

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Peña, Manuel**, *American Mythologies: Semiological Sketches*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. 2012. 172 pp., \$99.95 hardcover (978-1-4094-4274-5).

Who (still) believes in myths? “Nobody” is a simple answer that comforts our scientific age; “everybody” a more nagging one that can (and should?) still puzzle us. But why should anybody have once believed, or continue to believe, in myths? This is the question almost no one even dares ask — not even Manuel Peña. His book *American Mythologies: Semiological Sketches* draws us into the deconstruction of those myths that nobody deeply believes in, but that everybody seems nevertheless to cling to — that is, before being informed of how we can criticize their semiological formation by associating them with their ideological reification. Of course, with the aid of Roland Barthes’ semiological theory of myth, relayed through a Marxist view of ideology, we can quickly be assured of a solution to the problem: myths are what the dominant class uses to perpetuate its rules in order to reign supreme over the dominated classes. This kind of naïve stance appears to be at the bottom of Peña’s argument. Although his analysis of some myths that circulate in US society proves informative about their genealogies, and to be funny at a distance about their hermeneutic resistance and resilience, it hardly reveals anything we did not already know about their existence *as myths*. In eleven short chapters that analytically tackle one myth each, we are led through the false representations of “corrupted union bosses,” “Wal-Mart’s associates,” the “rags to riches” litany, “Egypt in Las Vegas” and others. These amount to personal portraits the semiologist draws of (arguably false) representations that apparently seem to dupe everyone else in US society (and abroad). True enough, one could argue about the inaccuracy of the representation of the Alamo, particularly regarding the current rhetoric of chauvinistic nationalism that degrades the Mexican version of the story, and especially considering the fact that the proclamation of the Texas’ independence preceding the war would deprive Mexico of about one-half of its territory. But isn’t it common sense (or am I being too generous here?) to look at such rhetoric with slight skepticism, and without replicating the crass ignorance that one would need to believe the “mythified” version as it appears at tourist sites like the shrine

in Texas? As Eric Hobsbawm has forcefully argued in his books on the topic, aren't all national formation stories more or less based on myth?

That pretty much everything — from trucks to nature, from politicians to racism — can make its way into a mythified version is a lesson that we can all benefit from. And although Peña's overt intention in his book is to mimic Barthes' *Mythologies*, first published in 1957, he apparently forgot that when the book was republished in 1970, Barthes wrote a new foreword where he explained that while he could not consider altering the original sketches, he thought that semiological analysis and the critique of ideology had both significantly evolved since the first publication; it would have been necessary to rewrite the entire book to generate a more cogent analysis. It is true that Barthes' initial project of analyzing and criticizing contemporary myths was rather simple: remove the part of them associated with the "meta-language" that blurs the initial connection between signifier and signified, thus building a "second-degree signifier" and opening the way for it to become a myth. Better still: show the bare "facts" that contradict this mythical operation, or expose the true initial connection between the signifier and signified, *et voilà*, the myth is solved. The only problem is that myths still live very active lives, even when their ideological deconstruction has been completed. This is because this deconstructive mechanism must be believed in or not, and it can be contradicted by some appearance of the myth that still gives credibility to it. For example, the fact that the "rags to riches" story is not a universal rule does not preclude the possibility that it can happen to a particular person; hence, there is still a chance that it exists "for real." I do not mean to suggest that we don't need to be retold that certain ideological operations should be exposed (yes, "intelligent design" is just another mask for theism, with a notable political bent towards activism), but can't we ask for a more nuanced understanding of the various mechanisms at play to be more convinced of how we think about things and their representations today? The critique of US myths, after all, is not entirely new, extending from Daniel Boorstin's critique of the delusions of the American Dream in its new "image forms" in the early 1960s, to Baudrillard's ecstatic semiology in *America* and Eco's amusing *Travels in Hyperreality* in the 1980s (not forgetting Lacan's powerful argument about the always elusive movements of the signifier, nor Ernst Cassirer's understanding of mythical thought as a symbolic form and anthropological disposition). But semiological analyses of American myths have also often included an extended sociological dimension, as for instance in Jeffrey C. Alexander's "strong program" of cultural sociology, which insists on a Durkheimian approach to religion in order to help us understand the functionality and relevance of rituals in contemporary society.

In any of these cases, the reality of myths is at stake, but even more to the point, the actual belief in them is made plausible. Peña's book is an interesting addition to this discussion, but there are several crucial dimensions that are left out, and he glosses over the fact that the reality of myths is a more complex issue than a mere semiological operation of mystification suggests.

*Université du Québec à Montréal*

Jean-François Côté

*Jean-François Côté* is Full professor of Sociology at UQAM, codirector of the Groupe interdisciplinaire de recherche sur les Amériques (GIRA – INRS, Urbanisation, culture et société) and series editor of *Américana* series at Presses de l'Université Laval. He has edited and coedited books (J.F. Côté, A. Deneault, eds., *Georg Simmel et les sciences de la culture*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2010 ; J.F. Côté, F. Lesemann, eds., *La construction des Amériques aujourd'hui. Regards croisés, transnationaux et transdisciplinaires*, Montréal, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2009 ; J.F. Côté, E. Tremblay, eds., *Le nouveau récit des frontières dans les Amériques*, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2005) and published a book (J.F.Côté, *Le triangle d'Hermès. Poe, Stein, Warhol, figures de la modernité esthétique*, Bruxelles, La lettre volée, 2003) and numerous articles on U.S. and other American societies.

[cote.jean-francois@uqam.ca](mailto:cote.jean-francois@uqam.ca)