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THE MYTH OF THE WHITE MAN: DECONSTRUCTING COLONIAL NARRATIVES OF POWER

ABSTRACT

This article examines the myth of the white man, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Ernst Cassirer and Hans Blumenberg. The myth of the white man is primarily rooted in the belief in the distinctive "civilizing mission" attributed to white Europeans, which is further reinforced by racist narratives, often intertwined with theological underpinnings. The focus of this analysis is to explore the origins and dissemination of this narrative, which emerged concurrently with the colonial expansion of European empires beyond their continental borders. Furthermore, the article aims to highlight the association between the myth of white hegemony and Christian religions, acknowledging that the narrative took shape differently within Catholic and Protestant contexts.

Keywords: philosophy of myth, the myth of the white man, colonialism, white hegemony, postcolonial studies, racism

INTRODUCTION¹

The study of myths, as posited by Leszek Kołakowski, is often grounded in a fundamental, existential need to perceive the world as coherent and value-oriented (Kołakowski, 1972, 12-14.). Ernst Cassirer's perspective further enriches this understanding, presenting myth as a reflection of a specific consciousness structure, a unique worldview. This approach underscores that the essence of myths lies not solely in their narratives but also in the mode of thinking they embody, paving the way for an analysis that transcends individual stories to encompass the structure and social function of mythical thinking.

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Cassirer's view myths as universal structures intrinsic to all cultures. It functions as an a priori symbolic form that both structures reality and imparts meaning. However, Cassirer also acknowledges its potential to morph, as illustrated in his 'Myth of the State', where he explores the application of 'mythic thinking' to political ideologies.

This article aims to explore the concept of myths as a fundamental symbolic form shaping human world perception. The focus here is on what is termed the 'myth of the white man.' Following the insights of Andrew Kralus and Przemysław Parszutowicz in their analysis of Cassirer's work (Kralus and Parszutowicz, 2020, 15), this study examines the political manifestation of 'mythical thinking', particularly in the context of fascism's artificial myth fabrication, which manipulates fear and aggression and advocates for a return to a mythical connection with nature and community primacy.

The primary objective of the article is to deconstruct the complex network of interrelations at the core of 'mythical thinking.' This form of thinking is fundamentally grounded in emotional responses and subsequently forms the basis for more structured, ideological rationalizations. Utilizing the frameworks developed by Ernst Cassirer and Hans Blumenberg's philosophy of myth, this study dissects the narrative construction of racial and cultural hegemony. It delves into how this narrative is woven from the interplay of Christian religious beliefs, the notion of a 'civilizing mission' of white Europeans, and various racist narratives, often underpinned by theological foundations.

METHODOLOGY

Hans Blumenberg, building upon Ernst Cassirer's theoretical framework, posits the concept of the 'absolutism of reality' as a pivotal notion in understanding myth. This concept articulates the human struggle to grapple with the uncontrollable aspects of existence. According to Blumenberg's analysis, myth emerges as a mechanism for mitigating this existential challenge, facilitating detachment from the capriciousness of the physical world by substituting it with a more structured symbolic order (Blumenberg, 2006, 3). This reconceptualization of the world through myths reduces perceived hostility by transforming the unknown and transcendent into a more comprehensible narrative form.

The interplay between myths and reality is further examined Heike Paul in 'The

Myths That Made America: An Introduction to American Studies'. Paul, simultaneously extending the discourse of Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, explored the concept of an 'imagined communal mythology' in the American context. This mythology encompasses narratives of national heroism and identity, exemplified through historical figures and groups such as Christopher Columbus, Pocahontas, the Pilgrims and Puritans, or the Founding Fathers. Paul categorizes notions such as the West, the cultural melting pot, and the self-made man as integral components of this 'American myth'. She contends that while myths were traditionally perceived as premodern interpretations of the world, losing ground in the Enlightenment era, contemporary perspectives, influenced by thinkers such as Horkheimer and Adorno, often equate myths with propaganda and manipulation (Paul 2014, 159).

'The Myths that Made America', serves as a pivotal reference in the context of this study, particularly due to the overlap and interconnection between the myths of America and the 'myth of the white man'. Both narratives, deeply intertwined through the historical threads of colonialism and the multifaceted dimensions of hegemony: economic, military, and cultural, form part of a broader 'mythology of the white man'.

Paul's theoretical framework is constructed around five key aspects of myth, starting with a discursive understanding of myth, distinct from normative definitions. She explores the intricate relationship between myths and ideology and the paradoxical nature of mythic narratives, which simultaneously endure and adapt. Paul identifies the manifestations of myth in cultural texts, narratives, images, and rituals, noting their capacity to shape what she terms the 'political unconscious'.

In this article, however, the approach to the 'myth of the white man' diverges from Paul's framework. This myth is conceptualized not solely as a political construct but also as a more expansive phenomenon encompassing social and cultural dimensions. Its global influence suggests its alignment with a broader 'way of thinking', resonating with Cassirer's concept of 'mythical thinking', which captures its dynamic and pervasive nature.

The 'myth of the white man', as understood here, is a worldview, a perspective on reality that actively influences and shapes that reality. This myth comprises several interrelated elements, including Christianity, the notion of a 'civilizing mission', and the narrative of 'difference', encompassing race, culture, and class.

These components, integral to the 'myth of the white man', persist in contemporary consciousness and manifest in various cultural texts. The myth, as defined in this study, narrates the power and purported extraordinary mission of white Europeans in the nonwhite world, fundamentally linked to the concept of race.

DISCUSSION

This narrative, however, is not unique to one society or culture. The potential for such myth-making exists within all human groups, and history is replete with examples, such as the Polish myth of the Sarmatians or the Nazis-propagated myth of the Aryan race. However, due to historical factors such as colonialism and technological advancements, the 'myth of the white man' has achieved a global presence unmatched by other similar narratives. It is important to recognize that every community, regardless of size or ethnicity, has created and continues to create its own myths, which often celebrate notions of greatness, uniqueness, and nobility.

The 'myth of the white man', as a potent narrative shaping historical and contemporary realities, finds its roots in the late fifteenth century, coinciding with the onset of the colonial era. This period marks a significant transition in the evolution of the myth, transforming it from a local European narrative to a globally pervasive ideology. Prior to this, similar narratives, such as the myth of the Roman Empire, which emphasized law, discipline, and military prowess, existed. These myths functioned primarily within Europe and adjacent regions, often glorifying certain attributes while concealing the costs borne by those integrated into the Roman Empire. However, their scope was relatively contained compared to the expansive reach of the 'white man's myth' that emerged with so-called 'great geographical discoveries'.

The global dissemination of this myth, which has far-reaching and often destructive implications, as evidenced by historical, economic, and cultural records, began in earnest when European narratives started to extend beyond the continent. This expansion marked the transformation of a regional cultural story into a global myth, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries.

The integral role of Christianity in the formation and propagation of the 'white man's myth' under colonial conditions is evident from its inception. The link between Christianity and colonial expansion is exemplified in the writings of

Christopher Columbus. Following his first expedition, Columbus adopted the title 'Xristo-Ferens' or 'Carrying Christ', as noted by Bartolomé de Las Casas and referenced in Tzvetan Todorov's 'The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other'. Las Casas highlights Columbus's christened name, Cristóbal (Christum Ferens), signifying 'the bearer of Christ'. This self-designation by Columbus symbolizes the initiation of a mission that would extend the Christian narrative, along with European influence, across the oceans to distant lands and cultures (Todorov, 1984, 26).

The inception of colonization, particularly Spanish colonization, marked the emergence and evolution of the 'myth of the white man', prominently featuring the motif of 'carrying Christ'. This narrative intertwines religious connotations with the themes of salvation, Christianization, and Enlightenment. Kamil Popowicz, in 'Social Lamarckism and Racism and Eugenics in France', highlights the uniqueness of Spanish colonial expansion as an extension of the Reconquista, positioning it within a continuum of religious and national liberation wars. This historical context significantly influenced Spanish perceptions and categorizations of the 'other', which are predominantly defined in terms of paganism (Popowicz, 2009, 30).

Early 16th century, a period marked by Martin Luther's proclamation of the 95 Theses and Spain's conquest of Mexico is marked by the intertwining of religious developments in Europe with colonial endeavors in the New World. Communications between continents, more rapid than commonly assumed, facilitated a parallel evolution of religious and colonial narratives. Spain, reasserting its role as the defender of Catholicism, extended this mission into its colonial policy, as highlighted by Patricia Seed in 'Are These Not Also Men? The Indians' Humanity and Capacity for Spanish Civilization'. Seed discusses how papal edicts such as *Inter Caetera* and *Dudum Siquidem* not only granted Spain sovereignty over the New World but also mandated the Christianization of indigenous peoples, intertwining faith with public policy and imperial legitimacy (Seed, 1993, 635).

The debate surrounding the 'humanity' of the indigenous population in the New World was a significant discourse in Spain that occurred in two major phases: 1511-1520 and 1532-1537. The culmination of this debate saw Dominican Bernardino Minaya secure Vatican's official stance through Pope Paul III's bull *Sublimus Deus*, affirming the humanity and capacity for understanding the

Catholic faith of the New World's natives (Hanke, 1937, 92). Alice Beck Kehoe, in 'Manifest Destiny as the Order of Nature', contrasts Spain's forceful conquest and philosophical debates on indigenous rights with the approach of Britain and later colonizers who leveraged international law and the doctrine of first discovery. The latter's strategy necessitated the obfuscation of the preexisting native populations, labeling them 'savages from the woods', a translation of the French 'sauvage', to frame sovereignty rights as a question of natural history rather than human rights (Kehoe, 2014, 187).

According to the historical narrative of North American colonization, the absence of empires akin to Inca's Tawantisuyu or the Aztec empires of Mexico rendered the region a perceived wilderness. This perception categorized the indigenous inhabitants alongside the flora and fauna, furthering the mythic narrative of an untamed land awaiting European intervention. The arrival of European Protestants, particularly in areas deemed untouched by civilization, had profound religious and mythical implications. Sacvan Bercovitch, in 'The Puritan Origins of American Self', articulates this narrative, portraying the American continent as a 'New Jerusalem'—a utopia where a purer form of Christianity, untainted by Catholicism or papism, would prevail (Bercovitch, 1975, 35).

This narrative birthed the 'myth of the Pilgrims', a critical component of the broader 'myth of the white man', which later played a significant role in global colonialism. As Heike Paul delineated in 'The Myths That Made America', the Pilgrims of Plymouth and the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, influenced by the Reformation and particularly Calvinism, sought to establish a new 'Holy Commonwealth' in North America. They viewed America as their Promised Land, thus interpreting biblical scripture as a prophecy they were destined to fulfill (Paul, 2014, 138).

The mid-19th century witnessed a resurgence of the 'myth of the white man' in America, notably through the ideology of Manifest Destiny. First articulated by John O'Sullivan in 1845, manifest destiny encapsulated the notion of a divinely ordained mission for White Anglo-Saxon Protestants to dominate and civilize the continent, ostensibly legitimizing the subjugation and displacement of indigenous populations (Kehoe, 2014, 190).

In 'History of Colonization', Marc Ferro highlights the dichotomy in Western historiography regarding the motivations for colonization. First comes Joseph

Schumpeter's analysis of British imperialism which posited an ideological basis, emphasizing the irrationality of colonial expansion driven by a civilizing mission. In contrast, John Hobson argued for economic interests as the primary motivation for colonialism, with ideological narratives constructed post-factum to justify expansionist policies. From a mythological standpoint, both perspectives offer insights into the colonial narrative. The ideologization and mythicization of colonial conquest may have served to rationalize the inherent violence while simultaneously perpetuating myths such as the historical mission of the white man or the creation of a new Jerusalem by the Pilgrims (Ferro, 1997, 24-28).

Despite their theological and philosophical foundations, such as the Aristotelian notion of the soul used in Spanish arguments about the humanity of the Indians, colonial practices were often starkly materialistic. The exploitation of indigenous peoples in the Potosí mines, located in present-day Peru and Bolivia, exemplifies this phenomenon, where the harsh realities of colonialism starkly contrasted with the lofty narratives of civilization and conversion. This dichotomy suggests that the more rigid the realities of the colonial system are, the more vigorously the 'myth of the white man' worked to obscure them.

The 19th century marked a significant evolution in the colonial narrative, with the emergence of the 'civilizing mission' concept. This ethos, proclaiming the delivery of salvation, culture, and civilization to colonized peoples, was epitomized in the American boarding school system's motto: 'Kill the Indian, Save the Man.' This phrase encapsulates the systematic eradication of indigenous languages, cultures, and identities in favor of a Eurocentric worldview.

The 'civilizing mission' constitutes a core element of the 'myth of the white man'. Rooted in the belief that it was the duty of 'higher nations' to globalize European (Christian) culture, this myth is vividly illustrated in Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The White Man's Burden'. Kipling, an imperial sympathizer, penned the poem to bolster American annexation and colonization of the Philippines. Its publication in February 1899 catalyzed a surge of interest in Kipling's work, sparking diverse reactions that mirrored the ambivalence toward imperialism itself. The poem, through its seven stanzas, conveys the notion of imperialism as a sacrificial service but simultaneously frames the efforts of 'civilizing' as Sisyphean, facing inevitable resistance from the 'savage' natives perceived as innately inferior and resistant to enlightenment.

This view of imperialism as an ethical obligation posits the 'white race' as a bearer of 'progress' to all corners of the world. Such a perspective necessitates the dehumanization of the colonized, reducing them to 'otherness' to justify the civilizing mission, a theme previously discussed in the context of the Spanish conquest of Mexico (Murphy, 2016, 35).

Different colonial powers employed various strategies, contributing to the multifaceted 'myth of the white man'. This myth posited that the divine destiny of white Europeans would bring both religious and civilistic enlightenment to the colonized. However, this narrative did not uniformly apply to all subjugated peoples. Léon Poliakov, in 'Le Mythe Aryen', notes that while Bartolomé de Las Casas, defender of indigenous rights, opposed the maltreatment of Native Americans, he did not extend this advocacy to Africans (Poliakov, 1994, 165-157). This dichotomy reflects the European perception of indigenous peoples as 'bons sauvages' or 'noble savages', a concept predating Rousseau and Saint-Pierre, while Africans were often relegated to a lesser status, likened more to 'beasts' than to 'men', evident even in the linguistic distinctions between terms such as 'mestizo' and 'mulatto'. Kamil Popowicz highlights that the abolition of indigenous slavery paradoxically led to the intensification of African slavery, underlining the complex, often contradictory facets of the 'white man's myth.' (Popowicz, 2017, 36)

The process of dehumanizing the 'Other', both historically and in contemporary contexts, frequently begins at the linguistic level. A common strategy involves discussing the 'Other' as a faceless mass, an anonymous collectivity, rather than as individuals with distinct identities. In more elaborate narratives, the exoticization of the 'Other' emerges. However, a distinguishing feature of the 'myth of the white man' is its construction of the 'Other's' incompatibility or even nonhumanity, often articulated through religious or 'scientific' discourses.

This theme has roots extending back to antiquity. Kamil Popowicz, in his extensive discussion on the evolution of human knowledge, traces these ideas to the ancient Greeks, Romans, and medieval scholastics, whose philosophies informed the theological debate on the humanity of the indigenous peoples in Spanish colonial discourse. Popowicz asserts, 'The origins of racism can be traced back to the beginnings of biology and medicine,' highlighting the historical inquiry into the causes and implications of physical differences among humans. The ancient Greeks and Romans established foundational archetypes for

the European perception of the 'barbarian', which were later reshaped under the influence of Christianity throughout the medieval and modern eras (Popowicz 2017, 31).

Ania Loomba addresses the challenge posed by the biblical assertion of universal brotherhood and shared descent to the existence of 'savages' and 'misfits'. A common historical resolution was to label such groups as recipients of divine punishment, as reflected in the biblical narrative associating the color black with the descendants of Ham, Noah's malevolent son, and with malevolent forces. This interpretation, however, requires additional historical nuance to fully understand its impact and evolution (Loomba, 2011, 120).

Biblical narratives have historically been employed to justify the perceived inferior status of 'Others', particularly black people. This discourse, dating back to the 16th century, interweaves theological and racial ideologies. In 1590, a notable instance occurred with Spanish Jesuit José de Acosta, who postulated that Indigenous Americans were among the ten lost tribes of Israel, a hypothesis contested in the following century by French theologian Isaac de la Peyrère (Weinberger, 2020, 14). These theological debates continued into subsequent centuries, gaining particular momentum in the U.S. postcivil war era. This period marked an intensified need among white Southerners to rationalize the enslavement of black people as a 'natural state of affairs'. William Campbell's 1891 treatise 'Anthropology for the People: A Refutation of the Theory of the Adamic Origin of All Races' integrated contemporary scientific theories, including aspects of evolutionary theory, into the biblical discourse, asserting God's creation of inherently unequal races with a preference for whites (Campbell, 1891, 7-19).

Other contributions to this narrative included Lester Hoyle's 1875 work 'Pre-Adamite, and who tempted Eve? ', which categorizes five human races in a hierarchical order from the 'most primitive' black to the 'most perfect' white. Hoyle's interpretation of the biblical serpent as representative of the yellow race coincided with a surge of anti-Chinese sentiment in the U.S., reflecting the racial biases of the era. Other authors, such as Alexander Winchell, Brigham Young, and Charles Carroll, posited black people as direct descendants of the biblical Cain, interpreting black skin color as 'Cain's stigma' and speculating on the nature of Cain's sin (Maleszka, 2013, 70).

The biblical lineage of black people as descendants of Ham, as Ania Loomba

discusses in 'Colonialism/Postcolonialism', represents another dimension of this discourse. This interpretation, linked to the biblical portrayal of Egypt as 'the land of Ham', was further bolstered by claims that the name Ham meant 'black'. Prominent proponents of this theory included Buckner Payne, written as Ariel, and Pastor Thornton Stringfellow.

As Matthew Maleszka elucidates these theological interpretations were not merely academic exercises but were also deeply intertwined with societal attitudes and policies toward race, illustrating the profound impact of religious narratives on the construction and perpetuation of racial myths (Maleszka, 2013, 70).

The integration of biblical justifications for slavery and racial segregation with 'scientific' endorsements, particularly in modern and 19th-century discourses, marks a notable development in the perpetuation of the 'myth of the white man'. Influences from Social Darwinism and the works of theorists such as Arthur de Gobineau, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and Georges Vacher de Lapouge added a veneer of scientific legitimacy to what were essentially pseudotheological or pseudoscientific narratives, cementing the myth of race at the time.

Central to the myth of the white man is the concept of race, though for the purposes of historical exploration, it is instructive to momentarily consider the category of 'difference'. (Seed, 1993, 631). The idea that remote regions of the world were inhabited by monstrous beings dates back to classical antiquity and persisted through the Middle Ages. This notion gained immense traction in the 16th century, particularly with Sebastian Münster's *'Cosmographie universalis'*, which saw numerous editions and translations over a century. Reports of encounters with 'monstrous human races', such as Amazons, cannibals, or giants, by Dutch, Spanish, and English explorers and in texts such as those of Jesuit José de Acosta, reinforced these myths. The physical appearance of these 'aliens' became a determinant of their perceived monstrosity, further alienating the 'Other' and negating any value they might have.

Emmanuel Levinas's philosophical concept of the 'face of the Other' – which implies a fundamental ethical imperative, 'thou shalt not kill'—is rendered inapplicable in the context of colonialism due to the myth of the white man. This myth effectively dehumanizes the 'Other', exemplified in the narrative of their cannibalism. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin elucidate how the term 'cannibal', derived from colonial encounters and the etymology linked to

the Carib natives, underscores the process by which Europe distinguished itself from its colonial subjects, morally justifying its expansion (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 2013).

The term 'cannibalism', as Peter Hulme discusses in 'Colonial Encounters', emerged in Christopher Columbus's diary, initially describing a tribe rumored to practice anthropophagy (Hulme 1996). This linguistic shift from 'anthropophagy' to 'cannibalism' is significant, as it transitions from a descriptive to an ontological category, enabling complete dehumanization. Therefore 'cannibal' became a signifier of savagery and primitivism, an integral part of the moral justification for imperial rule.

CONCLUSION

In colonial contexts, varying laws and customs regarding interactions with native populations, highlight the differing approaches to the 'Other'. Sensational tales from these regions, like a German sailor's encounter with cannibals in Brazil, fueled European fascination with the 'monstrosities of the New World'. Such narratives reinforced the idea that those indulging in anthropophagy occupied the lowest rung of humanity, yet they represented only a fringe element of the broader perception of 'savages' (Seed, 1993, 633).

This portrayal is central to the development of racism, a pivotal aspect of the white man's myth. As Klemczak discusses in his article 'Should the statue of David Hume be torn down? ', the 18th-century thinkers, including Voltaire, Kant, and Hume, contributed significantly to the racial discourse. The classification of human populations under the abstract concept of 'race' influenced subsequent scientific and pseudoscientific interpretations of racial differences (Klemczak, 2021).

The persistence of myth and mythical thinking in culture stems from the enduring quest for meaning in human existence. Mythical thinking bridges the gap when scientific understanding falls short of explaining complex realities. Far from being antiquated by the advent of science, myth retains its relevance, often by adopting the rhetoric of scientific discourse, as seen in fields such as psychoanalysis. The racial myth, deeply ingrained in Christian Western civilization, has historically passed through mythical, scientific/pseudoscientific, and

ideological phases. These phases are not discrete but overlap, creating a complex tapestry of meanings, as exemplified in the myth of the white man, where ideas of progress and civilization intermingle with biblical salvation narratives and racial theories.

Following Cassirer and Blumberg, this article treats myth as a form of consciousness, a particular way of thinking. Historical philosophy, from Giambattista Vico to the modern sociology of knowledge, acknowledges 'mythical thinking' as universal, transcending cultural and gender boundaries. In the contemporary world, myths, as conceptualized here, remain potent, despite the Enlightenment's emphasis on knowledge and Christianity's historical attempts to supersede mythology. As Stefan Klemczak notes in 'The Faust Myth as an Attempt to Tame the Modern World', enlightenment criticism overlooked the deeper significance of myth in human *Weltanschauung*, leading to the erroneous belief that myths had been conquered by reason. However, a closer examination reveals that myths, often intertwined with critically acquired knowledge, continue to underpin human worldviews (Klemczak 2002).

In this exploration, grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Hans Blumenberg and Ernst Cassirer, I have revisited the foundational premise that myths are essential in constructing and comprehending human reality. Through this analysis, it becomes evident that myths, particularly the 'myth of the white man', extend beyond mere narrative constructs; they represent a specific mode of understanding and interacting with the world. This study reaffirms Cassirer's assertion that myths constitute unique worldviews, reflecting not just collective narratives but also shaping the perceptual lens through which societies interpret their existence, values, and truths.

The political potency of myths, as exemplified in the manipulative strategies of fascism, underscores the study's relevance in contemporary socio-political discourse. This investigation, drawing upon the insights of Hans Blumenberg and Ernst Cassirer, reveals the multifaceted nature of myths in crafting collective identity and consciousness. The 'myth of the white man', explored as a universal symbolic form, demonstrates its pervasiveness and adaptability across cultures, impacting both the individual psyche and societal structures.

In conclusion it is important highlight the dual role of myths as both constructors of reality and tools for ideological manipulation, thus calling for a more nuanced understanding of their function in shaping historical and modern

worldviews. Building on this premise, it becomes imperative for scholars in myth studies and philosophy to delve deeper into these intricacies. Future research in the field of myth studies and philosophy should continue to interrogate the complex interplay between myth, ideology, and cultural narratives. Further studies could explore the ways in which colonial myths, like the 'myth of the white man', adapt and evolve in response to global socio-political changes. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches incorporating insights from postcolonial studies, multiculturalism, and migration studies could enrich our understanding of the role of myth in contemporary cultural and political discourses. Such research is vital in deconstructing entrenched narratives and fostering a more critical engagement with the narratives that continue to shape our collective consciousness.

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