

Introduction

*Can everything, then, be a myth?
Yes, I believe this, for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestion.
(Roland Barthes, Mythologies)*

This special, anniversary volume of *Ad Americam* is different from the previous volumes, which included texts from various areas of American Studies and were not focused on any particular topic or subject. However, at the same time it somehow corresponds with the first issues in which the editorial concept assumed a selection of articles joined by some overriding idea or problem. For many reasons, the idea was abandoned, but it has now been resumed with this special issue.

The idea of an American Studies journal appeared 15 years ago from the desire to know America better, to confront our ideas with the ideas of others, and a willingness to exchange thoughts and thus explore new aspects of American culture, politics, history and present reality. Thanks to the texts we have published, we have come closer to America (*Ad Americam*), a distant, huge and very complex country with a multi-ethnic society and complicated history. As researchers of America in a distant country, "outsiders," we hoped to present our different and unique perspective and to turn the attention of our readers to what cannot be seen from inside, from the center of America. We wanted to go beyond the cliché views and strategies that define and interpret America, in order to know but not succumb to the American myths. This is why the anniversary issue of *Ad Americam* is focused on a subject that allows us to understand America better, while at the same time distorting its image – American myths.

Professor Ira Chernus claims that American culture, politics, and history are full of myths which enter into various relationships with each other:

Small-scale myth is part of one or (more often) several larger-scale myths, which are in turn parts of ever larger myths, creating an interlocking web of hierarchies. For example, the Mayflower's landing (and the Rock itself) are part of the Pilgrim myth, which is in turn part of the Puritan myth, which becomes part of a series of larger-scale myths: religious freedom, New England, the self-sufficient farmer, group heroism, conflict with the native peoples, democracy, the frontier, the Kingdom of God on earth, etc. (*The Two Great*)

This "interlocking web of hierarchies" creates American mythology. In other words, myths do not exist separately, and a mythology is not merely a simple set of

myths, but the relationships between myths are complex. In the published essays, American and Canadian myths are analyzed from two perspectives. The first is an attempt to look at a myth and its importance from an American or Canadian perspective, showing the role that myth plays in these societies. The second perspective is the Polish perspective, examining and interpreting American myths from the position of Polish culture participants.

As soon as America appeared on maps in the late 15th century, it captured the imagination of Europeans. Most of them built up a picture of a newly discovered continent on the basis of scanty reports by the first travelers. As time passed, there were more and more sources of information about America: personal letters, oral transmissions and, finally, mass media messages: newspapers, photography, film, television and the Internet. Even today in the 21st century, in a shrinking world where the journey across the ocean takes only 8 hours, most Poles have not visited the United States or Canada, and they create an image of these countries mainly on the basis of mass media texts: news, films, TV shows, etc.; nowadays the media is responsible for generating new myths and preserving old ones. In Poland, American myths were always very popular and powerful.

The USA has always been attractive as a place where a person is able to escape from poverty at his/her own initiative or develop freely his/her abilities and talents. This has made America so appealing not only for many people from developing countries, but for anybody who has believed they could make better careers when they cross the Atlantic. Since Poland in the 19th and 20th centuries remained an underdeveloped country, the majority of Polish people always considered the United States as economically attractive. The migration from Poland to the USA was motivated by the same economic factors as in the cases of other poor countries, such as Italy and Ireland. Thus, the USA appeared for Polish people as a country of freedom and wealth. This common belief that the American model of development and "way of life" guaranteed prosperity and freedom for everyone was only strengthened in the communist period. It happened in spite of communist propaganda which tried to present the United States as a country of social inequalities and oppression.

In the communist era, the mythical image of America was confronted with our grim reality. Contestation and rebellion against communism had roots in ideas of a better, free world. These values were identified in Polish people's minds with the United States. For Poles, no other country in the Western world embodied freedom and prosperity as totally as the United States. Not surprisingly, some American myths played an equally important role after 1989, allowing Poles to draw patterns and inspiration for building a new Poland. It is worth remembering here the words of the US ambassador to Poland, John Davis, who wrote in a telegram to the Department of State a few days before President Bush's visit to Poland: "Landing in Warsaw, the President finds himself in the center of the world's most pro-American country. Poles have always shared our love of individual freedom." One should not forget that the myths which have been so alive in Poland have also defined the US's depiction in other countries.

What is a myth, then? Can it be extracted in a pure form from the net of mythological entanglements, seeing that the individual texts in this volume are devoted to various, sometimes very small components of huge and complex American mythological narratives? There are many definitions of myth and many strategies to explain it.

According to Chernus, "Myth is a story, compounded of fact and fiction." Robertson, in his book *American Myth, American Reality*, claims that myths are stories, or, to be more precise, they are extracted from stories (XV). For us, the most universal and easy to apply is Roland Barthes's theory of myth, according to which myth is a communication system. Myth communicates. It does not just tell stories, but communicates deeper meanings and provides explanations of inexplicable phenomena. Thanks to Barthes, we understand myth as a system of signification, a second-order semiological system which feeds on primary-order communication systems such as language. Myth simplifies and deforms primary senses and robs language of its original, innocent meaning to become a vehicle of ideologies. They arise from specific power structures and therefore are useful for maintaining societies. American mythology no doubt is a powerful tool in building American identity. But it is equally important in creating images of the country and its citizens in the eyes and minds of the rest of the world. In this situation, a myth can be easily taken for a stereotype, a certain "picture in our head," as Walter Lipmann argued. What is the relationship between myth and stereotype?

In terms of a sociological approach, a stereotype is understood as a false generalization, superstition or prejudice, but according to Lippmann's definition, a stereotype is also a message and performs a vital communication role. Zbigniew Benedyktowicz, in his persuasive argumentation, claims that a myth and a stereotype should be considered on the same plane. For Benedyktowicz, a stereotype is a "myth of simplified and reversed proportions" (33). When a myth is full of tension, drama, or solemnity, the stereotype can be reduced to a joke or caricature. There is no secret or depth in a stereotype – there is only an unequivocal interpretation and unequivocal assessment.

Another important term often associated with myth is a symbol, which, according to Barthes, is also a communication system, but unlike myth it belongs to the primary semiological system. Ricoeur, however, finds very close relations between myth and symbol: "Symbols are more radical than myths. I... regard myths as a species of symbols, as symbols developed in the form of narrations and articulated in a time and a space that cannot be coordinated with the time and space of history and geography" (18). In the essays we publish, some authors concentrate more on stereotypes or symbols. Having in mind that all three concepts are messages communicating something fundamental about the worldview and the values of the people who use them, we believe that analyzing an image of *America* also from the perspective of symbol and stereotype is justified. We have to remember also that myths, symbols and stereotypes are always inspired and motivated by reality. Chernus argues:

American myths have been and still are nearly all influenced by the rationalist culture of the Enlightenment. So they usually have a larger component of truth than the myths of ancient cultures. Our national myths draw on empirical facts from all aspects of public life – political, economic, cultural, moral, and more – and create a complex interplay among them, creating a sense of the nation and its life as a unified, harmonious whole (*The Meaning*).

American civilization, however strongly rooted in European culture, is different from the "motherland." Students of American culture, history and politics often face myths which are, as we indicated above, based on factual elements of that

phenomenon, and which “occupy” the imagination of societies. Research tries to explain the roots of these myths and analyze to what extent a myth corresponds with reality, since – after all – a myth grows because a civilization, nation or society has a unique nature. To make the whole picture even more complicated, one should add to the long list of *myths* an equally long list of *stereotypes*. Stereotypes often falsify reality but may also complete the message which constitutes a myth’s sense.

The authors who contributed to this volume have made an attempt to explain the nature of various American myths and discuss American symbols and stereotypes. We intended to present American mythology from different angles. One may find in this volume American social, cultural and historical myths and stereotypes constructed, analyzed and deconstructed by scholars using tools which belong to various disciplines.

The essay by Mateusz Bogdanowicz may be seen as a kind of introduction to the whole collection of essays. The author, without going into detail, looks at American myths as a phenomenon which influences the modern world in the era of globalization. Discussing the definition of myth and referring to American myth as a particular concept, he presents the influence of American symbols in the process of creating needs, expectations and – finally – products, both material and immaterial. He states, however, that one of the traits of the American myth is its impossibility of fulfillment; the promise of a better life, wealth, and the promise of getting “something” derived from that myth remains unfulfilled. Still, as the author proves, the American myth has a unique appeal.

Marcin Gajek, on the other hand, returns to the time when the first American myths were born and discusses the very first and most important and fundamental (it is justified to say: founding) myth of American democracy: equality. Focusing on the interpretation of that principle by Abraham Lincoln, he writes about two canonical documents in American history: the Declaration of Independence (where the equality clause was expressed) and the Gettysburg Address (where it was interpreted). The author discusses the genesis of the American nation and intentions of the authors of the Declaration of Independence. He leans towards the interpretation that only the Constitution created the American nation and that the Declaration is often interpreted through our expectations – thus the interpretations go too far. The equality clause did not bear the same meaning at that time as was attributed to it later by Lincoln and his contemporaries; Gajek reduces its role to “justification of a separation” rather than a constitutional principle. It was Lincoln’s Address, argues the author, that permanently changed the way of understanding the equality principle in American political thought and jurisdiction.

The social context of American mythology is discussed by several authors of the volume who try to analyze various aspects of the presence, use or re-use of myths or stereotypes in American societies or as interpreted from a Polish perspective. Ewa Grzeszczyk, starting from the assumptions of Barthes’s theory, tries to undermine the myth of American social mobility otherwise known as the American myth of success, which is described by the formula “from rags to riches” and is included in one of the great American meta-narratives called the American Dream. The author, referring to a variety of research studies and publications, shows how media messages still promote the ease and obviousness of achieving American success, despite research results clearly showing that not every hardworking American reaches

success and advances up the social ladder. What's more, American social mobility is not exceptional and does not differ from other areas of the world.

The social function of myths is analyzed by Tomasz Basiuk, who focuses on the issue of gay identity and its expression in American and Polish societies. Although these two societies are different from each other, and the process of gay emancipation began far later in Poland than in the USA, one may also observe similarities. The author writes about the process of gay minority inclusion in American society on the basis of legal changes which took place in the United States. He writes on the issue of *visibility* crucial for the process of change in the social attitude towards a minority's rights. *Coming out*, broadly defined, is discussed through the perspective of American and Polish social, political and cultural experience.

A very unusual approach to American mythology is presented by Joanna Dmuchala who, when writing about the fate of the first Polish immigrant, refers to two myths – the first is the myth of America as an open, democratic country, which turns out to be a disappointment for immigrant women from Eastern Europe. The second is the stereotype of nineteenth-century femininity: common views on the social roles of women at this time limited to filling the roles of mother and wife, and being passive, uneducated and reliant on their husbands. The cases described in the text show how far from the truth these stereotypes were.

Joanna Wojdon also discusses the problem of emigration, but from a completely different perspective. Basing her study on a thorough content analysis, the author discusses images of the Polish diaspora in the USA presented in the Polish communist press. The author convincingly shows how communist propaganda employed a variety of myths and stereotypes, and combined them in order to create a desired negative image of the Polish community in the United States. Because the United States was ideologically hostile to the Polish authorities at the time, Poles living in the USA automatically became enemies of the Polish People's Republic.

Although Canadian mythology constitutes the area of Łukasz Albański's discussion, the author also touches the problem of myth-creating operations used for persuasive purposes. He discusses the functional use of the Canadian frontier myth by settlement propaganda encouraging the colonization of Western Canada.

Magdalena Paluszkiewicz-Misiaczek also focuses on Canadian mythology but describes the myths created from a Polish perspective. This time Canada is the subject of myth-creating operations, and the author reproduces the basic myths about Canada, its nature and society that emerged in the perceptions of Poles, based on popular literature written either by Canadian authors published in Poland (Lucy Maud Montgomery) or Polish authors who wrote about Canada (Arkady Fiedler) and whose literary images of the maple leaf country shaped the notions of Poles about Canada for many years.

Paluszkiewicz-Misiaczek's text takes us to the area of cultural studies. According to Roland Barthes, popular culture is mainly responsible for creating and operating contemporary myths. Popular movies, advertising, songs and popular literature are endless sources of postmodern myths dominating the imaginations of millions of people worldwide. This is explicitly shown by Dawid Przywalny's text about myths created by American comic books, which the author treats as a treasury full of stories and images important for Americans. Comic books, Przywalny argues, became a new form (one of many popular culture forms) in which myths are constructed

and deconstructed: the lives of immigrants, the Cold War and the Vietnam War are presented in a popular form and have become myths themselves.

While comics are studied primarily as generators of myths for Americans, Jolanta Szymkowska-Bartyzel's text shows how the myth of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle has functioned in Polish culture. The author shows how certain areas of the Harley-Davidson's history have been appropriated by popular culture and have created the myth of a rebellious machine, which in Poland was perceived as the essence of Americanness and was used as a symbol of both youth rebellion and political resistance.

The mythopoetic effect of popular culture is perfectly illustrated by Paweł Laidler, who analyzes myths that have grown up around the jury system through American mainstream movies that present the institution in a very specific, conventional manner far from the judicial reality.

The political dimension of American mythology is also analyzed. The authors write both on the nature of American myths which exist in such an area and the use of those myths as a political tool. Robert Kłosowicz analyzes the American institution as it is seen through popular culture texts. He writes about the presence of marines as a symbol of American power, devotion and effectiveness, and aptly points out that although such forces exist in many countries of the world, only in the USA are marines a symbol widely identified with their Mother Country. Kłosowicz presents the birth of the formation, its structural evolution and its growth to its present position as one of the main tools of US foreign policy, but also as a very rare military force which, through various cultural texts, inspires the popular imagination to a great extent. Moreover, marines perfectly symbolize the superpower status of the United States as a military and moral force (Kłosowicz evokes the role of the marines in the Second World War).

Zinovia Lialiouti also discusses political aspects of myths, but does so in connection with the role of the USA's image in the foreign policy of Dwight David Eisenhower's administration. The author presents the phenomenon of cultural diplomacy in the context of the Cold War which determined the policy of both superpowers in practically every dimension. The political and economic rivalry of the United States and the USSR had an ideological aspect, and it was equally important for both superpowers to be able to challenge the rival politically as to be appealing to the rest of the world. Zinovia Lialiouti focuses on a case study of the Eisenhower administration that tried to prevent the decrease of American appeal in the world, which could be observed in the 1950s. The US administration began to develop propaganda and cultural diplomacy as important tools of foreign policy. All propaganda has to rely on an affirmative image of the propagandist – the USA, in this case.

Marcin Fatalski writes about one of the myths of the contemporary revolution – Ernesto Che Guevara. There are not many people whose public recognition is comparable to this hero of Cuban, Latin American and even world revolution. Guevara leaves no one indifferent – for many people he embodies the values of the Left: a fight for the rights of those who are underprivileged and excluded. For others, he was one of the architects of Cuban dictatorship, responsible for the poverty and oppression that the new regime created. Fatalski discusses the source and nature of Guevara's popularity. Che is constantly present in culture (including popular culture, where his image as a symbol of anti-capitalism has become a "product") and

political debate. The author tries to analyze the cause of this myth and confront it with reality.

The twentieth century has been described as the “American century,” and some years ago many people prophesied the fall of the American empire and an emergence of new powers. But today, when the world is in turmoil, the United States remains the only superpower. It seems that American values, ideas and finally myths, will remain a point of reference and inspiration for people of various backgrounds for a long time to come.

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