

# The Pot at the end of the Rainbow : Political Myth and the Ecological Crisis

TIMOTHY DOYLE

**A constant theme of discussion which attempts to overcome the environmental crisis on this planet revolves around the necessity for both changes to the structure of political processes and individual or group attitudes. Both of these are important. Attitudes and politics will not change, however, if the bedrock of unassailable truths—myths—remain unquestioned. It is this bedrock of ideas which constantly legitimates both social and political structures and compatible attitudes, values and goals. In short, myth is the basis for ideology and political organisation.**

First, this paper investigates the concept of political myth. It contends that it is not the purpose of the student of myth to 'uncover' and then to present an ultimate 'scientific', 'ecological' 'truth' to overcome the crisis. Instead, myth appears to be a necessary thread of history.

This research, then, attempts to seek out myths which have outlived their social and political context and, secondly, replace these myths with a new one, more appropriate to a new age.

As a consequence, three myths which may be contributing to the ecological crisis are singled out: 'History Always Repeats'; 'The Universe is Infinite'; and 'You Can't Stop Progress'.

After the historical processes are investigated which have elevated these maxims to the status of myth, a new myth will be presented: 'The Myth of the Pot at the End of the Rainbow'. This myth, when inculcated into the youth of the late Second Millennium, will help avert the ecological crisis.

## **Ideology and Political Myth**

Martin Seliger, in his comprehensive work on ideology and politics,

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TIMOTHY DOYLE is lecturer in Politics and Sociology, Deakin University, Warrnambol, Victoria, Australia.

divides ideology into two separate categories: restrictive and inclusive. Restrictive ideology is based around the traditional Marxian definition, which limits the use of the term to 'specific belief systems'<sup>1</sup>. Marx described as 'ideological' any 'set of political *illusions* that have been produced by the social experience of a class'. To Marx, ideologies were illusions fed by the owners of the modes of production to the masses in efforts to keep the latter deluded, 'content with a difficult if not intolerable condition'.<sup>2</sup>

This restrictive view of ideology has been widely used in the social sciences when interpreting diverse social phenomena. Basically, it views ideology as strictly serving the interests of the ruling elite. In a recent example of literature aimed at understanding the sociology of the mass media, ideology was defined in the following fashion:

It stated that the ideas that were dominant in any historical period would always be those of the ruling class. This was not a matter of deliberately hoodwinking people; rather, the bourgeoisie would naturally expect other social classes to view society in the same way that they did and had the power and influence to promote this kind of influence.<sup>3</sup>

The second category of ideology—inclusive—is far broader in its interpretation. Ideology is not the exclusive domain of the dominant class; instead, it includes belief systems, values, symbols, myths, goals, motivations, and the like, found in all social systems. Ideology is the intellectual baggage of all persons regardless of position, prestige, and power.

I see strengths in both views of ideology. Ideology is inclusive in the sense that it can be generated by members of all classes and all groupings. On occasions it is also restrictive: the ideology of dominant groupings is often stronger than that of others, resulting in political activity which necessarily serves dominant interests.

Myths are defined here as a sub-set of a political entity's ideology. Whether one has a restrictive or inclusive view of ideology also determines what type of definition is given to 'myth'. For example, numerous Marxian interpretations of political myth are often restrictive, myth being determined solely by the bourgeoisie and utilised as a tool with which to repress the proletariat. Inclusive theories of myth, as with likewise definitions of ideology, are similarly broad.

One of the earliest available references to restrictive political myth occurs in the pages of Plato's *Republic*. In Book Three, Plato discusses his three classes of Athenian society and their mutual relations. He writes of his idea to subdivide the Guardian class into Guardian proper, or Rulers, and Auxiliaries. The Rulers are the supreme commanders of the State, whereas the latter, as close as can be translated, are the administrators: the bureaucrats. Plato wrote of a society relatively free of nepotism: a society with mobility amongst the classes based solely on merit. In short, the very 'best' individuals would become Rulers and others would be distributed

between the lesser classes, regardless of ancestral position. The following, lengthy quotation is taken from *The Republic*, as Plato unravels his 'magnificent myth' to his alter ego. It reads:

'Now I wonder if we could contrive one of those convenient stories we were talking about a few minutes ago', I asked, 'some magnificent myth that would in itself carry conviction to our whole community, including, if possible, the Guardians themselves?'

'What sort of story?'

'Nothing new—a fairy story like those the poets tell about the sort of thing that often happened "one upon a time", but never does now: indeed, if it did, I doubt if people would believe it without a lot of persuasion, though they believe the poets.'

'And seem to be hesitating to tell us more', he said.

'And when I do you will understand my hesitation,' I assured him.

'Never mind,' he replied, 'tell us'.

'I will,' I said, 'though I don't know how I'm to find the courage or the words to do so. I shall try to persuade first the Rulers and Soldiers (i.e. the Auxiliaries), and then the rest of the community that the upbringing and education we have given them was all something that happened only in a dream. In reality they were fashioned and reared, and their arms and equipment manufactured, in the depths of the earth, and Earth herself, their mother, brought them up, when they were complete, into the light of day; so now they must think of the land in which they live as their mother and protect her if she is attacked, while their fellow citizens they must regard as brothers born of the same mother earth.'

'No wonder you were ashamed to tell your story', he commented. I agreed it was indeed no wonder, but asked him to listen to the rest of the story.

'We shall,' I said, 'address our citizens as follows:

'You are, all of you in this land, brothers. But when God fashioned you, he added gold in the composition of those of you who are qualified to be Rulers; he put silver in the Auxiliaries, and iron and bronze in the farmers and the rest. Now since you are all of the same stock, though children will commonly resemble their parents, occasionally a silver child will be born of golden parents, and so on. Therefore the first and most important of God's commandments to the Rulers is that they must exercise their function as Guardians with particular care in watching the mixture of metals in the characters of the children. If one of their own children has bronze or iron in his make-up they must harden their hearts, and degrade it to the ranks of the industrial and agricultural class where it properly belongs: similarly, if a child of this class is born with gold or silver in its nature, they will promote it appropriately to be a

Guardian or Auxiliary. For they know that there is a prophecy that the State will be ruined when it has Guardians of silver or bronze.' 'That is the story. Do you think there is any way of making them believe it?'

'Not in the first generation', he said, 'but you might succeed with the second and later generations.'

'Even so it should serve to increase their loyalty to the state and to each other. For I think that's what you mean.'<sup>4</sup>

According to the translator of *The Republic*, H.P.D. Lee. Plato's 'magnificent myth' has been criticised in the past as it is evidence that Plato 'countenances political propaganda of the most unscrupulous kind'.<sup>5</sup> The term 'propaganda', like myth and ideology, has numerous definitions. Usually; however, the term presupposes that the persuasive action will be more advantageous to the persuader than the persuadee.<sup>6</sup>

It is evident that Plato perceived that a myth is a story which has been created with conscious aforethought. To Plato, it seems that political systems require supernatural stories to justify them. These stories are an integral part of societal tradition providing an intellectual and spiritual bedrock where ambiguities and inconsistencies remain clouded and distorted. A Platonian definition of the Christian Bible, for example, would be that it was thought up by a number of clever men who consciously tried to impose a particular order onto a given society, using a collection of stories. They pretended these stories were sent to them by some supernatural force who knew all. This factor of conscious and deliberate aforethought separates Plato's utilisation of the term myth from a number of more recent definitions which will be discussed later.

Although the 'magnificent myth' is designed to replace the traditions of all three classes, without favour to any, the myth itself is developed by Plato a member of the Academy, an Athenian school for statesmen; part of, no doubt, the class of Guardians Proper. The question must be asked, therefore, 'Are members of the elite class—the Guardians Proper—capable of developing a political myth which does not favour their own class?' Some structuralist arguments would suggest not. This restrictive quality of Plato's 'magnificent myth' shares significant traits with Marxian definitions.

Although not a Marxist himself, Murray Edelman shares this restrictive, structural view of myth. Edelman explains that a myth is 'a collective belief that is built up in response to the wishes of the group rather than an analysis of the wishes'.<sup>7</sup> Myths, therefore, are based on what people want. Edelman would argue that they inevitably reflect what the ruling class wants and in turn, these are diffused throughout the community. Edelman does not suggest that 'elites consciously mould political myths to serve their own ends'. Instead, he would say that myths having evolved from a specific political system, reinforce what is already established, while at the same time denounce alternative idea systems.<sup>8</sup>

### Nineteenth Century Myths

The 'common sense', Western definition of myth still used in the latter part of the twentieth century is largely derived from the previous century, when myth was interpreted as 'fable', 'invention', or 'fiction'.<sup>9</sup> This 19th Century definition differs from archaic usage of the term. For example, although Plato may have consciously created a story, in no way did this story constitute an 'untruth' in the Judaeo-Christian sense. The myth, to Plato, remained a most precious story due to its 'sacred, exemplary, significant' nature. Indeed, it was the dominance of Judaeo-Christianity, coupled with the global power of the British Empire at this point in history, which 'put the stamp of "falsehood" and "illusion" on whatever was not justified or validated by the two testaments'.<sup>10</sup>

In this sense, then, myths included many tales and stories evolving from all cultures which were not part of industrial Europe. The industrial revolution, wrote Durkheim, had atomised society into a mass of individuals.<sup>11</sup> Durkheim wrote of 'anomie': the dissolution of longstanding societal structures which did not fit in with the industrial regime. One hastens to add that at this time much folklore and myth would have been replaced by a new mechanised, highly rationalised society which did not tolerate as 'truth' any idea which did not fit in neatly with its new designs.

This common sense definition of myth began to alter in academic circles—according to Eliade—in the first or second decade of this century. It was soon discovered that industrial Europe also had its own myths which were not necessarily any closer to a metaphysical truth than myths of another culture or time. 'Myth' began to be used in a way which was similar to its archaic origins; as a 'true story'. Eliade writes:

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the "beginnings". In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality—an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behaviour, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a "creation"; it relates how something was produced, began to *be*. Myth tells only of that which *rally* happened, which manifested itself completely.<sup>12</sup>

Myth, in this sense, is a sacred story and a 'true history', as it only deals with 'realities'.

The development of myth as a definition and a concept has come one step further since Eliade's writings in the early 'sixties. Whereas Eliade argues 'that modern man preserves at least some residues of "mythological behaviour"; writers such as Roland Barthes take this point much further by insisting that modern humanity has created complex systems and languages which harbour a multitude of myths.<sup>13</sup>

Three points must be drawn from Barthes' definition of myth. First, in a

comparative sense, myths are quite different from the Marxist idea of 'false consciousness'. Briefly, Marx wrote that a proper understanding of history would 'give the proletariat a guide for the future'.<sup>14</sup> Through the establishment of a science which was truly proletarian, the masses would find a way out of their 'false consciousness' which resulted—amongst other things—from the alienation between themselves and their produce. Drucker writes :

One prerequisite of this science is an "unmasking of human self-alienation"—the task which Marx's theory of ideology is supposed to accomplish. Given this unmasking, all will be clear: "It is the task of history, therefore, once the other world of truth has vanished to establish the truth of this world".<sup>15</sup>

Marx believed that his own writings did not constitute ideology, but rather an historical, immovable truth. As myth has so far been utilised as a sub-set of ideology (though this relationship is defined differently by others), Marx would also argue that the *Communist Manifesto* was also removed from myth. In comparison to false consciousness, and although myth does comprise sacred truths, these truths change depending on the social context at a given time and place.

Perhaps Barthes' view of myth is more like Mannheim's interpretation of false consciousness? Mannheim held in high regard Marx's ideas on the subject, but felt Marx had failed to view his own work in a similar fashion.<sup>16</sup> In the sceptical traditions of the Sophists, Mannheim discouraged the belief in ultimate, static truths. Instead, Mannheim expressed the opinion that 'no idea... is strictly congruent with reality, nor is there any such thing as disinterested or abstract thought; all ideas are a more or less pathological expression of social discontent'.<sup>17</sup>

As mythical truth is a relative concept, only existing at any given time, it cannot hide 'real' truth, as Marx's false consciousness does. Barthes suggests that myths do not hide anything. Instead, they distort and legitimise a current truth. Myth must always exist in all societies; it is not something which Barthes would want to rid of altogether, as Marx does false consciousness. Myth only may become dangerous, as I later contend, when it outlives its usefulness in its everchanging social context. In this case, the myth—instead of being the result of societal intercourse begins to demand conformity to its own sacred story, although society is no longer able to comfortably function within its confines.

The second point which needs to be explored in Barthes' writings on myth centres on the relationship which myth characterises between history and nature. The primary reason given by Barthes for writing his work relates to his resentment of 'newspapers, art and common sense' confusing historical reality and nature. He summarises :

What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined, even if this goes back quite a while, by the way in which men have produced or used it and what myth gives in return is a *natural* image

of this reality .... Myth does not deny things. on the contrary. its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.<sup>18</sup>

Myth is the lowest common denominator in any dialogue. Myths are the answer to life's foremost riddles; for they are riddles in themselves which no-one seeks an answer to. Amongst this strange form of riddle lies many ambiguities and conflicting ideas; but within the myth, these ideas seem clean, coherent and simple: they are the 'truths' of our time. The author is reminded here of a typical discussion between a parent and a child which supports the myth. It reads as follows:

Child : Why are humans more important than animals ?

Parent : Because God made them so.

Child : Why do people make war between themselves ?

Parent : It's just human nature.

Child : Why?

Parent : It goes without saying.

Child : Why ?

Parent : It's just a fact of life.

This brings the discussion to the third characteristic of myth which Barthes elucidates: myth is superbly economical. Complexities are reduced to one line principles.

In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialects, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.<sup>19</sup>

### **Characteristics of Myth**

As illustrated, there are numerous different works on myth, and each of these works has its own unique interpretation of the term. Nine characteristics taken from these works and others are combined in this section to provide my working definition of myth for the purposes of later investigation.

1. Myths can be both inclusive and restrictive depending on circumstances. All societies and all groupings within these societies may have their own myths. The myths of the powerful often dominate.
2. Myths are economical. In their shortest sense, they are best expressed as a maxim or a cliché.
3. Myths connect cultural history with what is 'natural'. Myths relate to what is 'beyond knowing'.
4. Myths can be both deliberately perpetrated in an instrumentalist

- fashion and, also, myths can be established unconsciously.
5. Myths, following on from the last point, 'express unconscious wishes which are somehow inconsistent with conscious experience'.<sup>20</sup>
  6. Myths are widely understood.
  7. Myths are rarely questioned.
  8. A myth usually has consequences, 'but not the ones it literally proclaims'<sup>21</sup>
  9. Myths exist as a necessary part of life: the purpose is not to get rid of them altogether, as if to uncover a scientific 'reality': but when they outlive their usefulness to the activist, they must be uncovered and replaced with stories which are more fitting. A myth which is unsuitable to a given historical period may severely limit political and social action.

### **Myth and the Ecological Crisis**

The existence of the ecological crisis is perceived by some as the *raison d'être* of the conservation movement. Within this particularly relevant context of this crisis the discussion of myth will continue.

The final characteristic of myths—point nine—is crucial to the understanding of the remaining discussion. This point claims that it should not be the purpose of the theorist and the activist to first of all uncover and then to present an overt truth. Instead, myth appears to be a necessary thread of history. The student of political myth must attempt to seek out myths which have outlived their social context and, secondly, propose new myths more appropriate to a new age.

The first part of the process—identifying myths—is extremely difficult. The student of myth operates within a society which is often inseparable from the myths upon which it is based. In fact, I would contend that a myth which is truly harmonious with a given time and place is impossible to identify by a dweller of that same socio-spatial dimension. Again, it must be stressed, it is only when myths continue to exist beyond their time of meaning that they begin to emerge not as eternal truths, but as truths established by an historical process. Even so, their identification remains quite difficult.

I have identified three myths which, by their resilient and anachronistic nature, may be contributing to the ecological crisis which faces the Earth in the latter years of the second millennium.

A constant theme of discussion which attempts to halt environmental degradation of this planet revolves around the necessity for both changes to the structure of political processes and individual or group attitudes. Both of these areas are important. These will rarely change, however, if the bedrock of unassailable truths—myths—are rarely questioned. It is this bedrock which constantly legitimates both political structures and compatible attitudes, values and goals. In short, myth is the basis for ideology and political organisation.



**Myth 1 : 'History Always Repeats'**

The myth of an ever-repeating history was first taught to me at secondary school, as the prime justification for the learning of history. Each year, the first class would invariably begin as follows:

Teacher : Today we will learn why the study of history is relevant to our everyday lives.

Following this cue, the teacher would scribble on the blackboard: 'History Always Repeats.'

This seemed, at the time, to be an unassailable and irreproachable fact: an utter fact. The logic followed on from this 'fact'. If we could learn lessons from the past, then, we could gain far more control over our destiny.

There is no doubt that some present day experiences share similar characteristics with ones in the past. Indeed, some lessons can be learned from the past. But it was the all-consuming nature of this adage which was impressed upon our young minds. Nothing new would evolve. Aristotle's *Politics* was recited to us in an interpreted fashion: '... all ideas of any value have already been discovered and tried'.<sup>22</sup>

Even Aristotle, however, did not have any logical basis for his assumption. He repeated this idea in passing, 'as if it was so generally accepted that it needed no support'.<sup>23</sup> Already, historical repeatability had reached the magnitude of myth.

These 'cyclical' theories of history have even more ancient origins. The idea that all events occur in cycles which are more or less alike existed in some form in ancient India, in Babylonia, and in Greece. Boas makes the conjecture;

The notion of the rhythmical recurrence of cosmic events may well have developed out of the characteristics of the solar year, the periodicity of the lunar phases, the round of the seasons in regular order, the life cycle of the individual human being. That the idea of birth, maturation, senility, and death followed by rebirth, maturation, senility, and death followed by rebirth interested the ancients is shown by the many myths and rites in which this series of events is figured.<sup>24</sup>

This view of existence has been utilised by philosophers and thinkers right up to the present day. The concept of an ever-repeating cosmic and human history has been utilised in the writings of Hegel, Marx and Michels, among others. In the case of Marx there is a rather popular quotation taken, often unknowingly, from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.

Hegel says somewhere that all great events and personalities in world history reappear in one fashion or another. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, and the second as farce.<sup>25</sup>

The repetitious view of history is often presented hand in hand with pessimistic theories of existence. The elite theories of Robert Michels are

excellent examples. His idea that democracy was futile and that elitism was inevitable was grounded in his empirical view of human history. In *Political Parties*, the following words are found:

The democratic currents of history resemble successive waves. They break ever on the same shoal. They are ever renewed.<sup>26</sup>

The problem with the myth of the 'eternal recurrence' is that it breeds pessimism such as Michels'. If history always repeats, then the future is severely limited. Arnold Toynbee argues that there have been twenty-six civilisations so far in human history. All have failed to overcome major stimuli, which he terms 'challenges', and have ceased to exist because of this.<sup>27</sup>

The ecological crisis may be the challenge which confronts the survival of this civilisation; but how can the ecological crisis be averted if the die of history has already been cast? This view of human struggle limits certain ecopolitical initiatives; simply because these initiatives have either not worked in the past, or they have not been tried and tested. Anyway, as the myth goes, history always repeats, that's just the way it is.

Those who attempt to break out of the confines of the myth suffer criticism from the pragmatists, the realists, the incrementalists, and the proponents of 'common sense' who remain firmly entrenched within the myth.

The myth of ever-repeating human history has become quite dangerous. It has outgrown its social and political context. Historical shackles may have to be unleashed if the ecological crisis is to be survived. At the conclusion of this chapter a myth which is suitable for these new times will be introduced.

## **Myth 2 : The Universe is Infinite**

At that moment another dismal scream rent the air and Zaphod shuddered.

"What can do that to a guy?" he breathed.

"The Universe," said Gargravarr simply, "the whole infinite Universe. The infinite suns, the infinite distances between them and yourself an invisible dot on an invisible dot, infinitely small."

"Hey, I'm Zaphod Beeblebrox, man, you know," muttered Zaphod trying to flap the last remnants of his ego.<sup>28</sup>

In mathematics, infinity is a concept which explains increasing without bounds. But the common sense, mythical notion of an infinite universe has its roots in modern theology rather than mathematics. The infinite, perfect God of the Theists is the source of the idea in its modern usage. In this interpretation, God's infinity is formless and incomprehensible to finite beings such as humans. Despite the fact that we cannot imagine an infinite God and its universe we 'know' it exists, for, as the saying goes, 'if the universe is finite, then what exists beyond it? there must be something!'

How does this myth relate to the ecological crisis? If the universe is limitless, then - given the appropriate technology resources - are also limitless. 'If we mess up here, then we can always move onto the next place.' For so long in western history, resources have been seen as an eternal cornucopia. Most modern views of capitalism remain firmly entrenched in the Lockean premises of property and abundance constructed in the late 17th Century.<sup>29</sup>

Probably one of the earliest references to limits to growth after the scientific revolution came from Thomas Hobbes. Although Hobbes did regard the natural environment as limited, this was only due to the human incapacity to exploit resources. To Hobbes, nature, as an idea removed from human endeavour, was still limitless.<sup>30</sup> It was not until Malthus' theories revolving around mathematical constraints on population growth that the finite nature of the environment was recognised.<sup>31</sup> Of course, in many primitive cultures, these ideas of limits to growth have existed for millennia.

The fact remains, however, that in western post-industrial society the myth of an infinite universe with its infinite resources still reigns supreme. As with the previous myth, this idea, by outsurviving the necessarily defunct social context of infinite plenty, may be further promoting the environmental crisis.

"What do you think will happen to them all?" he said after a while.

"In an infinite Universe anything can happen." said Ford. "Even survival. Strange but true."<sup>32</sup>

### **Myth 3 : You Can't Stop Progress**

The history of the Human Species as a whole may be regarded as the unravelling of a hidden Plan of Nature for accomplishing a perfect state of Civil Constitution for Society.. as the sole State of Society in which the tendency of human nature can be all and fully developed.<sup>33</sup>

Poetic imagination has put the Golden Age in the cradle of the human race, amid the ignorance and brutishness of primitive times; it is rather the Iron Age which should be put there. The Golden Age of the human race is not behind us but before us; it lies in the perfection of the social order. Our ancestors never saw it; our children will one day arrive there; it is for us to clear the way.<sup>34</sup>

Towards the end of the seventeenth century there was much debate about the position of a 'golden age' in human history. The scholars of ancient times had previously dominated philosophical discussion. An integral part of this discussion had been a strong yearning of a past, noble age, where society had reached ultimate fulfilment. As J. B. Bury writes in his work *The Idea of Progress* philosophers such as Kant and Saint-Simon led the 'moderns' to a victory over the 'ancients'.<sup>35</sup> For them, the 'golden age' existed in humanity's distant future: a future which humanity must strive towards, ever, onwards,

Krishan Kumar writes:

Mankind could now be seen as advancing, slowly perhaps but inevitably and indefinitely, in a desirable direction. In a sense, it was illogical to try to determine the happy endpoint of this progression; but the attraction to do so proved irresistible.<sup>37</sup>

The scientific revolution had convinced certain intellectuals that new ideas and new tools had given humanity a chance to fulfill itself beyond past expectation. Modern humanity had reason, liberty and science. What were those primitive and social wealth? Humanity was now more 'complex' than ever before.

In the present day, the idea of progress is extremely powerful. Also, it is mythical in every sense. It is seen as something which is beyond human control. Progress is inevitable; one cannot stop it. To a believer of the myth, progress always existed; it just happens to be part of the natural forces.

Progress, as a concept, became a dangerous myth in the context of the environmental crisis when, as Bury writes, it was joined with the Baconian idea that knowledge should be applied to human manipulation of the natural environment.<sup>37</sup> Progress became seen as intrinsically tied to the changing, taming, and controlling of the non-human world. Of course, as part of this idea was the premise that nature could be improved upon. Many environmentally degrading acts are now carried out under the mythical banner of 'Progress'. The question remains: progress in what, to what?<sup>38</sup>

The future beckoned urgently, and the promise it held out could only adequately be gauged by the chaos that might result if the forces of progress were not all combined in the task of bringing the new society into being. Of those forces the most important were science, the men of science, and all those who could see in the achievements of the scientific method the highest fulfillment of the Enlightenment, and the key to the future direction and organisation of society.<sup>39</sup>

### **Conclusions: in Search of a new Myth for a new Millennium: 'The Pot at the end of the Rainbow'**

Myths which band together with other ideas to make up an ideology are not always complementary. In fact, most often, related myths are ambiguous. For example, the progress myth ties neatly in with the concept of infinity and a never-ending pool of possible knowledge. But it directly conflicts with the unidimensional, cyclical view of History included in myth number one. This must be another characteristic of myths: they are often illogical when bound together in one particular value system. This makes sense, as myths are rarely questioned. Their logical inconsistencies, therefore also remain unseen. Perhaps this increased confusion contributes even more power to the myth. Life becomes an unsolvable riddle with its answer

found somewhere far removed from logic and reason, residing again in the supernatural.

So far the discussion has traced the historical roots of these myths in an attempt to demystify them. As mentioned earlier, this is not part of an effort to remove myth altogether, but rather to replace outdated myths which could currently be perceived as perpetuating the environmental crisis.

The content of ideologies which gather under the broad banners of 'environmentalism', 'conservation', 'green' or 'ecology' are remarkably diverse. These include reformist, revolutionary and practical approaches to overcoming the environmental crisis and other goals pursued by the conservation movement. All of these ideological approaches are based on myths.

As far as reformist doctrine goes, a rather tidy attempt at creating new ecological myths came from Barry Commoner in 1972. Commoner's 'Four Laws of Ecology' are not much more than four neat little maxims based on a new scientific interpretation of ecology: (1) 'everything is connected to everything else'; (2) 'everything must go somewhere'; (3) 'nature knows best'; and (4) 'there is no such thing as a free lunch'.<sup>40</sup> These are myths which, by their existence, are alternatives to ones which perpetuate the degradation of the earth.

Commoner differed from Plato on several obvious grounds. The most important difference was that Commoner did not comprehend that he was attempting to create a new series of myths, whereas Plato consciously contrived his. Myth-making itself is a process which often takes place unnoticed by the mythmaker. Most myth-makers are simply in the search for a new ultimate truth which would explain the riddle. Plato knew that the riddle would never be solved, but the riddle could be made to operate more effectively if its premises were appropriate to their time. Hence, he created his own, more relevant and constructive myth.

Despite the adamant cries of ecologists, Commoner's cliches are not logical truths or 'laws' at all, but leaps of faith: myths. The first two and the fourth laws are really part of one idea: inter-connectedness. Although this concept is a vital premise upon which the science of ecology is based it is no more a universal, ephemeral truth than the maxim. 'Everything is an individual separate event'. Indeed, perhaps the latter will become a catchcry of some future age with dominant ideas similar to nineteenth century liberalism.

The third law constitutes a myth in every sense as it gives ultimate knowledge to a powerful force which is beyond human perception: Plato's Gods have been replaced by Nature with a capital 'N'. Drysek criticises the logic of Commoner's third law:

One should not, though, accept Commoner's third law absolutely.

To do so is to adopt a fairly dismal outlook on the prospects for human intelligence, and to cast man in a distinctly inferior role.

The third law is actually overstated. Clearly man can create and

sustain ecosystems, as well as destroy them. One suspects, though, that viable man-made ecosystems are the product of slow and incremental human intervention. The point is surely that man should not be either nature's master or nature's slave; rather, he should work in cooperation with nature as part of an intelligent system.<sup>41</sup>

Despite obvious logical flaws and the fact that Commoner does not perceive his 'truths' as myths, his maxims are far more appropriate to their time than those which were alluded to in the previous sections. As myths, interconnectedness and a Nature god may help us to prolong our time on this planet.

Couple these ideas with a finite universe, an undefined future, and a world where progress is not a final truth, and a more suitable mythology may evolve: one which may be capable of withstanding the environmental crisis.

If Plato were here now—with his tongue firmly planted in his cheek—and his primary interest were no longer the creation of an ideal state in which justice is to be maximised but the survival of humanity and the Earth, he might come up with the following myth:

You are, all of you in this land, brothers and sisters (sisters have become relevant since Plato's day). Nature fashioned you all out of the same clay; for Nature is not a carpenter (as was the son of the Christian god), but a potter. You are all connected, for you all exist in this one Pot.

The Pot is a confined space, with limited potential; it is finite. There is nothing beyond the Pot but the hands of Nature and the wheel on which the Pot was spun.

Your future, past and present are also all part of the same Pot. But the colour of the Pot can always be changed by you, as you have been given a palette with unlimited rainbows (it does rain inside the Pot).

The purpose (Nature believed in goal-setting) of your existence is to discover which colour, which shade you are all happiest with. It may be the first colour you mix, or it may be the last. You must stop searching when you find it. For then, you will know that there is a prophecy that the Pot will be ruined if Nature doesn't put it into the kiln to fire. □

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