolescents given the very limited political power distributed to them as well as their widespread treatment as “incomplete” adults whose autonomy is severely curtailed throughout North America. In such a climate, democratic myth offers the possibility of progress being part of their individual goals and visions of the self but also the democratic progress of humanity in general. For instance, curriculum and lessons could focus on an array of topics and issues, from the influence of demographic changes in the future to how one can address issues of environmental degradation now and in the future. In such lessons, the students would be encouraged to locate democratic myth as the narrative that brings continuity and significance to their future goals and visions for democracy. In doing so, students would not only imagine and envision how democratic change is possible, they would also individually and collectively form modes of being and ways of life devoted towards this transformation both now and in their futures.

8.6 Democratic Myth and Pedagogical Practicalities

Up to this point, I have addressed the important curricular and temporal context that is necessary for democratic myth to be received and worked on in our schooling system. In doing so, I briefly discussed educational moments in which democratic myth can infuse our teaching and learning praxis. As always, more can
be said on how democratic myth can be engaged through a reforming of personal and collective pedagogy.

As noted, the aim of critical democratic educators is to construct, with their colleagues and students, educational opportunities where democratic myth can be contextualized and what Blumenberg (1979/1985) describes as “worked on” in a way that informs a democratic mode of being. Central, then, in constructing these educational opportunities should be trying to unite the particularized work on democratic myth within communities, the more general social imaginary of democratic myth and the narrative construction of self through a democratic way of life. Let me acknowledge from the outset that this conceptual distinction is necessarily artificial in the sense that the reception of democratic myth and critical democratic praxis will often entail these intertwined conceptual elements. In other words, these conceptual elements of democratic myth should not be understood as distinct from one another but rather as symbiotic parts that, when united and nurtured accordingly, can open the real possibility of the reception of and work on democratic myth.

First, pedagogy should be designed in a way that engages the social imaginary on a particularized level. What this entails is that the core elements of democratic myth—namely, the narrative significance created by substantive notions of equality, freedom, and autonomy and power by the people—are brought to bear on a wide variety of teaching materials in the curriculum of life. Important in this process is creating a link between students and the larger social imaginary and, in turn, contextualizing this mode of orientation to their engagement of life. For instance, one might engage students in the issue of the privatization of fresh water in Ontario. For critical democratic pedagogues, this issue provides a plethora of educational opportunities and avenues to critically work on democratic myth. For instance, in the critical democratic tradition, the students could critically
analyze and work against the structures of corporate power and lobbying that are currently trying to privatize this highly valuable resource. More than this, as noted, this issue provides an important set of narrative avenues for democratic myth to be received and collectively worked on. Crucial in engaging this topic is to create opportunities in which teachers and students are able to frame and reframe this particular issue within the narrative of democratic myth: How does the practice of water privatization relate to a substantive notion of democratic equality? Does this practice challenge and undermine the substantive conceptions of respect and dignity we have for both ourselves and others? Does this notion of democratic equality necessitate the right to food and certain resources such as water? How is this practice informed by freedom and autonomy? Should the freedom and autonomy of individuals who are collectively acting as a corporation trump the freedom and autonomy of people who desire the water as a public resource? What role should the people have in legitimizing this privatization of these resources? And last, are democratically elected officials’ decisions sufficient to justify this practice?

The engagement of such questions should not limit the scope of teaching strategies and activities to argumentation and dialogue. Of course, such practices are crucial means of engaging democratic myth and developing critical democratic praxis. However, teachers can certainly engage these questions and narrative significance in multiple forms: from the creation of poetry and songs, to the use of dramatic arts, speeches, letter writing campaigns, statistical analysis, and even scientific studies. What is important is that the teachers provide the opportunities to shift the mythic discourse on a range of issues. Further, the students, along with teachers, should be encouraged to interpret such an assignment as more than merely another meritocratic opportunity to display their deserved academic growth or to be informed by the neoliberal myth to interpret the privatization of water as a
necessary social effect of *homo economicus* working in their communities. Once more, using democratic myth as a form of symbolic orientation inevitably challenges these narrow notions and opens the students’ social imaginary both in terms of what an assignment is as well as how education is connected to our constructed communities.

In addition to working on myth through the engagement of the core elements of the democratic narrative, teachers must concurrently strive to have students integrate these core elements in the larger narrative context of democratic myth. More than simply discussing democratic elements in particular social contexts, students must be provided with educational opportunities in which they are able to locate, understand, and integrate these elements within humanity’s democratic struggle. Of course, essential to this process is nurturing and developing an understanding among students of the democratic tradition. As mentioned earlier, unlike its meritocratic or neoliberal counterparts, the democratic myth can and should be integrated within the larger history of democratic progress from past, to present, and into the future. More than simply understanding the history of democracy, teachers must work with students to understand the mythical significance of democratic events, moments, beliefs, and practices by individuals and groups in the struggle for equality, freedom, and collective empowerment. What this entails, then, is connecting the democratic myth and our story of progress through these core elements to the students’ mythical work in the curriculum of life.

By way of example, in my own teaching practice, I have worked with students to investigate and understand the issue of lowering the voting age in Canada. Once again, drawing on various strategic means the students could engage this topic with the teacher in many meaningful ways: from historical research of changes in the voting age in Canada’s past, to a debate, to simulated
campaigns and votes on a wide range of topics by the students and discussion of the results. Regardless of the means, the educator should work with the students to understand not only how substantive notions of equality, autonomy, and collective empowerment are at the heart of this issue but also how understanding and acting upon these issues, whether one supports or rejects such a change, is essential to the democratic progress of our communities. Far from these issues being trivial, they are the marrow of our democratic being.

In this sense, it is not enough for teachers and students to understand that by engaging in certain issues in the curriculum of life such as ageism or sexism, they are confronted with problems of inequality and the undermining of autonomy. Rather, our educational communities must integrate these issues and the lived struggles of the individuals and communities that actively engage in democratic change as part of the democratic myth and its corresponding narrative of progress. As such, this entails working on democratic myth through the popular advocates of democratic movements and through the collective involvement of citizens within these movements. As much as one can easily articulate the narrative significance of well-known activists or politicians such as Rosa Parks, Mother Teresa, Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela to democratic myth, particular emphasis must also be placed on democratic progress as a collective act. In other words, as much as Park’s and Mandela’s contributions are exceptional, teachers and students should strive to understand that the reflections and actions of all members of this movement, those that have remained historically nameless or forgotten, are essential in the collective movement of our communities towards embracing equality, autonomy, and collective empowerment.

The aforementioned point is essential for teachers striving to nurture the democratic myth in their classes. Teachers and students working on democratic myth should strive not only to nurture narrative unity and significance to individual
acts but also to do the same for collective democratic acts as well. In this way, for example, one might look towards the movement to lower the voting age of Canada from 21 to 18 in 1970 as a monumental event that extended equality, autonomy, and democratic legitimacy to many citizens. Similarly, using Portelli and Vibert’s (2002) previous example, teachers and students should try to provide narrative significance to the importance of communities working together to challenge sexist language that undermines our respect for, and the dignity of, others. In both examples, the challenge for the teacher is not just to engage the issue but also to reveal how these various struggles to realize democratic freedom, which is often dismissed, repressed, or oppressed, are key collective acts in our democratic progress. Ideally, then, teachers and students would begin to imagine and frame all democratic struggles as part of their praxis. They would begin to understand that the historical and present socio-political struggles are part of democratic myth; they would also begin to understand that the well-known, less publicized, and sometimes silenced struggles of people for freedom, equality, and empowerment are a part of said myth. As such, teachers and students would begin to embrace the view that both great historical figures as well as those millions who have dedicated their lives to democracy without fame are part of democratic myth. Moreover, we would begin to understand that our individual and collective values, beliefs, and acts that are intertwined with democratic myth are necessary and sufficient conditions of democratic progress.

Lastly, in teaching for the reception of democratic myth educators must effectively nurture the myth in the student’s narrative construction of the self. This point is important insofar as there is certainly a temptation to try to objectivise the curriculum of life in such a way that a variety of issues, beliefs, or practices become solely subjects of philosophical or sociological study. And while such detachment can be an important part of the process of critical reflection, teachers
must encourage and develop educative practices in which students learn to see democracy as a way of life and understand themselves as participating members of humanity’s democratic progress. The current meritocratic myth, despite its undemocratic elements, is clearly effective in this regard. Far from this myth simply being another social story, its narrative form and content provides significance and unity to people’s lives; it provides a narrative orientation through which individuals can locate the narrative self in a larger community myth. In a similar way, democratic myth, if it is going to be received and worked on in a meaningful way, must be able to provide the individual self with narrative significance and unity to his or her life.

Democratic myth, then, should not replace or ignore students’ personal experiences; it should orient them to understand their experiences and their stories of the self as part of the struggle for a democratic life and social order. Here, I am using personal experience in the broadest sense: from the relationships we form, to the television shows we watch and the music we listen to, to the various episodic experiences that make up our autobiographical self. As a consequence, educators should begin to design, construct, and implement opportunities for students not only to communicate their personal experiences but also to reflect on how they fit within the democratic myth. Once again, how teachers work with students to do this is open to the talents and resources in the community. A teacher may draw on traditional forms of autobiographical expression such as reading response journals, memoirs, artistic expressions, or oral presentations. What is essential, regardless of the teaching strategy employed, is that the students begin to see and understand their experiences as well as the expression of some of these experiences as part of our collective work towards democratic progress. In other words, it is not enough for teachers to simply ask students to express their personal experiences; they need to work with them so students can understand these experiences, and consequently
themselves, as part of their struggle for equality, freedom, and community empowerment.

For example, by putting into the narrative context of democratic myth particular episodes in our lives both as teacher and students, one can gain particular meaning and importance in terms of the transformation of the understanding of our own lives and the lives of those around us. I recall my experience teaching a grade 12 English class in Oshawa, Ontario, in 2008. As part of the students’ integrated work-experience unit, I spent one class examining workers’ rights in Ontario. As a class we read over each right and discussed its rationale and importance in the workplace for ensuring fairness and dignity to all workers. Subsequently, we shared stories on a variety of work experiences and episodes that related to these rights. I recall one particular student who explained a variety of unjust employer practices that clearly violated her rights as a worker. And while I, as a teacher, was not privy to her thoughts or subsequent actions in the workplace, it was clear that our discussion clarified the sense of injustice she rightly felt about the situation. As such, not only was this student more open about her disdain for this practice, but she openly denounced her employer’s ways as fundamentally undermining her dignity as a person and as a worker. It is thus through these small and large events in our lives that the narrative of our democratic progress can provide crucial insight into issues of power, discrimination, and marginalization in our students’ lives, as well as their subsequent effects and their overall significance.

Similarly, educators can also bring students’ artistic experiences, both in terms of creation and reception, as a location for democratic myth to orient the students. It is evident that while non-fiction works have been traditionally understood as an important educational medium for understanding democracy, we should be open to the influence and democratic possibility of arts and entertainment both as a canvas for critical praxis and for its positive role in
nurturing and working on democratic myth. Thus, I think we should be receptive to the idea that the poetry of Walt Whitman (Nussbaum, 2001, pp. 645–671), the music of Bob Dylan, television shows such as the Simpsons, or movies such as Milk contain within them the seeds of democratic change as much as the works of John Locke. Moreover, the work on myth through the arts need not address material that is democratically inclined. Specifically, teachers may provide students educational opportunities to critically understand issues of sexism in the lyrics of 50 Cent or the negative stereotyping of teenagers in shows such as Two and a Half Men. Hence, the aim is to encourage students to locate these artistic works and their experience of them in the larger mythic narrative of our individual and collective democratic progress.

By working to orient personal experiences within democratic myth, students and teachers are able to concurrently locate the self within this narrative. Just as we begin to understand other individuals and groups and their values, beliefs, and actions as part of their struggle for democratic progress, we can begin to see ourselves, and our values, beliefs, and actions as part of the same narrative. As teachers and students begin to orient themselves in the democratic myth, they are able to connect themselves to the social imaginary: How do my thoughts and actions relate to substantive notions of equality, human autonomy, and the collective empowerment of myself as well as others? Does a particular thought or action reflect or undermine the dignity and respect of others? Does another thought or action enhance or undermine the freedom and autonomy of myself as well as others? Do they empower all people or do they concentrate the power and its benefits to the few? Central in answering these questions is correlating praxis within democratic myth. Insofar as teachers, along with students, can begin to see and reflect upon ourselves as part of the struggle for democracy, we can also work
to understand our practical engagement of the world as moving us and others away from or toward a democratic way of life.

As critical democratic educators and students work on democratic myth and critical praxis through the personal, particular, and larger narrative contexts, they can slowly begin to provide a narrative alternative to the current meritocratic and neoliberal alternatives dominating our current system. Once again, our reception and work on democratic myth must be understood as an important part of traditional critical democratic praxis that openly challenges and critically uncovers the inherent injustices within our social order. In doing so, as we critically analyze, challenge, and transform these undemocratic beliefs and practices in our social order and education system, democratic myth serves as an alternative narrative that provides an important mode of orientation and sense of narrative significance that grounds our democratic way of life.
Conclusion
Towards a Pedagogy of Mythos

9.1 Embracing Myth

As I noted in the opening of this work, the mythos/logos antinomy has cast a long and significant shadow on the history of Western thought and culture. The influence of this antinomy can, at least in part, be explained by how the development of reason and science has had and continues to have a profound and revolutionary effect on how we understand the world as well as how we control and change it. More than this, however, the influence of this antinomy rests on our misunderstanding of myth. By misunderstanding myth, Western culture has ultimately failed to see how myth’s resilience and existence in contemporary culture is the result of its unique narrative qualities and symbolic function rather than some lapse of reason. Moreover, by misunderstanding myth, much of Western culture has ultimately conflated reason’s and science’s abilities to fulfill all of humanity’s symbolic needs amidst a highly complex, indeterminate, and indifferent world (Blumenberg 1979/1985, 1996). Drawing on these aforementioned insights from Hans Blumenberg, I have defended his view that myth’s continued existence is a testament to the inherent incoherence and fallaciousness of the mythos/logos antinomy itself and the corresponding view that cultures progress from a mythic state to a rational/scientific one.

It is within the context of Western culture’s inheritance of the mythos/logos antinomy as well as myth’s inherent resilience that I have cast my philosophical analysis of myth in education. In re-examining our philosophical understanding of myth in this work, I thus not only reconfirmed Hans Blumenberg’s (1979/1985) and Chiara Bottici’s (2007) insights into the continued relevance and resilience of myth as a mode of orientation but also uniquely reconceptualized how these myths
are currently received and worked on within our education system. As my work reveals, far from our current education system being a benign and rationally designed institution that nurtures pure and practical reason among our students, it is a system whose policies and sets of institutional relations tightly correspond with the socio-political myths that are received and worked on by administrators, teachers, and students alike. As such, our education system must be understood as an important institutional place where myths inevitably manifest themselves.

Given this context, I have argued that educational theorists and practitioners must radically shift their view away from understanding socio-political myths as “illusions” that should be demystified by reason or as archaic and irrational beliefs to understanding them as important modes of symbolic orientation. As a mode of symbolic orientation, myth provides narrative significance to humanity amidst an indifferent and highly indeterminate social order (Blumenberg, 1979/1985). As such, the debate about myth in society in our education system should shift from choosing either myth or reason to understanding the conceptual and epistemological limits and relationship between reason/science and myth. Thus, my work serves to end the debate about whether myths exist or should exist in the education system. The existence of myths is and always will be a part of social order, including educational institutions. As I demonstrated in the second half of my work, the philosophical examination of myth must shift to understanding myths that are received and worked on in schools that best serve humanity and those which erode the values and beliefs that are central to well being. It is on the very basis of the shift mentioned that this work provides new insight into harmful effects of neoliberal and meritocratic myths as well as into how myth can and should fit in with the critical democratic tradition.
9.2 Myth and the Critical Democratic Tradition

As I have defended throughout this dissertation, the critical pedagogical tradition and critical democratic pedagogues have provided revolutionary insight into how teaching and learning can be an important means by which we can nurture critical praxis in order to struggle for a democratic way of life. It is for this reason, that throughout this work, I have been a staunch defender of embracing critical praxis in our classrooms and engaging substantive democratic issues with the hope and aim of transforming the injustices in our existing social order.

Despite these important features, it has been my contention that the critical democratic tradition has been influenced by the antinomy between *mythos* and *logos*. Far from this influence being benign, I have argued that it has ultimately led to a fundamental failure to properly understand myths. In Chapter 2, as revealed through Blumenberg’s (1979/1985, 1996) work, it is evident that the antinomy created between myth and reason/science is not only mistaken but has led many philosophers and cultural critics to miss the relevance and force of myth as a mode of symbolic orientation in our current social order. Consequently, the idea that reason, theory, and science should or even can replace myth is fundamentally flawed. As Blumenberg argues, not only do myth and reason have the same symbolic function in our existential history, but myth provides what reason and science cannot in our world; it can provide a sense of narrative unity and significance to our experiences both past, present, and into the future. It is this sense of symbolic unity and narrative significance that provides meaning and value to a social order that is highly indeterminate. In doing so, it provides the symbolic basis of our beliefs and actions that in many cases cannot be completely or sufficiently understood or justified by science and reason alone. Thus, I argued that critical democratic pedagogues must begin to reassess the limits of reason and science while concurrently reassessing how myths continue to be received and
worked on in our social order. As I argued in Chapter 3, part of the re-examination of myth includes understanding how socio-political myths have become an essential and inevitable part of the modern social-political order.

In moving beyond the *mythos* and *logos* antinomy through Blumenberg’s philosophy of myth, I have revealed how critical democratic pedagogues can gain new insight into how particular socio-political myths may embed themselves within our educational communities in and through ways previously not properly understood. Specifically, in Chapters 5 and 6, I examined how both the meritocratic and neoliberal myths must be understood as distinct from their theoretical counterparts, insofar as they provide narrative unity and a sense of significance to administrators, teachers, and students alike. In addition to this, I revealed that these powerful myths are particularly pertinent to critical democratic pedagogues because they perpetuate narrative orientations of our education system and socio-political order that resist, erode, and undermine the possibility of nurturing democracy.

In expanding and deepening our understanding of these dangerous socio-political myths, we begin to understand how the reception and contextualization of these myths is more complex than previously assumed by critical democratic educators. In this sense, myths are more than simply a set of stories, illusions, or mystified ideas created and applied by those in power; they are an essential mode of orientation that is received and worked on by large segments of the educational populace. As a consequence, while I have advocated and continue to advocate the continued critical analysis of how systemic power relations influence the perpetuation of myth, as my work revealed, our critical analysis must dig deeper into how these myths grip all of us and others. Ultimately, then, we must struggle to deepen our conceptual understanding of undemocratic myths to ensure that our
critical engagement will be more effective in loosening the grip of said myths on teachers and students alike. Further, I have argued that the Blumenbergian philosophy of myth also adds new insight into the necessity of political myth being part of our critical democratic engagement of the socio-political order through the nurturing of a democratic way of life. I have contended that by going beyond the *mythos* and *logos* antinomy, philosophers and practitioners of critical democracy must abandon the view that critical theory and reason alone can reoccupy the symbolic void left as people abandon particular myths. As Blumenberg (1979/1985) rightly argues, our existence is marked by a fundamental need to orient ourselves amidst an indifferent reality and a highly indeterminate social order. Further, not only has reason and science been unable to answer all the fundamental questions posed by early modes of orientation, but it also, as I argued in Chapter 4, has heightened the epistemological indeterminacy of our social order by producing an abundance of complex information. It is thus humanity’s need to act amidst this indifferent and highly indeterminate environment that continues to make mythic unity and significance both relevant and necessary. Consequently, as critical democrats focus their criticism on oppressive or unjust myths in a way that undermines their legitimacy, people will not completely abandon myths as a form of orientation but rather inevitably seek out alternative narratives that can unify and provide significance to their lives.

Thus, as I argued in Chapter 4, critical pedagogues must begin to rearticulate and re-examine political myths that are congruent with their aims of nurturing a democratic way of life. Far from this proposal being a radical impossibility for critical democrats, it reflects the reality that critical democratic pedagogues, such as Paulo Freire, have been implicitly appealing to political myth as a part of the critical pedagogical tradition from its conception. Consequently, embracing socio-
political myths as a narrative corollary to critical democratic praxis is not a call for a radical overhaul of the tradition in its entirety; it is rather a matter of articulating and working on myths that are consistent with our democratic aspirations, and finding the pedagogical means to nurture said myths in and through our education system.

Once more, central to my reworking of democratic myth as a part of critical democracy is reconceptualizing myth as an essential narrative element of critical democratic praxis. As Blumenberg (1979/1985, 1996) argues, the existence of myths does not negate the relevance of reason and science as an important mode of orientation. The existence of myth rather points to understanding the conceptual limits of both modes of orientation as well as to how myth and reason/science interact and intertwine with one another. Thus, as I revealed in Chapter 4, democratic myth should inform and be informed by our critical reason, reflection, and experience. It is this foundation of critical praxis that informs and challenges the insidious and morally harmful effects of particular myths, such as the neoliberal myth, and summons a defence of democratic myth as an important narrative of progress that should inform our moral and political existence.

Further, more than simply reflecting on the implicit existence of myth within the critical democratic tradition, my work began the process of articulating what I denoted as “democratic myth” Democratic myth, far from being an irrelevant conceptual add-on to critical democratic praxis, is a unique narrative that opens up the possibility that our individual and collective progress can be framed in our ability to embrace substantive notions of freedom, equality, and collective empowerment of all people. Moreover, in embracing democratic myth, we can begin to orient ourselves in such a way that democracy provides unity to our individual and collective struggles, as well as a sense of narrative significance to
the people, events, policies, and practices of the past and present in order to transform the future.

As I articulated in Chapter 8, our education system, with all its flaws, can and should play an important role in nurturing the reception of and work on democratic myth among and between its community members. While much work must still be done to continue to critically engage undemocratic myths within our education system, teachers and students can begin to provide the space and pedagogical opportunities to nurture democratic myth as an alternative narrative to those that currently dominate our existing educational landscape. In doing so, we can collectively nurture more than another “story”; we can nurture a democratic way of life, through the curriculum of life (Portelli & Vibert, 2002), that fundamentally alters our moral and political being in the world.

The reception of the democratic myth would fundamentally alter our understanding of the current narratives that have come to dominate both our education specifically and society in general. As I revealed in my discussion of both the meritocratic and the neoliberal myths, embracing a democratic way of life and democratic myth will inevitably lead to tensions, resistance, and struggle against myths that justify and even glorify individual merited progress that comes at the expense of others or humans as purely self-interested economic agents. Instead, by nurturing the reception of democratic myth in and through education, students would begin to embrace a normative vision of their being that unifies through praxis the narrative of our democratic progress through substantive notions of equality, collective empowerment, and freedom. Moreover, as democratic myth provides unity and significance to our lives, critical democratic praxis opens the possibility that the substantive elements of the narrative core of democracy are not simply theoretical constructs breathed through the works of academia or irrelevant values hallowed by modernity. Rather, democratic myth would inform the
narrative of our individual and collective progress in the world and guide our past, present, and future understanding of personal experiences as well as our interactions within our local, national, and even global communities.

It is with a great sense of hope, then, that I think that democratic myth can contribute to the struggle for a critical democratic way of life. A way of life that embraces a substantive sense of equality over the manufacturing of petty differences, calls for the collective empowerment of all people rather than the legitimating of the power of the few at the expense of the many, and a way of life that nurtures a deep sense of community and co-operation among all people rather than an incorrigible desire to secure one’s own success and material progress at the expense of others. Moreover, democratic myth also furthers the possibility that we embrace a way of life that does not reduce our being to a matter of utility maximizing, consumption, and production. In nurturing democratic myth, teachers and students alike would embrace a sense of democratic progress that, while impossible to measure and control through technocratic policy, provides significance to educational policies and practices that extend the freedom and equality of all people beyond the narrow confines of economic growth that comes at the expense of our moral being.

9.3 Policy Implications

My work’s re-examination of myth should not be understood as being distinct or irrelevant to educational policy itself. As I revealed both in my critical discussion of the neoliberal and meritocratic myths as well as in my defence of democratic myth, educational policy is both a product of socio-political myths that inform the construction of the education system as well as a powerful institutional means that allows and promotes students to work on and receive these myths. If we are to take democracy seriously, then one issue of paramount importance is the re-examination of pedagogical policies that threaten to erode and undermine the
values, beliefs, and potential actions that are consistent with a democratic way of life.

Of specific relevance to this work is the set of policies that stem from and reinforce the meritocratic and neoliberal myths. As I argued in Chapter 5, the meritocratic myth in its original form does share some basic philosophical affinities to the democratic tradition. This being noted, in its current form, the policies wrongly nurture the reception and work on a narrative that perpetuates an epistemological and social hierarchy both inside and outside schools that both hides and justifies systemic inequalities and the oppression of many groups and individuals. It is for this reason, I argued, that any policies that solidify the strong sense of “deserving” the socio-economic capital accrued through education must be abandoned. In aiming to nurture a democratic way of life, policies must be consistent with the view that all students should be respected and are worthy of dignity, and education should work towards embracing their collective empowerment and freedom.

As part of this abandonment, then, our education system must shift from the high-stakes policy of distributing immense privilege and opportunities to those sorted into the elite academic streams in our schools while concurrently severely limiting or even corrupting the educational and learning opportunities for those that are sorted out of these categories (Apple, 2001, 2004b; Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1989; Oakes, 1985). As noted in Chapter 5, this should include a loosening of our current conception of academic achievement that reifies individual achievement at the expense of more group- and community-based learning.

In addition, part of this shift must include a radical overhaul of the current social sorting process through grade distribution. This shift would include creating educational policies that directly address the systemic inequalities inherent in our current system in a meaningful and substantive way. Therefore, it would no longer
be sufficient to ignore the role of class, race, culture, and other differences that influence the distribution of grades and privilege in our schools and social order. Rather, any such inequalities must be addressed inside the classroom, through the curriculum of life, and in society in general as substantive issues. Not only is there evidence to reveal that community involvement and engagement of issues of justice aid schools and students currently marginalized (Portelli, Shields, & Vibert, 2007), but I would argue that this local and critical engagement is a moral necessity if we are to take seriously our democratic commitment to respect the dignity, freedom, and political empowerment of all people.

More than this, these inequities must be understood and critically examined as the effect of systemic failures of our socio-economic order and should be alleviated by working with groups within these various communities (Aronowitz, 2004; Freire, 1968/2000; Giroux, 1983; Weiner 2003). Moreover, addressing these substantive issues of equity must be accompanied by the abandonment of policies that enforce a single standard of achievement that works under the assumption that it can objectively and fairly manufacture academic difference and measure all learning (Portelli & Vibert, 1997). The most glaring and extreme example of this policy is standardized testing such as the EQAO tests in Ontario (Ricci, 2004). However, as I argued, the problem of narrow educational standards is also reflected in the standardization of curriculum and corresponding narrow modes of assessment and evaluation in our schools. In both instances, attempts to manufacture difference in students, while certainly benefitting the educational elite in our education system, have concurrently marginalized many others. Consequently, policy-makers and schools must begin to explore the possibility that more than one standard of achievement, some of which may be evaluative but immeasurable, is needed to grow the talents and embrace the substantive differences between students and between communities.
In terms of my critique of the neoliberal myth and its educational policy, I think an even more radical resistance and abandonment is in order. As I argued in Chapter 6, to embrace the democratic myth and critical democratic praxis does not mean that we abandon the importance of education in developing skills for employment or for training students. Rather, it is my contention that the neoliberal myth and corresponding policies that propagate the view that education is purely an instrument of the market economy and that students should be developed into self-interested, utility-maximizing producers and consumers must be critically resisted and abandoned in their entirety. So harmful are the neoliberal myth and corresponding policies that they have corrupted the notion of quality in education, the aims of education, and the relationship between students and teachers (Apple, 2001, 2004a; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 1983). As I argued throughout Chapter 6, the neoliberal myth is, at its very normative core, fundamentally undemocratic and thus ultimately undermines what I conceive to be the narrative core of the democratic myth and a democratic way of life. Consequently, if we are to take democracy seriously and find the democratic beliefs and values both morally and politically necessary for the individual and collective betterment, then any policies that support the reception and working on the neoliberal myth must be necessarily challenged and resisted with the ultimate aim of this narrative being reoccupied by democratic myth.

Finally, as I have argued throughout this work, if I am correct in my analysis of socio-political myths, more has to be done than critiquing the meritocratic and neoliberal myths and corresponding policies. If we are going to take democracy seriously and embrace democratic myth as an important part of our own and our students’ critical democratic way of life, then we must begin to create educational policies that aim to support, receive, and work on democratic myth. As I suggested in the final chapters of my work, this would include reformulating the curriculum
to include both engagement in substantive issues within our various communities as well as discussion about how the students critically engage in these issues (Portelli & Vibert, 1997).

Additionally, and a related point, as part of contextualizing and particularizing democratic myths within communities, any set of educational policies must ensure that local autonomy is provided to individual boards, schools, administrators, teachers, and students to engage the substantive and relevant issues that are at the narrative core of democratic myth. In this sense, it is essential that while general policies that aim to foster a democratic way of life may be legally set by government institutions, there must be enough educational space and opportunity for local communities and community members to have significant and substantive input on how the democratic myth and critical democratic praxis can be received, worked on, and established within specific communities that have particular needs.

This is not to say that there may be substantial overlap in how particular communities receive the narrative of democracy or to deny the common narrative core inherent in the myth. This being noted, it is evident that as teachers and students engage in the curriculum of life and incorporate a democratic myth into everyday praxis, how they do this may differ significantly in Toronto, Ontario, than from in the small town of Dunnville in rural Ontario. Consequently, policy-makers should resist the temptation to reify a specific conception of democracy and to try to apply a dogmatic version of democracy by creating a standardized curriculum and modes of assessment and evaluation that should be applied nationally or even provincially. In contrast, government agencies should work with communities to use policy to increase the pedagogical autonomy of local communities and community members in order to ensure the unique issues,
challenges, and strengths of the people are reflected in the design and development of schools.

In addition, I think policies both in teachers’ colleges and in schools themselves must encourage a substantive shift in pedagogical philosophy that is consistent with a democratic way of life. And here I appeal to similar radical shifts in education that ruptured the traditional views of how we should teach or even who we should teach. As difficult as it is to imagine, teachers’ colleges and schools must provide policy that explicitly and meaningfully promotes beliefs and actions, whether it be in areas such as discipline or even evaluation, that are consistent with the narrative core of democratic myth. For instance, it is not enough that a teacher is well skilled at teaching geography or mathematics. We need teachers who are well skilled in their required fields and who are equally committed to ensuring educational excellence, including the living and nurturing of a democratic way of life and myth.

As I have argued throughout this work, I am not advocating a system of democratic indoctrination—such as a set of policies that would severely limit the possibility of democratic myth and a democratic way of life from emerging in and through our schools. Rather, I am advocating that policies and a corresponding pedagogical philosophy that takes democracy seriously must promote instructional techniques, relationships between community members, and even the process of creating rules and regulations that embrace a democratic mode of being in the world. A rather obvious example of this would be how schools conceive of the relationship between students and teachers. As I argued, neoliberal policy conceives of the relationship as one between service provider (teachers) and clients (student). However, if we are to embrace democratic myth and a democratic way of life this relational framework fails to capture the deep and profound sense of respect and dignity that democracy offers as a mode of being; nor does it offer the
possibility that teacher and students, despite differing ages and experiences, may learn from one another as they engage in the curriculum of life. Thus, as part of policies and educational discourse, schools must use policies to begin to rearticulate learning as part of a democratic way of life.

On a final note, as I also argued throughout the final chapters of this work, while I certainly advocate the creation and implementation of educational policy as an essential factor in working and receiving the democratic myth in school, it is important to note that it is certainly not sufficient. If we are to understand and embrace democracy as a mode of being in the world, then critical democratic praxis and the reception of democratic myth must be embraced and worked on by one another independent of the policies set out by any community. As such, as educators and advocates for a democratic way of life, we must not fall into the trap of thinking that simple changes in educational policy will necessarily lead to democratic transformation nor the view that inadequate changes to policies necessarily negates the possibility of democratic myth being received and worked on as part of our critical democratic praxis. Therefore, it is our embracing of critical democratic praxis and reception and work on democratic myth that should inform and inspire our policy reforms not vice versa.

9.4 Future Study

It is with this humble optimism that I hope this work can open up further possibilities for the theoretical and pedagogical study of myth. In philosophy of education, while I identified the meritocratic and neoliberal myths as two particularly powerful myths that I have had to engage on a philosophical and practical level while teaching, in no way do I think that my articulation of these myths, and the complexity of their reception and production, is exhausted by any means. Further work in this particular area would entail continued articulation of how the narrative core of these myths embeds themselves within the policy and
practices of our education system. Moreover, as I also noted, another academic possibility is to delve conceptually deeper into how these myths embed themselves within the subjectivity of teachers and students. While this is beyond the limitations of philosophical research, it does not preclude qualitative and quantitative research into how these political myths are received and worked on at a particular level by administrators, teachers, and students alike.

My analysis of the meritocratic and neoliberal myths also opens up the possibility of further analysis of other socio-political myths that have embedded themselves within our education system. Given the complexity of our symbolic order as well as my limited powers of perception, I think that my work has contributed to the long and difficult process of examining different strands of myth that exist or will emerge in the future. If Blumenberg is correct in his understanding of myth, then myths will emerge and perish, return and be recreated ad infinitum within our various communities. If critical democratic educators are to take myth seriously in this substantive way, they must continue to track, understand, and challenge these various myths in our educational communities.

As I noted in the opening of Chapter 7, there is also much philosophic work to be done on understanding and articulating democratic myth. Not only do I think that my articulation of the narrative core of the myth is a beginning is this regard, but I also think that much more can be said on how this myth manifests itself in our communities. In fact, I think that further examination of democratic myth will provide insight into how we might be able to better receive and work on this myth in and through education.

Finally, and here I return to the importance of critical praxis, there is important and invaluable work that must be done in challenging these aforementioned myths and in nurturing democratic myth both within and through schools. It is with great pride I consider myself a teacher who is actively
struggling against these mythic forces while trying to nurture a democratic way of life both in myself and with my students. More than my lengthy analysis of myth being intellectual exercises to continue my merited ascent in academia, it is an articulation of how these myths are real and tangible modes of being that have corrupted both myself, my colleagues, and my students whom I deeply care for. I have seen and experienced these myths as well as the profound and deep damage they have done to both learning and democracy.

In terms of the meritocratic myth, I have experienced how “merited” individual achievement has created unjustified divisions inside the classroom that correspond to the vast inequalities outside of it. Moreover, I have experienced how this system of manufacturing difference through grade distribution has radically reduced learning and the education system into an instrument of individual competition for scarce grades and social capital over the collective betterment of all. For those unmotivated, ill-equipped, or marginalized by this system, the consequences are far greater than low achievement and marks; these students are intentionally limited in their “deserved” socio-economic status in our social order. Engrossed in the meritocratic myth, students and teachers struggle to see one another as fundamental equals; rather, they see each other as individuals who are categorized by their talents and earned social status. They also struggle to see liberty and freedom outside the limits of an education system providing them institutional opportunities to be properly sorted. And they struggle to see how progress should serve the collective empowerment of all people rather than the future socio-economic elite of our society.

I have also personally experienced the harm done by the neoliberal myth. As I noted from my analysis in Chapter 6, it is shocking to experience first-hand the radical transformation of our education system into primarily an instrument of infinite economic growth. The neoliberal myth has turned the students I teach into
self-interested, utility-maximizing clients whom the education system prepares for the “free market” economy. In such an environment, teacher and students do not struggle together to realize a way of life that challenges and engages substantive moral and political problems in our communities. Rather, in such an environment, I am taught that my role as a teacher is to simply motivate students, teach them measurable skills, provide accurate and timely feedback, and, in turn, accurately measure student achievement to ensure that the level of achievement matches the desired outcomes. In doing so, I am supposed to ensure that my students are adequately being prepared for the highly competitive economy, which, in turn, is supposed to guarantee our continued economic progress. In fact, neoliberal myth has become so banal that many of my own students, when asked the purpose and aim of learning, invariably and overwhelmingly respond, “to get a job” and “make some money.”

The harm done by both of these powerful socio-political myths extends well beyond the normative particularities of their narratives. As noted, the problem is not that these two fundamentally undemocratic myths exist per se but rather the accompanying fatalism that both have ushered into the public discourse on education. Both myths have been united with educational policy and institutional norms in a way that has strangled out alternative socio-political myths. For critical democratic pedagogues, both the neoliberal and meritocratic myths have made learning and nurturing a democratic way of life at best a highly irrelevant moral and political add-on that can be taught within our current institutional order and at worst an irrelevant set of ideas that no longer should be openly entertained in discussion of our current education system. And while my students have openly embraced the need to challenge and actively engage substantive social, political, and even environmental issues inherent in communities, the institution and its defenders chug along forcing them to adapt to the status quo.
Moreover, I have also experienced the profound possibility that critical democratic praxis and the myth of democracy have for our schools. Although, at times, the critical democratic voice seems to be a lonely cry set in the wilderness, many teachers and students alike long for an alternative mode of being that can inform our schools and our world (Chomsky, 2000; Freire, 1998; Giroux, 1983; Kozol, 1991; Portelli, 2001); moreover, many of these same teachers and students are equally moved by the need for more rather than less democracy in our lives and institutions. Therefore, a significant amount of work must be done both inside and outside our classrooms if the struggle for democratic progress is to supersede the existing alternatives. I hope, then, that my work offers, even in the smallest sense, the possibility of further clarity and meaningful engagement of lived democracy in our education system. It is this very work and engagement of myth that will have a profound influence on whether democracy will continue to provide mythic unity and significance to our lives and the existing socio-political order, or whether it will become yet another irrelevant story of our distant past.
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