

Sigurd Skirbekk:

The Immigration Debate:

A Question of Moral, Science, Ideology, Myth or Belief?

E. Anti-racism as myth

Much of the anti-racial argumentation fits the criteria of an ideology. We could say that what we are dealing with here is an issue-oriented, restricted ideology that fits a more extensive New Liberal ideology. All the same, not all anti-racial statements can be ascribed to research-based interpretations or to an interest-governed ideology. An ideology can have a mobilizing effect on people with common interests, encouraging joint initiatives. Nevertheless, the ideology does not gain universal credibility without having something else to fall back on, something that causes a specific perception of reality to appear as both right and reasonable.

This is where myths enter the picture. I have described myths in terms of five hallmarks. Central to myths, in contrast to ideologies, is the story; and not just any story, but one that binds together five identifiable hallmarks: Myths are meant to communicate something important about our lives, something that gives shape to a general theme by reducing it to a struggle between two forces, something that sees this struggle as a manifestation of the good and the evil locked in battle that has an archetypal character and which therefore must be won again and again; thus it becomes the task of the guardians of the myth to rouse people to a recognition of the drama in their life every time they are faced with moral choices in critical situations.¹

As for the immigration debate, the story is not about people who go beyond the limitations of nature with anthropocentric pride in their own rights, or about people who leave overpopulated areas and cross the borders of civilization without a desire to adapt culturally. A thorough review of reports and accounts of the immigration problem in different media indicates that the behind-the-scenes story, which is constantly invoked, deals with events during the Second World War.

Admittedly, now and then the time horizon is expanded to include Europeans' attitudes toward the natives in other parts of the world in previous centuries. «The white man's burden» is often depicted as a combination of racist arrogance, economic exploitation, and slave trading. Much could be said about all these subjects, but this would not necessarily be an integral part of the story which causes a liberal immigration policy to come across as moral penance.

Slavery, for example, is a much older phenomenon than modern racial theories. And it is not correct to think of the European form of slave trading as unique. Some historians reckon that Europeans have been guilty of slave trading involving around 10 million Africans who were shipped to America over a period of three hundred years. By comparison, it is estimated that 14 million Africans were exported as slaves to the Muslim world between the 7th and the 20th centuries.² It is difficult to see how this story would give Muslims from the Orient a unique moral right to settle down in Europe in our time.

From a close perspective, it is nevertheless a more special variant of arrogant European racism that is used as a reference for Europeans' guilt. This involves the persecution of Jews by German nazis on racial grounds. The Second World War is often retold in such a way that it can be used in a mythical context.

There are many ways of telling stories about the War. In the schools and the media certain interpretations have become established as the «correct» ones. These have many striking features in common with the five hallmarks of myths. The War is regarded as a battle between two forces: the evil and the good, embodied in nazism and anti-nazism. The latter front is made to include the Red Army and the Western allied armies, as well as the various participants in national resistance movements.

This leads us to suspect that we are dealing with accounts that are more adapted to mystical needs than to historical analytical accounts. The myth will have to assume that the decisive battle was between those who were fighting for democracy, liberation and the same, it must be said that all allied forces during the Second World War were fighting against a regime that was systematically exterminating³ Jews on racial grounds, even though during the War itself, this was not the most explicit motive for participation in the battles. The fact that between five and six million non-combatant Jews who perished during the War have taken on a special significance in relation to the 160 and 170 million civilian victims of various political regimes during the 20th century, based on R. J. Rummel's estimates, can be interpreted in a number of ways.

With good reason it can be claimed that the extermination of the Jews was more purposeful and organized (and thus more malevolent (than most other murders that were more indirect. By the same token, we could say that a number of Jews have been adept at exploiting sociological research and the media to focus attention on themselves. But there is a third possible interpretation, which we could call the mythical need: The reason the slaughter of the Jews figures so prominently in accounts of World War II is that this genocide can be linked so directly to racist and nazi ideas and thus provide a means of combining the inhumane, the non-scientific and the politically authoritarian in one image. If this image can be made to represent the apex of evil, even as it is cast as the opposite of New liberal ideals, then a number of New Liberal interpretations will have been provided with a virtually impenetrable defense.

The relative aspect of the predominant myth becomes clearer when cast against the backdrop of an anti-myth. Instead of dichotomizing the fronts under the Second World War as an ideological conflict between nazis and anti-nazis, the basic contrast could be viewed as a conflict between people who were trying to defend their homeland on a nationalistic foundation on the one hand, and people who were willing to subjugate countries imperialistically on the other. The losers in this war were those who had not known the strength or the necessity of a national policy. Alas, the Jews and Gypsies had to suffer because they had not developed a nation and an army to defend themselves. The Germans suffered defeat because they championed a supranational new order without first acquiring the requisite national and civilizational legitimization for this new order.

To avoid misunderstanding, we should emphasize the following: When we call an account mythical, this does not mean that the basic subject to which the myth refers has not taken place, merely that the myth forces reality, which is multifarious, into the constraints of a specific interpretation. When we say that the accounts of Jewish persecution are part of a

contemporary myth, this in no way trivializes the historical consequences for the Jews. Attempts by so-called revisionists to cast doubt on the reliability or tenability of studies of the Holocaust are a derailment of the debate in this context. It is the validity, or the utilitarianism of the accounts of the Holocaust that should be questioned (that is, the relevance of certain historical events to finding answers to contemporary challenges related to overpopulation and to the relationship between different civilizations.

The spread of certain mythical interpretations of the Second World War indicate that we are dealing with interpretations which appeal to far more people than those who personally experienced this war. The link between the Holocaust and fascism, and between fascism and genetic explanations of social differences, has become an important reference for spokesmen in politics and the media, in cultural life and research.⁴ The reasons for this are many. One plausible explanation is that these connections help limit public debate on social differences to socially-determined circumstances, and thus to circumstances that many would like to explain away by some acceptable means.

A myth is often useful as a cautionary tale; but without an analytical corrective, it can all too easily mislead. If a single myth becomes all-powerful, it can masquerade as cultural integration. But it can actually be a form of integration at odds with the conditions for dialogue and the development of insight that would be important to a more complete social understanding.

References

- 1 Where the myth is predominant, we can expect a strong cultural pressure, not only on the politically active, but on the entire collective memory of a people. - Cf. Olick, Jeffrey K. and Danaiel Levy: «Collective Memory and Cultural Constraint: Holocaust Myth and Rationalitiy in German Politics». *American Sociological Review*, 1997, Vol. 62 (Dec. 921-936).
- 2 Mauny, Raymond (1970): *Les siècles obscure de l'Àfrique noir: histoire et archeologie*, Paris.
- 3 R. J. Rummel, with his average figures for different genocide researchers, has concluded that communistic states took the life of 0.52% of the civilian population per year in those areas where they ruled, as opposed to 0.40% for totalitarian states taken as a whole, 0.21% for authoritarian states, and 0.01% for democratic states. Cp. Rummel, Rudolph J. (1995): *Death by Government*. Transaction Publications. New Brunswick; tab. 1.6.
- 4 Novick, Peter (1999): *The Holocaust in American Life*. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston/ New York - Finkelstein; Norman G.(2000): *The Holocaust Industry: reflections on the exploitation of Juwish suffering*. Verso Books, London

[Back to main page](#)