

**“Un-Mythologizing Mythologization”: Examining the Impact of Myth-Making in
Various Fields**

Israa Alshalabi

Department of English, American University of Sharjah

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Dr. Philip McCarthy

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In this paper, I argue that the practice of mythologization regresses the progress of society as a whole. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.), mythologization can be defined as the act of “imparting of a mythical quality to something” (para. 1). Kiron (2004) further adds that mythologization “is an aspect of cultural formation and of a distinctively human need to generate symbolic meaning” (p. 6). The majority of myths and stories around the world have been passed down orally from one generation to the next (Larrington, 2019). As soon as humanity mastered the technology of writing, myths and stories started to be preserved (Larrington, 2019). The world’s earliest myth is widely believed to be The Epic of Gilgamesh, which can be traced as back as 2100 B.C. (Andrews, 2018). While the analysis of mythologization as a form of narrative study emerged in the early 10th century (*Narrative Inquiry*, 2023), the exact origins of the practice remain unclear because of limited historical documentation. The act of mythologization has been an integral part of human existence for as long as history can trace, and some proponents even argue for the necessity of mythologization for the continued existence of humanity (Abdimuratovich, 2021). However, mythologization is rarely as useful as it is made out to be. As such, this paper explores the adverse implications of mythologization on societal development by conducting an extensive analysis of the available literature, and therefore uncovering the impact of mythologization in various fields.

I support my position on mythologization with the following three arguments. First, mythologization leads to the spread of scientific misinformation. As an example, Jones (2018) demonstrates that the mythologization of artificial intelligence (A.I.) as a holistic solution for climate change disregards the various environmental problems that it causes. Second, mythologization is detrimental to mental health. According to Atkinson (1997), the act of self-mythologizing through illness narratives can intensify pre-existing mental health issues. Finally, mythologization is damaging to the economy. For instance, UNCTAD (2009)

demonstrate that the cause of the 2008 financial crisis was the mythologization of some aspects of the market, which consequently facilitated the development of speculative financial instruments that are divorced from the productive functions of the real economy.

I also consider two alternative views to my position. First, some critics argue that mythologization is an effective political tool that plays a vital role in the formation of nationalism and unionization (Malinowski, 1960). Second, others claim that mythologization can act as a timeless vessel for important cultural values passed down through generations (Murfin & Ray, 2018). I demonstrate the validity of such assertions, while acknowledging that a comprehensive perspective may not have been fully accounted for. As an example, while mythologization could provide political stability, it is often temporary and precarious, as can be seen in the case of the political polarization and fragmentation that resulted after the EU referendum outcomes (Maher et al. 2018).

This paper is important because it provides a number of recommendations that will raise awareness on the effects of mythologization. These recommendations include “Prioritizing fact-based education and enforcing strict misinformation guidelines,” “Promoting mental health awareness through campaigns,” “Enacting transparency regulations in marketing and conducting consumer awareness campaigns to prevent fraudulent promotions,” as well as “Prioritizing inclusivity and healthy representation in the preservation of cultural myths”. Through these recommendations, this paper aims to help in mitigating the adverse effects of mythologization.

The Drawbacks of Mythologization in Various Fields

The practice of mythologization has a variety of drawbacks that are worthy of consideration. One of these drawbacks is the potential of spreading misinformation through scientific myths. Another drawback is the incitement or aggravation of mental illness through aesthetic mythologization. Mythologization is also detrimental to the economy in numerous ways, such as causing disruption of market dynamics and scamming individuals into

uninformed purchasing habits. All these drawbacks must be further considered in order to re-examine the role of mythologization in modern society.

Myth as an Agent of Scientific Misinformation Dissemination

Mythologization can lead to the spread of scientific misinformation. The mythologized retelling of facts radically diminishes the accuracy of information. In fact, after many narrativized accounts of scientific data, accuracy may be completely lost. An example of this phenomenon is the perception of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) as a panacea to climate change, despite its documented environmental costs. Indeed, the emissions from a single deep learning training model can exceed 284 tons of carbon dioxide (Strubell et al., 2019), and the widespread adoption of A.I. has led to exponential increases in energy consumption (Jones, 2018). Thus, destroying the mythos that propels the expansion of technology or science is the first step in creating more sustainable and informed solutions to global problems.

While glorifying science or technology is reductive to societal progress, excessive fear and critique is equally as damaging. As an example, despite the fact that many perceive A.I. as an optimum solution to all human problems, others believe that A.I. will be the demise of the human species. Stein-Perlman et al. (2022) revealed that believers of this statement include many scientists who are actively involved in A.I. research. Atkinson (2016) posits that this belief exaggerates the rapidity of technological advancements, especially considering the deceleration in the processing capabilities of silicon computer chips and the comparatively modest developments in A.I. beyond deep learning. This perception can be attributed to the mythologization of A.I. as a sentient being instead of a tool made by humans. Consequently, there is misplaced focus on improbable existential AI threats. This misguided focus detracts the attention from present and tangible AI-related concerns such as increased surveillance or risk of mass unemployment. This fact further exemplifies how mythologization can diminish the accuracy of information, which may misdirect focus and initiatives away from urgent issues.

Myth as a Triggering/Aggravating Factor of Mental Illness

Mythologization can exacerbate pre-existing mental health issues or even potentially cause them by promoting unrealistic narratives of mental illness. More specifically, media aestheticizes mental illnesses by integrating elements of pop culture and using romantic language, effectively mythologizing mental health issues. This pattern of behavior is problematic because it can lead to increased suicidal ideation, especially among youngsters. For example, mental health professionals have warned against the mental health issues that could result from watching “13 Reasons Why,” a show that explores the reasons behind a teenage girl’s suicide (Howard, 2017). The show depicts the revenge of the girl posthumously through 13 cassette tapes that expose her bullies, which sends across the dangerous message that she was only to become an active agent in her life after committing suicide (Shrestha, 2018).

In addition to the fact that mythologization can lead to suicidal ideation, mythologization can also make individuals want to be mentally ill. Shrestha (2018) argues that the romantic narrativization of mental illness on social media platforms may lead to the desire to receive the same attention or employ the same narrative. The study provides examples of such narrativization techniques that include meticulously edited photos and romantically melancholic quotes. The study also claims that such techniques serve to depict individuals with mental illness as ‘fallen heroes.’ Accordingly, as pointed by Reinecke (Bine, 2013), social media websites may become an echo chamber of negativity, promoting and sustaining a cycle of depression, self-pity, and self-harm.

Besides the idea that mythologization may lead to suicidal ideation and the desire to be mentally ill, mythologization can also contribute to the mistreatment and misrepresentation of mental illness. By mythologizing mental illness, certain narratives are being forced upon individuals with mental illness. These narratives are mostly being imposed by neurotypical people with no real knowledge or understanding on the reality of mental illnesses. For example, the sensationalized media coverage of violent outbursts from some

individuals with mental illness perpetuates a dangerous misconception (Van Brunt et al., 2016). This misconception is that these volatile outbursts are increasing in frequency because of mental illness. Because of this misguided notion, individuals with mental illness are 11 times more likely to be the recipients of violent attacks in comparison to the general public (Khalifeh & Dean, 2010). Most dangerously, this overtaking of neurodivergent rhetoric by neurotypical individuals is detrimental to any attempt at raising awareness for mental illnesses, and instead perpetuates the societal ignorance that surrounds most mental illnesses (Shrestha, 2018). This ignorance often translates into a lack of appropriate support and accommodations for individuals with mental illness, as general society will not be informed enough to accommodate the needs of neurodivergent individuals.

Myth as a Deteriorating Factor for the Economy

Mythologization may have significantly adverse effects on the economy of a nation by propagating unrealistic economic ideals and distorting market dynamics. Namely, economic myths can lead to widespread dissonance and misinformed decision-making, ultimately resulting to mass economic damage. For instance, UNCTAD (2009) demonstrates that the cause of the 2008 financial crisis was the mythologization of the market's supposed virtues, which ultimately enabled the creation of speculative financial tools that are disconnected from the productive activities in the real economy. An antique older example is the tulip mania that occurred in the Netherlands during the 17th century. The term tulip mania refers to a severe case of economic frenzy surrounding tulip bulbs. Wang and Wen (2012) demonstrate that tulip bulbs became highly sought after and their prices skyrocketed to extraordinary levels, surpassing the prices of extravagant houses. The study claims that soon after, however, the market for tulip bulbs collapsed abruptly, which resulted in the Dutch economy falling into a deep recession in 1637. According to Moore et al. (2017), the public realized the overvaluation of these bulbs and lost interest, which contributed to the rapid and catastrophic crash in prices. Therefore, economic mythologization can enact large-scale damage on the economy as a whole, and consequently lead to economic instability.

While mythologization can lead to economic instability, it can also have a damaging economic impact on a smaller scale. This effect can be seen when mythologization is used as a marketing technique that deludes consumers and scams them with factually inaccurate marketing. For example, Peattie and Crane (2005) claims that in the late 1980s, attention to the green marketing approach spiked because of a growing public interest in environmentalism. This resulted in a surge in corporate initiatives within the realm of green marketing and a parallel increase in academic endeavors in the sphere of green business. Megabrands started incorporating environmentalist myths into their products as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) efforts. Recognizing the increasing demand for healthier choices in lifestyles, Neufeldt and McNeish (2021) points out that megabrands such as Coca-Cola and Nestlé made strategic investments in “healthy” products. Neufeldt and McNeish further uncovers that the financial success of these products would be short-lived. Soon after the launch of these green products, environmental organizations would become aware of various environmentally unethical practices performed by these organizations. These practices include the disposal of plastic packaging material in landfills and oceans, as revealed by Hidell (2004). The myth of the green product or service would shatter, and the public would wake up to the fraudulent marketing.

An additional example is the swift growth of the protein snack industry. Chen and Eriksson (2019) posit that the protein snack industry is growing rapidly because of consumers’ beliefs that protein snacks improve physical health, despite the lack of evidence to support this claim. The article further clarifies that food companies capitalize on consumers’ naivety by incorporating protein into items previously regarded as unhealthy. The authors argue that the food companies emphasize the protein levels in these products and promote them as a result of advanced scientific technology, effectively deceiving their customers about the health benefits of these snacks.

Arguable Benefits of Mythologization

Proponents of mythologization argue that myths are beneficial to society in many ways. For instance, some argue for the necessity of mythology in politics as it is the foundation of unity and nationalism. In addition, many contend that mythology is imperative to society since it preserves cultural heritage. Despite the fact that these arguments possess some merit, it is also important to acknowledge their limitations.

Myth as a Basis of National Unity

Some experts contend that mythologization is a crucial political tool that forms the basis of nationalism and unionization. Malinowski (1960) posits that myths increase sentiments of solidarity and self-identity, despite the fact that they may vary in a nation depending on interpretation and personal experience. A prominent example of collective political mythologization is American nationalism ideology. American nationalism is founded on myths that glorify the history and formation of the USA. In fact, American nationalism is so intensely based on mythology that studies such as Vlahos (1988) dub it as American exceptionalism in literature. Vlahos provides two examples of these myths, the first being the idea that Americans are united in serving a higher-purpose, and the second being that American society is the root of civilizational progress. Vlahos further highlights that these myths are formative to American political identity, as they are what build the nation's confidence in the US government's policies. Meaney (2008) even attributes the exponential development of the USA to its mythologized nationalism. Meaney explains that the USA was able to become a leading force globally because it possessed the most powerful nationalist mythology in the world.

Despite the fact that mythologization may act as a unifying tool, it may also lead to political fragmentation and polarization. Political myths are mostly founded on unethical intentions, which is why the public loses faith in its authorities' after the myths eventually shatter. Dălăla (2021) explains that political myths serve to usurp support to gain untruthful legitimacy. Once the public eventually becomes disillusioned about the reality of their

governing body, the solidarity that once united them often starts to disintegrate as they have all become distrustful of their leadership. A recent example of such an occurrence is the impact of the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum. Maher et al. (2018) conducted a survey that aimed to explore the impact of this referendum, and concluded that the public has become much more politically polarized than before. This polarization happened because the EU political myth has been fractured and that the public had been disillusioned, which radicalized a significant portion of the public. Another example is the political myths that were utilized in the early 1990s in Romania. Dălălaşu reports that after the disintegration of the communist system of government in Eastern Europe, the Romanian government scrambled to craft political mythology to legitimize their authority. Dălălaşu claims that the Romanian authorities would employ various political myths that reform the past of Romania as way of persuading the public and crafting a legacy. The author concludes that these myths only provided a veneer of legitimacy, which led to their inability to tackle the genuine challenges within a transforming society.

Myth as a Heritage Preserver

Proponents of mythologization also claim that mythologization is a vital heritage preserver for communities. Myths safeguard and preserve essential cultural values and teachings by acting as a form of encrypted communication (Giskin & Walsh, 2001). Furthermore, a community can safeguard its position in history through the creation of myths that reflect its beliefs and values. An example of such a community would be the Ancient Greek civilization. Though the Ancient Greek civilization has been extinct for more than two thousand years, it is still vividly remembered because of its rich and unique mythology. In fact, some experts consider Greek mythology to be the greatest legacy of the Greek civilization (Properzio & Lefkowitz, 1987). Thus, mythology can be a timeless vessel of a society's identity.

While mythologization does preserve heritage, it can also create damaging stereotypes. The common portrayal of specific archetypes in mythology often results in the

stereotyping of certain sub-communities. These damaging stereotypes are the result of the societal and political contexts from which they originated, and therefore they are misaligned with the progressive values of contemporary society. For example, Properzio and Lefkowitz (1987) reports that almost every Greek myth known to humans has misogynistic themes, even the ones that supposedly center around the autonomy of women. Another concerning pattern is the frequent depiction of ableist themes in Indian mythology. Barman (2021) unveils that individuals with disability are often portrayed as villainous characters in Indian mythology. Examples include the conniving, humpbacked Manthara from the Hindu epic Ramayana and the limping, cunning Shakuni from the Hindu epic Mahabharata. The study emphasizes that these disabled characters are portrayed more as literary tools than as genuine individuals, emphasizing their potential for mischief and evildoing rather than depicting them as realistic, multifaceted personalities. Even the names assigned to these characters carry strong implications. The author clarifies that the name 'Manthara' implies someone who is slow-witted, selfish, and narrow-minded, while 'Shakuni' implies traits of a vulture, such as cunning, manipulation, and deceit. Accordingly, oftentimes myths will contain parochial and unjust values that continue to harm specific groups within a society for years to come.

Conclusion

The widespread usage of mythologization calls for a critical review of its impact in various fields. In this paper, I argued that the practice of mythologization is regressive to any form of societal progress. The mythologization of any scientific fact will inevitably lead to the spread of misinformation, thereby diminishing the ability to produce sound decisions. Another drawback of mythologization is its propensity to exacerbate or even incite mental health issues, hindering progress in understanding and accommodating individuals with mental illness. In addition, economic mythologization damages the economy by perpetuating unrealistic myths that enact large-scale damage on the economy and scam individuals into misguided purchases.

Despite the complications of mythologization, many still believe in the necessity of mythologization in societal advancement. First, proponents of mythology believe it to be an immensely powerful political instrument that forms the basis of any sense of nationalism or national unity. However, whatever unity is provided by mythologization is fleeting, as this union will eventually disintegrate once the public is disillusioned. Second, many experts believe that mythology can be used to preserve cultural heritage by safeguarding the values and beliefs of the community. Despite this claim, mythology may be harming minority groups of the community by preserving outdated and regressive ideology.

Several recommendations can be made to address the adverse impact of mythologization. First, prioritizing fact-based education is pivotal in combating the spread of misinformation propagated through mythologization, which can be accomplished by implementing robust media literacy programs. Additionally, stringent guidelines and ethical standards should be enforced within the scientific and technological spheres to prevent the misrepresentation of advancements, ensuring responsible communication of findings to the public. Second, addressing mental health concerns aggravated by mythologization necessitates a comprehensive approach involving mental health education and awareness campaigns. Third, from an economic perspective, regulators and policymakers must emphasize transparency and accountability, curbing deceptive marketing strategies and scrutinizing the authenticity of claims made by corporations. Fourth, efforts to preserve cultural heritage should prioritize inclusivity by re-examining and revising myths that perpetuate damaging stereotypes. By adopting these strategies, societies can be better equipped to navigate the complications that arise with myths.

The common belief in the necessity of mythologization is still persistent. Whether as a political tool fostering unity or a vessel preserving cultural heritage, it is undeniable that myths wield power that extends beyond the immediate drawbacks. Nevertheless, the cost of clinging to myths in the face of modern society and the imperative of inclusivity must be

reconsidered. Acknowledging the influence of mythologization is a critical step towards fostering a more informed, equitable, and resilient society.

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In writing this paper, I followed the explicit instructions provided by the instructor for the ethical and productive use of AI (for example, ChatGPT and any such similar software). I also made sure to follow the guidance on plagiarism provided by the instructor. Specifically, I used ChatGPT (or similar software) only for the following:

Creation of working arguments

Creation of working counter-arguments

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