

# Historical Truth, National Myths and Liberal Democracy: On the Coherence of Liberal Nationalism\*

ARASH ABIZADEH  
*Political Science, McGill University*

WHEN, in his famous 1882 lecture “Qu’est ce qu’une nation?”, Ernest Renan claimed that national identity constitutively depends upon a selective and even distorted memory of past events, he was not casting ethical aspersions on nationalism. Rather he was simply making a functionalist observation about the viability of large-scale national identities. But if Renan’s observation is valid—as is widely acknowledged today by both critics and partisans of the nation—then it does raise a normative problem for theorists who defend national identities having already granted liberal democratic normative premises. For there is a tension between liberal democratic theory’s commitment to norms of publicity, public justification, and freedom of expression,<sup>1</sup> on the one hand, and the nationalist defence of a publicly shared identity dependent on historical myth, on the other. This paper interrogates the coherence of liberal nationalism by asking whether national myths can be justified once liberal democratic norms are taken for granted. My task, then, is not to ask whether liberal democratic norms themselves are justified (or coherent), but rather to ask whether the liberal democratic norms of publicity, public justification, and freedom of expression can cohere with nationalist normative commitments.

The analysis proceeds by making a crucial distinction between identity-constituting narratives that do make historical truth claims, and ones that do not. National myths invariably do make historical truth claims, and my thesis is that historical myths of this sort are indefensible within the framework of

\*For valuable comments on previous versions, I am grateful to Seyla Benhabib, Lori Gruen, Bruce Masters, David Miller, Don Moon, Sankar Muthu, Jennifer Pitts, Mathias Risse, Peter Rutland, Kariann Yokota, and the participants at Wesleyan’s Public Affairs Center seminar (February 2003).

<sup>1</sup>I understand liberal democracy to be a political association between *free* and *equal* citizens in which the exercise of political power is legitimated by appeal to the principle that citizens must be able to see the terms of their association, and the decisions affecting their well-being, as the outcome of free and reasoned public deliberation among equals. See Joshua Cohen, “Deliberation and democratic legitimacy,” *The Good Polity*, ed. A. Hamlin & Philip Pettit (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 21, and Seyla Benhabib, “Toward a deliberative model of democratic legitimacy,” *Democracy and Difference* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 68.

liberal democratic political philosophy. Perhaps *all* modern societies, including liberal ones, indeed depend functionally on myths of some sort; but if so, liberal democratic societies can only legitimately rely on myths of the latter sort, which do *not* make historical truth claims.<sup>2</sup> It may be true that modern democracy first arose in a national context, but the normative compatibility between the nation and liberal democracy remains at best an open question. Liberal democratic nationalists beware.

## I. RENAN: THE NECESSITY OF MYTH

For Renan, national identity is an affective identity that goes beyond the material interests that structure strategic action: “The community of interests makes for commercial treaties. In nationality there is an aspect of sentiment; it is at once soul and body; a *Zollverein* is not a *patrie*.”<sup>3</sup> According to Renan, the nation is constituted by two things: shared past *memories* and the present *will* to live together.<sup>4</sup> The latter is the normative criterion of legitimacy (“the wish of nations is, definitively, the sole criterion of legitimacy”<sup>5</sup>), while the former provides the affective source that empirically motivates willed consent.<sup>6</sup>

It is a shared memory of a common history—of glories, sacrifices, common suffering, and so on—that affectively motivates the present will to bind together, to act together in unified fashion. This motivational force does not come, as it did for Fichte, from a promise of immortality: “Nations are not something eternal.”<sup>7</sup> Rather, Renan locates the motivating and binding character of the nation in the nature of its shared historical memory:

the essence of the nation is that all the individuals have many things in common, and also that all have forgotten many things . . . every French citizen should have forgotten [*doit avoir oublié*] [the massacre of] Saint Bartholomew, [and] the massacres of the Midi in the thirteenth century.

The national memory must be a willfully *selective* memory. This mythical element in its shared memories is what enables the nation’s common history to provide it with a motivating power, so much so that the academic study of history poses a threat to the capacity of the nation to hold together: “Forgetting, and I would even say historical error, are an essential factor in the creation of a nation, and so it is that progress in historical studies is often a danger to nationality.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Rogers M. Smith, “Citizenship and the politics of people-building,” *Citizenship Studies*, 5 (2001), 73–96, argues that the creation and maintenance of all “political peoples” (i.e., groups that claim the ultimate allegiance of their members) require “constitutive stories” that characterize the people’s distinctive characteristics.

<sup>3</sup>Ernest Renan, “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?,” *Oeuvres complètes de Ernest Renan*, ed. Henriette Psichari (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1947 [1882]), vol. 1, p. 902. Translations are mine.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 903–4.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 905.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 904.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 905.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 891.

This is exactly the reason why some students of nations and nationalism have condemned the political role of national identity. Citing precisely this passage from Renan, Eric Hobsbawm concludes that “no serious historian of nations and nationalism can be a committed political nationalist . . . Nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not so.”<sup>9</sup> For scholars such as Hobsbawm, nations are in large part fabrications, and commitment to the deceits of national history involves a sort of false consciousness through which some groups dominate others. False or deceptive historical myths appear to subject (some portion of) the citizens to a power beyond any democratic principle of legitimation, whether consent or rational public contestation or critique. The fact that societies are inevitably characterized by conflicts of interests simply exacerbates the problem: the use of some myths rather than others to buttress a given collective identity, and thereby to legitimate a set of sociopolitical relations, will inevitably serve some groups’ interests better than others’. Assuming that at least some social actors will recognize the power of myths to legitimate sociopolitical arrangements, barring the possibility of critique, powerful groups may freely use myths to service their own domination. The philosophical problem should be clear: if social integration is to be secured via a collective identity that is in part premised on lies, then to the extent that liberal democracy implies norms of public justification, publicity, and meaningful consent, social integration appears to be incompatible with liberal democracy.

Against the charge that identity-grounding myths are simply lies and fabrications that represent some particular groups’ will to power, others have argued that it is a mistake to understand national histories as a set of truth claims in the fashion of the academic historian. Rather, they should be seen as something closer to stories. To hold them up to rational scrutiny, according to standards of “truth,” is itself a modernist conceit which, oblivious to the narrative dimensions of the human experience, destroys the possibility of human community. National myths are not lies and fabrications; they are inspiring narratives, stemming from human *imagination*, in which we tell ourselves who we are or want to be. Benedict Anderson makes this point explicit: when Gellner claims that nationalism “*invents* nations where they do not exist,” he

is so anxious to show that nationalism masquerades under false pretences that he assimilates ‘invention’ to ‘fabrication’ and ‘falsity’, rather than ‘imagining’ and ‘creation’. In this way he implies that ‘true’ communities exist which can be advantageously juxtaposed to nations. In fact, *all communities* larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) *are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup>Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. edn (London: Verso, 1991), p. 6, all italics mine, except for italics in the Gellner quote.

How can we evaluate such a response? Of course it may be that *all* historical narratives are in part “mythical” in some sense, and that all societies—even liberal ones—depend on such narratives. But the question here is whether or not such historical narratives should be open to contestation on the basis of the *criterion* of truth. An obvious objection to Anderson’s account is that to abandon the criterion of truth undermines the possibility of disciplining power via sociopolitical critique. Historical narratives are, after all, put into the service of justifying some relations of power rather than others: to say that historical narratives are necessary to the maintenance of a particular collective identity is to say that those narratives comprise one of the bases for the exercise of sociopolitical power. And national myths invariably seem to do this by actually making historical truth claims. The question is this: if one abandons truth as a criterion for evaluating the historical narratives that help sociologically legitimate sociopolitical arrangements, then how might dominated individuals or groups challenge the prevailing status quo?

## II. NATIONALIST DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY?

One response is that truth need not be the only basis for sociopolitical critique. David Miller argues (1) that historical myths are a component of national identity, (2) that such myths should not necessarily be subject to the demands of truth, and (3) that this restraint does not prevent the critique of status quo power according to democratic norms of equality.

(1) Miller concedes that “because of the historical dimension of the nation,” “various stories are concocted about the past history of the people who inhabited the territory now defined as national.” As such, “national identities typically contain a considerable element of myth,” and so it appears that if “one applies to them canons of rationality, they are revealed to be fraudulent.”<sup>11</sup>

(2) But in fact, Miller argues, it is not “rational” to subject national myths to the criterion of historical truth:

once we discover that national identities contain elements of myth, we should ask what part these myths play in building and sustaining nations. For it may not be rational to discard beliefs, even if they are, strictly speaking, false, when they can be shown to contribute significantly to the support of valuable social relations.<sup>12</sup>

By “rational,” Miller presumably means instrumentally rational—conducive to social utilitarian ends. He identifies two ways in which national myths are socially useful. First, myths “perform a moralizing role, by holding up before us the virtues of our ancestors and encouraging us to live up to them.” Second, “they provide reassurance that the national community of which one now forms part is solidly based in history, that it embodies a real continuity between

<sup>11</sup>Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 34–5.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 35–6.

generations.”<sup>13</sup> It is more than a little strange here to speak of “real” continuity when we are speaking about myths; presumably what Miller really means is that the (mythical) continuity is subjectively experienced as “real.” But if that is right, it undermines his elaboration of this argument. Miller later suggests that historical myths help to forge, beyond a mere mutual-benefit cooperative association, a community grounded in a historical identity. As such, the nationals’ “obligations to one another do not *arise* simply from the present fact of their cooperation; they can appeal to their historic identity, to *sacrifices made in the past* by one section of the community on behalf of others.”<sup>14</sup> On what plausible normative theory could mythical sacrifices that were not in fact made—or, to frame the issue as a matter of historical interpretation, acts that, given the broad range of historical facts (partly ignored by the mythical history), could not plausibly be understood as sacrifices—incur obligations on others?<sup>15</sup> The thought that myths may be justified because they provide historical reassurances does not get us very far. For it is not enough to know (a) that a mythical, possibly false, reassurance of continuity serves some ends that *would be* valuable *if* the myths had been true (for example, that they enable us to repay sacrifices made on our behalf).<sup>16</sup> We also need to know (b) why the myths would serve ends whose value is independent of the myths’ truth or falsity (for example, because they serve social integration, where social integration is taken to be valuable independent of facts about the past). Moreover, we also need to know (c) how the myths serve these valuable ends in a way that their instrumental value is not overridden by other considerations (that, for example, they incur social integration by illegitimately subjecting some groups to others, or by irreparably harming democratic norms).<sup>17</sup>

For the sake of argument, let us grant (b) that social integration would have some value independent of any historical facts (for example, that the social integration of this polity would be valuable independent of the true historical relationship between its constituent parts). The question to which I want to

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 42, emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Charles Jones: “Insofar as nations as ethical communities are historical fictions, they cannot legitimately generate any obligations on the part of compatriots for one another.” “Revenge of the philosophical mole: another response to David Miller on nationality,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 13 (1996), 73–86 at p. 79.

<sup>16</sup>Miller’s position that mythical sacrifices could incur obligations on others seems, among other things, to require denying the reason-dependence of the value of an end or goal. Compare, for example, with Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. 141–2.

<sup>17</sup>Here I am dealing with arguments that purport to show that shared national identities constituted by myths are instrumentally valuable as indispensable means to social cooperation, integration, etc. I do not deal with arguments that claim that shared national identity is a good in itself—a claim that, if true, might be taken to imply that myths have constitutive, non-instrumental value. But a similar point could be made even if it were assumed that the myths have constitutive, non-instrumental value, by virtue of being an integral part of a putatively valuable state of affairs. It would now have to be shown that the putative value of the state of affairs would not be compromised by the falsity of its constitutive myths.

return is (c) whether the social integration facilitated by myths could provide adequate room for the critique of power, as is required for its legitimacy according to liberal democratic standards.

(3) Miller argues that it could: the relevant basis for the critique of power is not the appeal to historical *truth*, but to a democratic norm of *deliberative equality*:

the crucial line of division may not lie between the truth of ‘real’ history and the falsehood of ‘national’ history, but between national identities that emerge through open processes of debate and discussion to which everyone is potentially a contributor, and identities that are authoritatively imposed by repression and indoctrination.<sup>18</sup>

Thus Miller locates the possibility of the critique of power in an account of deliberative democracy.<sup>19</sup> The exercise of power based in historical myths will still be subject to democratic norms as long as the discursive processes by which those myths are established are subject to the norms of deliberative democracy—in particular, the provision of equal opportunities, in the public sphere, for all groups to contribute to the formation and revision of the dominant national myths.

To the extent that the *process* involves inputs from all sections of the community, with groups only competing to imprint the common identity with their own particular image, we may justifiably regard the identity that emerges as an authentic one. No national identity will ever be pristine, but there is still a large difference between those that have evolved more or less spontaneously, and those that are mainly the result of political imposition.<sup>20</sup>

While the rhetoric of “authenticity” and “spontaneous evolution” conjures up illusions of prepolitical national identities, we could reformulate Miller’s account to avoid this problem. But we cannot rid it of another problem.

My thesis is the following: *either* (1) Miller abandons truth as a criterion for the critique of power, in which case either he cannot account for the phenomenological status of the speech acts of the actors who engage in processes of democratic deliberation, or he must abandon the critique of status quo power, *or* (2) he must covertly smuggle the criterion of truth into his account of deliberation.

To proceed, we need to be attentive to the different senses in which a historical account could be said to consist of “myth.” An obvious analytical distinction is between myth as imaginative narrative story and myth as a narrative purporting

<sup>18</sup>Miller, *On Nationality*, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup>For Miller’s defence of deliberative democracy, see David Miller, *Market, State, and Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), ch. 10; David Miller, “Deliberative democracy and social choice,” *Prospects for Democracy*, ed. David Held (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 74–92; and Miller, *On Nationality*, pp. 96, 150–1.

<sup>20</sup>Miller, *On Nationality*, p. 40, emphasis added.

to make historical truth claims.<sup>21</sup> (1) Some unifying, identity-constituting myths fit very neatly into the myth-as-story account. For a good number of Jews and Christians, for instance, many biblical narratives are not understood to be historically “true.” But they nonetheless provide an important part of their religious identity. Their import does not depend on their veracity as a set of historical truth claims; rather, their “truth” lies in the inspiration for human action, in their ethical message, or in the very act of reading a set of stories in common with others. The narratives perhaps do not tell their readers what their characters did in fact say, but what they should have said, and are understood in this way.<sup>22</sup> (2) But some identity-constituting myths *are* understood as a set of historical truth claims by the actors who bear the identity, and their truth/falsity is precisely what purportedly legitimates a set of sociopolitical relations in which some actors exercise power over others. In other words, there are some histories that could not do the sociopolitical work they do for an identity if they were understood merely as stories by the social actors involved. For example, one of the myths upon which the unity of the American nation is based is that Hawaii, one of its constituent parts, voluntarily joined the union. The jurisdiction of the United States over Hawaiian lands is justified by reference to some supposedly historical act of collective Hawaiian consent. But if it turns out that Hawaii was annexed forcibly—as scholars have in fact shown<sup>23</sup>—that is, if the historical narrative is false, then there might be important normative consequences for US jurisdiction over the islands.<sup>24</sup>

This two-fold distinction enables us to distinguish analytically between four cases (which may, and usually will, be mixed in practice). The first three cases are instances of what I call *myth-as-history*, that is, cases in which the historical narrative undergirds a collective identity only insofar as it is understood to be making truth claims. (1) There is the case in which the historical narrative is mythical in the sense that it is false. Call this *myths-as-lies*. (Renan’s reference

<sup>21</sup>Obviously, I am using “myth” in a broader sense than Percy S. Cohen, “Theories of myth,” *Man*, 4 (1969), 337–53, who defines myths as a narrative, at least some of whose events or objects only exist in the narrative, which refers to origins or transformations, and which has a sacred quality (p. 337). Nor do I restrict the term to an account that is “vague in its specifications of time and space,” as Peter Munz does, in “History and myth,” *Philosophical Quarterly*, 6 (1956), 1–16 at p. 2. Mary Fulbrook provides a definition that resonates with my use of the word: “myths are stories which are not necessarily true, nor even believed to be true, but which have symbolic power”; “Myth-making and national identity: the case of the G.D.R.,” *Myths and Nationhood*, ed. Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 72–87 at p. 73. Cf. George Schöpflin, “The functions of myth and a taxonomy of myths,” *Myths and Nationhood*, ed. Hosking and Schöpflin, pp. 19–35 at p. 19.

<sup>22</sup>What Munz, “History and myth,” has in mind when he calls myth a “concrete universal” is related to this. For Munz, myths identify universal features of significance and embody these in a particular story. Myths provide the standard, for Munz, of what counts as significant, and hence included in *historical* accounts.

<sup>23</sup>J. Kehaulani Kauanui, “‘For get’ Hawaiian Entitlement: Configurations of Land, ‘Blood,’ and Americanization in the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act of 1921,” *Social Text*, 59 (1999), 123–44.

<sup>24</sup>As suggested by the UN report recommending that Hawaii be returned to the UN List of Non-Self-Governing Territories; cited by Kauanui, “‘For get’ Hawaiian entitlement,” p. 140, n. 4.

to “historical error” falls under this category.) There are also the cases in which the historical narrative is necessarily understood in terms of truth claims, but the truths told are selective, or given a particular interpretive spin conducive to the identity-building project. The account is mythical in the sense that the interpretive spin relies on (2) embellishments and details about whose truth or falsity there is simply no evidence, or on (3) the omission of particular historical facts that would necessarily change our beliefs about events that are remembered. Call these two cases *myth-as-embellishment* and *myth-as-omission*, respectively. (Renan’s “forgetting” is an example of the latter.) (4) Finally, there is the case in which a historical narrative undergirding a collective identity can be called mythical in the sense that it is understood by the collectivity’s members in literary terms. This is what I have called *myth-as-story*. (This is the scenario Anderson emphasizes.)

### III. MYTH AS LIE AND AS EMBELLISHMENT

As we have seen, Miller’s position is that the truth or falsity of a set of myths can be rendered normatively innocuous if the myths serve some important socially useful ends, as long as those myths have been arrived at via a process of open, egalitarian democratic debate. Now, one obvious way to characterize a discourse about historical truth claims is as a process whose telos is to allow its participants (ideally) to reach an understanding, according to some canons of rationality, about the historical truth of the matter. (This is Habermas’ account of theoretical discourse, for instance.) But Miller is ruling out this telos. Instead, on Miller’s account, the telos of the discourse is to come to a *socially useful* understanding *about history* (that is, the goal of the interlocutors would be to come to believe a historical narrative as *true* because that account serves their *interests*.) Recall that in cases of myth-as-history, the actors understand themselves and are understood to be advancing truth claims, *and* the myths are socially useful only insofar as they are actually taken by the participants to *be true*. (If they did not think the account were a matter of true or false, it would be a myth-as-story, not myth-as-history; if they thought it were false, *ex hypothesi* it could not be socially useful, that is, it would not be an example of any of the four cases.)

There are two problems with Miller’s account of deliberative democracy insofar as it relates to the treatment of (1) myths-as-lies, and both problems apply to (2) myth-as-embellishment as well. The first problem concerns *conflicts of interests* between different social actors. The second concerns the *process* of deliberation and the self-understandings of the deliberators.

Let us begin with the latter question, by assuming a harmony of interests in order to isolate the process problem. We must ask, what is the status of the speech acts for the actors themselves who contribute to the deliberative process? If the interlocutors are making truth claims they know to be false, then they

themselves do not believe them. Nor will they actually believe fictional embellishments they have made up, that is, for which there is no evidence.<sup>25</sup> But *ex hypothesi*, myths-as-lies and myth-as-embellishment must be believed in order to be socially useful.<sup>26</sup> So the assumption must be that speakers make insincere truth claims in order to persuade *others* of historical facts that would be socially useful to believe. Now, either everyone understands that this insincerity is a constitutive feature of the deliberative process, or not. If everyone understands that insincerity is one of the constitutive features of the deliberative process, then the process would be self-defeating, because no hearer would believe that the propositional content of a speaker's speech act says something true about the world; they would only believe that they were hearing something that would be useful to believe as true. So in order to work, there must be an epistemological asymmetry built into the deliberative process: the majority of the participants cannot know that one of the process's constituents is insincerity. In other words, there must exist a group of benevolent, paternalistic elites who are aware of the true telos of the process, and who construct historical myths-as-lies or myths-as-embellishment that they think would serve general social interests, which they insincerely claim to be true;<sup>27</sup> and there must exist a mass of individuals who are not aware that this is the deliberative telos, that is, who mistakenly think that the telos of the deliberative process is to allow its participants to reach an understanding about the truth of the matter *à la* Habermas.<sup>28</sup>

But this represents a serious breach of the critical democratic norms to which Miller aspires. First, there would be a serious inequality, at the epistemological level, built into the very structure of discourse itself. Second, this epistemological inequality could in principle persist only if we made the *discursive process itself* unreflexive, that is, off-limits as a subject of discursive thematization and critique. In other words, the problem that myths-as-lies and myths-as-embellishment pose would only be pushed back one level: there would have to be a *second-order* myth-as-lie about the deliberative process itself. This already represents a serious curtailment of critique, and the implications for the critique

<sup>25</sup>It is true that we sometimes come to believe fictions by dint of having repeated them to ourselves over and over again, but such belief would not withstand the full scrutiny of critical discourse, which is what is at issue here.

<sup>26</sup>If they are embellishments that are understood to be embellishments and not truths, then we have a myth-as-story component here. Also, note that I am not suggesting that identities necessarily require shared beliefs to exist. I am simply saying these shared beliefs may be *one* way that the power relations which obtain in a collective identity might be legitimated.

<sup>27</sup>See David Archard's discussion of the "sexual lottery" tale that Plato wants the guardians to tell the ruled in the *Republic*, in "Myths, lies and historical truth: a defence of nationalism," *Political Studies*, 43 (1995), 472–81 at p. 480.

<sup>28</sup>Notice that the case of myth-as-story does not raise these problems for Miller's deliberative democracy account. The actors presumably narrate their stories, do not understand themselves to be advancing truth claims, and are not understood to be doing so by their interlocutors. There is something about the *internal* logic of the speech acts involved that rules out the appeal to truth as a criterion for evaluation: to do so would simply be to have misunderstood the speech acts themselves.

of power become manifest once we drop the assumption of the harmony of interests. If there exists a conflict of interest between the epistemological elites and the masses, and on the assumption that the elites would perpetuate myths that serve their own interests, then the result of this deliberative process would be the proliferation of myths-as-lies and myths-as-embellishment that effect social integration by subjecting the masses to the interests of the powerful via false consciousness. Allowing for critique of this outcome seems to require that the masses *not* be under illusions about the telos of the deliberative process, which, as I have already noted, would imply a self-defeating process.

Against this it might be argued that there exist situations in which there *is* a harmony of interests amongst almost all the members of society, and that this is precisely when restrictions on the process of critical public deliberation may be justifiable in the service of national myth creation. Just as an individual may deem it “rational” to restrict his future options (as Ulysses did when he bound himself to avoid succumbing to the Sirens<sup>29</sup>), a polity may *collectively* decide to tie its hands by placing ongoing restrictions on future processes of critical public discourse. The members of the polity, for example, may knowingly create institutions designed to mask or falsify the public historical evidence in cases where myths would serve the interests of all. (Just as, for example, liberal democratic societies sometimes do so in matters of “national security.”) It then might be argued that the problem would be reduced to a principal-agent problem: how to ensure that the epistemological elites faithfully mirror the interests of the people without the masses knowing the content of the elite’s activities (so as not to be self-defeating).<sup>30</sup>

But the problem is actually wider than this: the response just cited involves a serious compromise of the liberal democratic norms taken for granted in this paper. This compromise obviously calls into question the coherence of liberal nationalism. First of all, the success of the just-cited justification for myths (which has affinities with Government House Utilitarianism<sup>31</sup>) would require showing that the standard justifications for liberal democratic norms are

<sup>29</sup>It is Jon Elster who uses this episode from the *Odyssey* as a metaphor for the phenomenon of rational precommitment, in *Ulysses and the Sirens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>30</sup>Imagine, for instance, an egalitarian democratic polity, made up of two social groups, that has just successfully won a defensive war against an enemy bent on enslaving its neighbours. Postwar celebrations suffer a blow when it is revealed that the polity’s minority group had been courted by the enemy, and that many of its members had in fact betrayed their fellow citizens, sending large numbers to their deaths. That the betrayals occurred only under pressure of death mitigates to some extent the anger of the majority, but there is a lingering and lasting bitterness. The minority, for its part, has feelings of shame mixed with resentment, and increasing alienation from the polity at large. Everyone realizes that it would be in everyone’s best interests to bury this incident, and the fact that the betrayals were committed under duress makes the burial palatable to the majority. So that future generations are not marred by the memory, it is collectively and democratically decided to construct an alternative history, backed by faked documents, and to restrict public access to the evidence contradicting it.

<sup>31</sup>Bernard Williams, *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers, 1982–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 166.

erroneous, or at least overstated. To put it the other way, this defence of myths, which requires a curtailment of publicity, public justification, and freedom of expression, is now open to all the objections that liberal democratic theory has often levelled against its rivals. To cite but one example, it runs straight against Thomas Scanlon's defence of freedom of expression in light of the "Millian Principle" according to which "the powers of a state are limited to those that citizens could recognize while still regarding themselves as equal, autonomous, rational agents." By "autonomous," Scanlon means that "a person must see himself as sovereign in deciding what to believe and in weighing competing reasons for action."<sup>32</sup> An "autonomous person cannot accept without independent consideration the judgment of others as to what he should believe or what he should do."<sup>33</sup> This implies that while autonomy is compatible with recognizing an obligation to obey the commands of an authority (such as the state), it would be incompatible with an obligation to *believe* the decrees of the authority to be correct. Thus the "harm of coming to have false beliefs is not one that an autonomous man could allow the state to protect him against through restrictions on expression."<sup>34</sup> It follows that he could not allow the state to "protect" him from coming to have *true* beliefs either.<sup>35</sup> My point is not that Scanlon's liberalism is ultimately correct; my point is simply that the defence of nationalist myths-as-lies and myths-as-embellishment is incompatible with standard liberal democratic accounts of how power must be legitimated. If national integration depends on such myths, liberal nationalism has a problem.

<sup>32</sup>Thomas Scanlon, "A theory of freedom of expression," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1 (1972), 204–26 at p. 215.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 216–17.

<sup>35</sup>Scanlon, *ibid.*, p. 219, concedes that an autonomous person aware of his own poor judgment on some matters may rationally and legitimately seek, in these matters, to rely on the judgment of others. Such a person, Scanlon suggests, may even temporarily "enter into an agreement, subject to periodic review by him, empowering them to shield him from any sources of information likely to divert him from their counsel on the matters in question." But what he could not do, and remain autonomous, is concede such powers to others (such as the state) as part of the normal and permanent course of affairs; nor could it be in the state's powers to effect such arrangements whenever *it* judged them to be advisable.

Nonetheless, the concession might suggest that while it would be illegitimate to create permanent institutions restricting the expression of (or the public's access to) historical truths (or records), *temporary* measures curtailing standard liberal democratic procedures might still be permissible. So in the example about the two-group democratic polity in footnote 30, while it may be illegitimate to set up permanent institutions restricting public access to the historical evidence, it may nonetheless be possible to engage in a one-shot doctoring of the records, for example, by collectively and democratically deciding to destroy historical records that compromise the desired myth. This is what Carl Schmitt's defence of a "commiserial dictatorship" in *Die Diktatur* would suggest; see Gopal Balakrishnan, *The Enemy: An Intellectual Portrait of Carl Schmitt* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 32. But of course such a "temporary" measure has permanent effects and, even under the assumption of harmony of interests, would still raise difficult questions about the non-instrumental value of historical knowledge, about intergenerational justice, and so on. And once we consider future generations, the assumption of harmony of interests becomes *extremely* problematic in light of the fact that interests change in unpredictable ways. But as Carl Schmitt teaches us, the problem that cases like this pose for liberal democracy is real.

Second, this compromise of liberal democratic norms is considerably exacerbated by an important disanalogy between Ulysses-type cases and the one in question here: in the Ulysses case, the agent attempts to bind his future self's capacity for *action*, whereas our case requires the collective "agent" to restrict its future capacity for *knowledge* or *belief*. This cognitive dimension is precisely why there is a second-order problem: even if, thanks to a complete harmony of interests, the entire body politic unanimously decides to set up myth-making institutional elites, the masses must not only come to be under illusions about the *content* of the myths, they must also be under illusions about the nature of the institutions. That is to say, in order to believe the myths created by the Ministry of Myth, the masses must be under the illusion that they are coming from the Ministry of Truth.<sup>36</sup> It is not only that such institutions curtail liberal democracy in the future; it is also difficult to see how the institutions could be successfully created and democratically legitimated via transparent procedures in the first place.<sup>37</sup>

Miller of course does not *endorse* myths-as-lies; he simply argues that the criterion of truth should not be operative as a regulative principle of democratic deliberation. But taking certain myths for granted in this way is incompatible with the liberal democratic commitment to the critique of power.<sup>38</sup> The problems arise because on Miller's account, unlike Habermas', there is a disjuncture between the telos of the deliberative process (reaching a *socially useful* set of beliefs) and its purported mode of operation (advancing truth claims, not about what is socially useful, but *about history*). And the upshot is this: in order to abandon truth as an evaluative criterion, Miller either cannot account for the phenomenological status of the speech acts of the actors who engage in processes

<sup>36</sup>According to Robert Parry, when the Reagan administration in the US set up a propaganda apparatus in the 1980s designed to manipulate public opinion, it was initially named "Project Truth"; see his *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* (Arlington, Va.: Media Consortium, 1999).

<sup>37</sup>The Office of Strategic Influence debacle in the United States in February 2002 illustrates this second order cognitive problem rather well: in order for propaganda to work, it cannot be actively known to be such by its targets. The US Pentagon's plans were to create an office that would plant news stories of strategic interest to the US in the non-US media (which could then be picked up, of course, by US media). But when a senior Pentagon official told the *New York Times* that the Office's head envisioned operations that go "from the blackest of black programs to the whitest of white" (Maureen Dowd, "Office of Strategic Mendacity" *New York Times* section A, p. 21, column 1, 2002/02/20), implying that the Office would feed the media disinformation and lies, the revelation not only created an uproar, but it positively undermined the Office's capacity to function. The Pentagon immediately began denying that the Office would lie (James Dao, "New Agency Will Not Lie, Top Pentagon Officials Say" *New York Times* section A, p. 14, column 5, 2002/02/21). But the damage was done, and within a week US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld declared the Office shut, citing the fact that the reports of disinformation had made its functioning impossible (Eric Schmitt, "Rumsfeld Says He May Drop New Office Of Influence" *New York Times* Section A; Page 13; Column 6, 2002/02/25; Eric Schmitt, "Bush Seals Fate of Office Of Influence In Pentagon" *New York Times* section A, p. 17, column 6, 2002/02/26; Eric Schmitt and James Dao, "A 'Damaged' Information Office Is Declared Closed by Rumsfeld" section A, p. 1, column 5, 2002/02/27).

<sup>38</sup>See also Jonathan Seglow, "Universals and Particulars: The Case of Liberal Cultural Nationalism," *Political Studies* 46 (1998): 963–77, at pp. 972–3.

of democratic deliberation, or he must abandon the critique of status quo elite power. This leads to an insurmountable tension between critique and the needs of social integration reflected in an incoherence in Miller's account of democratic deliberation. Thus Miller oscillates between wanting to allow for myths, in which case he denies the applicability of rational truth-seeking, and wanting to allow for critique, in which case he covertly retreats to canons of rationality and the pursuit of truth. After proposing the classification of myths according to whether they are arrived at through open debate or through authoritarian imposition, rather than according to their truth/falsity, Miller then suggests that democratically arrived at myths "are very unlikely indeed to involve the outright denial of historical fact."<sup>39</sup> But why would they not, unless the telos of the process were to arrive at an understanding *about the truth* of the matter? The point is that Miller's assessment is probably quite right, but the *reason* he is right is that participants in democratic deliberation will contest historical claims on the basis of canons of rationality and truth-seeking. The criterion of truth is doing covert work here. Consider another example. Against the charge that his theory amounts to the conservative "sanctification of merely traditional ethical relations," and thus the prevailing status quo of power relations, Miller is compelled to respond by appealing to the very same criterion of rational reflexivity that he previously had curtailed in the name of socially useful myths:

To the extent that national identities, and the public cultures that help to compose them, are shaped by processes of rational reflection to which members of the community can contribute on an equal footing, this charge no longer applies.<sup>40</sup>

#### IV. MYTH AS OMISSION AND AS STORY

Similar problems might be thought to exist for the case of (3) myth-as-omission, designed to produce interpretations of historical events that are socially useful. Take two historical events, A and B. For example, let A be the French and English colonization of the land in North America, plus the later confederation between the two settler groups to found a country called Canada; and let B be the fact that there were Aboriginal peoples living in that land, with their own cultural practices and ways of life, who were sometimes driven off the land, sometimes killed in battle or by European diseases, and subjugated by the European colonists. Now let us make two assumptions about the events in order to construct a case of (3) myth-as-omission. First, let us assume that our interpretation of event A would be very different depending on whether or not we were aware of event B: if we were not aware of B, our interpretation of A would be A1, and if we were aware of B, our interpretation of A would be A2. And second, let us assume that it would be socially very useful to believe A1

<sup>39</sup>Miller, *On Nationality*, p. 39.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

rather than A2. So, in our Canadian example, if we overlooked B, we might be able to tell (A1) the proud history of two founding nations who confederated together to form a bilingual state—which is thus originally based on the legitimating principle of consent—that has welcomed all sorts of immigrants to enjoy its prosperity ever since. But if we added event B to the mix, our understanding of A would change drastically: (A2) the French and English could no longer be seen as *the* founding nations of Canada (with whatever privileges for French and English that this entails), and the Canadian founding would not look so consensual after all. The normative implications, in terms of the claims of Aboriginal peoples on Canada, might be profound.<sup>41</sup> Now, it would probably be extremely useful to Canadian identity, and its capacity to effect social integration, if the historical memory of B were omitted. But this would only be useful because it would allow one to believe interpretation A1, which, in light of all the evidence, seems actually false. But in that case, a myth-as-omission seems to work only insofar as it emulates or helps to produce myths-as-lies, because while the myth-as-omission itself is not constituted by a falsehood, it only works to the extent that it makes possible a false interpretation of some other event. In other words, in the context of a discursive practice understood by the actors themselves as thematizing the historical truth of the matter, attempting to produce a myth-as-omission via an egalitarian deliberative process faces the same objections as in the cases of myths-as-lies or myth-as-embellishment. To avoid the self-defeating nature of the deliberative process, participants in the discourse who wished to claim that A1 was false because B was true would have to be prevented from participating.

But, at this point, the reader might suspect that the argument about myth-as-omission has taken a rationalist turn that belies the nature of historical narratives. For it might be argued that omissions are *essential* to historical narratives as such. And this would imply that *all* historical narratives must make omissions. It thus appears that the distinction between “true” historical narratives and ones that are “mythical” by virtue of omissions cannot be sustained. This is a very serious objection, and I wish to examine it in light of Arthur Danto’s seminal work in the philosophy of history.

Let me quickly concede what cannot, and should not, be denied: all historical narratives omit some true statements about events past. Rather obviously, historical narratives are always *in practice* incomplete because, as Danto notes, the historical records on which they are based are incomplete.<sup>42</sup> To this we might add the time and space constraints impinging on any narrative. But Danto’s more profound insight is that historical narratives are essentially and so *in principle* incomplete.

<sup>41</sup>Their own recognition of this fact is evidenced, for example, in their calling themselves Canada’s “First Nations.”

<sup>42</sup>Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge*, rev. and exp. edn of *Analytical Philosophy of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 113.

This for two reasons. First, Danto argues, “any account of the past is *essentially* incomplete” because “a complete account of the past would presuppose a complete account of the future.” This is because a complete account of even a single event “would have to include every true historical description of that event.”<sup>43</sup> And some such true descriptions take the form of what Danto calls narrative sentences, that is, sentences that “give descriptions of events under which the events could not have been witnessed, since they make essential reference to events later in time than the events they are about, and hence cognitively inaccessible to observers.”<sup>44</sup> Danto provides the event of Diderot’s birth in 1715 as an example: “One true historical description of what took place is that, on that date in 1715, the author of *Rameau’s Nephew* was born.”<sup>45</sup> (Another example Danto gives of a narrative sentence is “The Thirty Years War began in 1618.”<sup>46</sup>) The truth of such descriptions could not be known until well after the event had passed. And the truth or falsity of many descriptions of Diderot’s birth still cannot be known, because they make reference to a future that has not yet happened, and that *we* cannot know even now. So a complete account of the past, that is, one that includes all true descriptions of past events, is impossible in principle.

Of course, this argument assumes that, contrary to the aspirations of substantive philosophers of history, the historian cannot project into and provide a complete account of the future. Danto’s argument for this assumption consists of two premises. First, there is no distinction to be made between purely “descriptive” historical accounts on the one hand and interpretive accounts on the other; rather, all historical descriptions are also interpretations, in that all historical narratives presuppose criteria of *significance* that tell the narrator how to organize the narrative and which events and details to include or leave out:<sup>47</sup> “any narrative is a structure imposed upon events.”<sup>48</sup> Second, “historical significance is connected with non-historical significance, and this latter is something which varies with variations in the interests of human beings.” Thus projection into the future would require not just predicting future events *à la* natural scientific theories, but also knowing “*which* future events are relevant, and this requires predicting the *interests* of future historians.”<sup>49</sup>

The first premise (about the necessity of criteria of significance) in Danto’s argument against the possibility of substantive philosophies of history also furnishes a second, independent argument for why historical narratives are incomplete in principle. Danto’s point here is that “even if we could witness the whole past, any account we would give of it would involve election, emphasis,

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., pp. 17–18.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. xii; cf. p. 143.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. xii.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., pp. 114–15.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., pp. 15, 169.

elimination, and would presuppose some criteria of relevance.”<sup>50</sup> According to Danto, to qualify as a historical narrative at all, an account must meet four conditions. First, it must (at least purport to) “report events which actually happened.” This distinguishes historical narratives from fictional narratives. Second, it must “report them in the order of their occurrence, or, rather, enable us to tell in what order the events did occur.”<sup>51</sup> Third, it must provide some sort of an explanation for the events reported. Yet even this is not enough. Danto’s fourth condition holds that, even if an account provides an explanation, to be a narrative and not simply a list of disconnected events, the account must relate the various events to each other within the parameters of some sort of narrative structure which presupposes criteria of significance.<sup>52</sup> (Conversely, “To ask for the significance of an event, in the *historical* sense of the term, is to ask a question which can be answered only in the context of a *story*. The identical event will have a different significance in accordance with the story in which it is located.”<sup>53</sup>) According to Danto, the notion of significance is

essential to the very structure of narratives. If an earlier event is not significant with regard to a later event in a story, it does not belong in that story . . . If every pair of events mentioned in a story are so unrelated that the earlier one is not significant with regard to the later one, the result is in fact *not* a story.<sup>54</sup>

In this passage, what Danto means by the “significance” of an event is that the event has consequences that the historian finds important. And this, in turn, is linked to a conception of human interests: “a narrative itself is a way of organizing things, and so ‘goes beyond’ what is given, involved in something one might call ‘giving an interpretation’.” The upshot is that “the maximally detailed account, that ideal duplication of history-as-actuality, would not be a narrative.”<sup>55</sup> So there could be no narrative that included *all* the details of what happened in the past, even if we waive the first problem and ignore the fact that many true descriptions of “what happened” are unavailable at any given time because they make reference to an unknown future.<sup>56</sup> If Danto is right then it

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>52</sup>Danto, *ibid.*, gives the following example of an account that meets the first three conditions but is still not a narrative: “Naram-Sin built the Sun Temple at Sippar as a consequence of pressure brought on him by the priestly class; then Phillip III exiled the Moriscos because of his religious convictions; then Uргуiza defeated the forces of Buenos Aires at Cepada because he was better equipped; then Arthur Danto woke on the stroke of seven, 20 October 1961, because he wanted to get an early start for excavations at Cerbetri.”

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>56</sup>In fact, for Danto the two problems are intimately related. We cannot imagine, even in principle, a historical narrative qua narrative produced by an “Ideal Chronicler” who is a witness to and simply describes every event as it happens. And Danto’s reasoning brings us back to his first argument for why a complete account is impossible. Because the Ideal Chronicler does not know the future, when describing the current events to which he stands witness, he is unable to use the whole class of narrative sentences, which make reference to the future. He is also unable to use what Danto calls

would seem that all historical narratives *essentially* qualify as myth-as-omission. And this would mean that if myths-as-omission are just as normatively problematic for grounding collective identities as myths-as-lies, then *all* historical narratives are. For the very distinction between true historical narratives and myth-as-history has collapsed.

I believe that this objection is essentially correct. But two qualifying points need to be made here. First, from the fact that all historical narratives are “mythical” in the narrow and precise sense that they make omissions, it does not follow that all historical narratives are mythical in the other senses I have identified. In other words, we still have a distinction between myths-as-lies, myth-as-embellishment, and “other” historical narratives. These other narratives do not include every past event; but they do not contain falsehoods or embellishments either. The objection simply shows that we must refine our analysis of these necessarily partial and interpretative (but still “true”) historical narratives.

The second point is that even though, within this category of “other” historical narratives, we cannot distinguish between ones that are true and others that omit facts—since all of them meet both conditions—there are other grounds for distinction. In particular, the normative problems that apply to myths-as-lies also apply to some, though not all, of these “true” historical narratives. I distinguish between two cases where this is so: (a) when, as I shall say, a true narrative *emulates* a myth-as-lie, and (b) when a true narrative serves to *produce* a myth-as-lie.

(a) I define emulation in the following terms: a historical narrative emulates a myth-as-lie when the facts or events that it omits are in fact significant according to the *internal* criteria which structure the narrative itself. Imagine, for example, a legal–historical narrative designed to recount the signing of a contract. If in fact there were three people who signed the contract, and the narrative only mentions two (though without denying the existence of the third), *and* the number of parties to the contract is significant within the narrative context, then the narrative functions as a myth-as-lie by emulation. The case of the Canadian founding described above falls under this category, which explains why its normative status is equivalent to that of a myth-as-lie. It is conceivable that A1 (the history of two founding nations who confederated together to form a bilingual state, without mention of the Aboriginal peoples) could be perfectly legitimate as a historical narrative specifically *about* the relationship of conflict and cooperation between the French and the English in North America. The

“project verbs”—verbs that describe temporally structured human actions that make reference to future anticipated results, and that frequently last over a period of time that breaks the action up into discontinuous events linked only by those anticipated results (such as, “he is writing his book this month.”) This inability to use “project words” renders the Ideal Chronicler “incapable of describing what men are *doing*” (p. 162). And project verbs presuppose criteria of significance that tell historians which temporally disconnected acts are part of the same ongoing action.

omission of the Aboriginal role *may* be justifiable in terms of the internal criteria of significance in such a narrative. But a historical narrative of the Canadian founding that purportedly derives its criteria of significance from the fact that it is a narrative telling us who Canadians are (and should be) today and what kind of state they have (and should have), but which omits the Aboriginal presence, emulates a myth-as-lie.

(b) A historical narrative helps *produce* a myth-as-lie when the facts or events it omits, while not internally significant to the narrative itself in its original context, are significant in a new context in which the original narrative is now situated and deployed. Imagine again that three people have signed a contract, but that the narrative reporting this event is in fact a love story about two of the signatories, who met for the second time at the signing. The narrative, quite sensibly, only mentions the lovebirds (without denying the presence of the third signatory). Not much ado here. But imagine that this historical narrative is now being fed into and deployed in a completely different context—say, in a court of law where the case at hand turns on the contract signed. *Now* the original love story is being used to produce a myth-as-lie that there were only two parties present, in a context where the number of signatories is significant. In other words, in these cases, the omitted facts or events are significant according to criteria *external* to the original narrative.

This second type of case can actually be analyzed, perhaps more fruitfully, in different terms: what is at stake in these cases is not the truth/falsity of the narrative *per se*, but *the very criteria of significance* that structure the narrative. And since, as Danto has argued, the criteria of historical significance arise from larger non-historical contexts of significance in which human interests are at play, the debate over what the relevant criteria of significance for a particular historical narrative *should be* touches on a properly normative or ethical question. These kinds of ethical debate are absolutely crucial to historical debates when collective identities are at stake. Consider, for example, European identity. One traditional way of grounding European identity might be via a Christian historical narrative in which European identity is depicted as arising in combat with, and in contrast to, Europe's Islamic frontiers. A rather different kind of narrative might emphasize the development of political institutions of human rights, religious toleration, political freedom, and democracy. The political implications of which narrative is chosen, for example regarding immigrants from non-Christian countries, or Turkey's entry into the EU, would of course be profound.<sup>57</sup> And such historical debates will have as much to do with criteria of truth and falsity

<sup>57</sup>For these two rival myths of European unity and their political implications, see Sonja Puntscher Riekmann, "The myth of European unity," *Myths and Nationhood*, ed. Hosking and Schöpflin, pp. 60–71. For an illuminating example of how historical narratives (and their truth claims and criteria of significance) buttress identity claims that served to legitimate political outcomes, see James Clifford's extended discussion of the Mashpee case in *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), ch. 12.

as with criteria of significance. The same point could be made with reference to debates about specifically national identity, such as in the German *Historikerstreit*.<sup>58</sup>

The result is that we now have four bases for critique of historical narratives used to ground collective national identities. An identity-grounding historical narrative can be criticized by claiming that (1) it makes false claims, (2) it embellishes the truth with claims for which there is no evidence, (3a) it omits facts that are significant according to its own internal criteria, or (3b) its criteria of significance are ethically unjustifiable, and it therefore omits facts that are significant according to justifiable criteria. (1) and (2) appeal to criteria of truth/falsity, (3a) and (3b) to significance.

So we can now redefine the category of (3) myth-as-omission and reconstitute the contrast with other “true” historical narratives on that basis. I now define a myth-as-omission as a historical narrative that makes historical truth claims, but which either (a) omits facts that are significant according to the narrative’s own internal criteria or (b) omits facts by virtue of criteria of significance that are unjustifiable given the current context, that is, it omits facts which are significant according to external criteria that, given the current context, *should* be brought to bear. We might, by contrast, call a true historical narrative that includes all the facts that are significant by its own criteria, and that has the right criteria in the first place, a *true and appropriate* historical narrative. Once we distinguish between questions of truth and questions of significance, we are able to capture the insight behind Renan’s “forgetting” and the kernel of truth in Miller’s argument, without jettisoning truth as a basis for critique. For the defence of myths-as-lies cannot rely on arguments justifying mere omissions: the justifiability of omissions falls under the purview of the criterion of significance, not truth.

So instances of forgetting are subject to critical scrutiny—not by questioning the narrative’s truth/falsity, but by (at least implicitly) asking ethical questions, such as whether we want to be the kind of people for whom *these* things are (in)significant, a people who thus grounds its identity in *this* kind of narrative. Furthermore, the criterion of significance furnishes a standard for the critique of omissions that derives from the nature of historical narratives as such: the criterion of significance, unlike social utility, is constitutive of narratives. Of course utilitarian considerations do help shape what counts as significant—significance, it will be recalled, arises partly in relation to human interests—and so *indirectly* feed into what sorts of narratives are judged to be true and appropriate. This is the kernel of truth in Miller’s account. But on Miller’s account, human interests tell us *directly* which narratives we should believe. On

<sup>58</sup>See Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), and James Knowlton and Truett Cates, eds, *Forever in the Shadow of Hitler? The Dispute about the Germans’ Understanding of History* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1993).

the present account, by contrast, interests help shape criteria of significance, which then in turn help determine which narratives will be believed. The ethical aspect of the debates in question on the present account have, in other words, a second-order character. They are not debates *about* historical truth designed to produce outcomes in our interests; rather, they are (at least implicitly) ethical debates about what our needs and interests are, what is significant to us, and who we want to be.<sup>59</sup> In other words, human interests do not provide an *unmediated* standard brought to bear in a debate about which narrative to believe. And this makes all the difference, for now there is no disjuncture between the telos of historical discourse, as necessarily understood by the participants themselves, and its purported mode of operation. Critical discourses about historical truth retain a semi-autonomous logic of their own, independent of considerations of interest. And this autonomy is crucial to critique.

Of course, in discourses where significance is at stake, Miller is surely right to say that equal access is key, in order for individuals and groups to articulate their interests and voice their views about what they see as significant. But while this egalitarian access to the public sphere may be necessary, it is not sufficient for adequate critique: equal access is no substitute for the possibility of bringing the criterion of truth to bear on historical narratives. Insofar as narratives presuppose criteria of significance, equal access allows different individuals to give voice to what is significant to them. But insofar as historical narratives make truth claims, what equal access provides is the opportunity to contest the truth of those claims.

If identity-grounding historical narratives can be evaluated according to standards of truth and of significance, an identity-constituting (4) myth-as-story is subject only to the latter standard. As Munz has suggested, a myth-as-story can be a powerful means to articulate and embody criteria of significance, which can in turn inform properly historical narratives. A myth-as-story can serve as a basis for collective national identities, not by instilling common beliefs, but by providing a common language, in the broad sense of the term, and common reference points. Thus identity-grounding myths-as-story can be subjected to critique by asking whether the criteria of significance they embody, the common reference points they establish, and the ethical lessons they propound are justifiable. One might ask, for instance, whether a patriarchal or martial myth-as-story really expresses who we—the collectivity in question—want and ought to be. And it is here that Miller's account of egalitarian deliberation truly comes into its own—for this is a case whose internal logic rules out the criterion of historical truth as a standard for discursive procedure. As Miller suggests, power

<sup>59</sup>I say “at least implicitly” because often the ethical aspects of the debate, about criteria of significance, are not treated separately from the historical aspects of the debate, about what happened. One way to dispute criteria of significance is to thematize the criteria explicitly and argue that they are inappropriate; another way is to present an alternative historical narrative, with different criteria of significance, and ask whether the narrative itself does not provide a more appropriate history.

can be subjected to an egalitarian discursive process in which all participants narrate their stories with the goal of shaping the collective identity. Power is checked because the myths-as-story that constitute the imaginative dimensions of national identity are subject to discursive political contestation. At the same time, egalitarian democratic deliberation furnishes the possibility for the expression of the interests of everyone, reference to which is necessary for a liberal democratic normative justification of collective sociopolitical arrangements.

## V. CONCLUSION

Egalitarian arrangements that facilitate democratic deliberation play a crucial role in subjecting the sociopolitical exercise of power in liberal democracies to critique and standards of legitimacy. When sociopolitical power relies on a putatively shared collective identity, disciplining and legitimizing its exercise according to liberal democratic standards requires that the individuals who make up this identity and/or are subject to its power be able to contest its character. This implies that insofar as the identity is shaped and constituted by its central myths and historical narratives, everyone must have an equal opportunity to express their needs, interests, and perspectives in shaping and contesting the validity of the criteria of significance reflected in these narratives. But insofar as these narratives are genuinely historical, in the sense of making historical truth claims about what has in fact happened, legitimizing the exercise of sociopolitical power in a liberal democracy also requires subjecting these narratives to critical scrutiny in terms of their truth. When socially integrating power is buttressed by historical narratives that are constitutively understood as a set of truth claims, the criterion of truth cannot be dispensed without seriously hampering the critique of power. Liberal democratic theory has no business trying to insulate taken-for-granted myths-as-lies and myths-as-embellishment from rational critique. And insofar as liberal democracies are accountable in their relations with other peoples, when foreigners are implicated in the narrative, such critique may need to include the inputs of participants beyond the national sites of deliberation that liberal nationalists might be tempted to take for granted: insulating Japan's official myths, which whitewash atrocities committed against foreigners in World War II, from contestation by Koreans may compromise the liberal democratic credentials of Japanese national identity as well.<sup>60</sup>

While David Archard is surely right to observe that, sociologically speaking, myths have a way of enduring in the face of rational critique,<sup>61</sup> no critical theory of liberal democracy can, at the normative level of political philosophy, endeavour to insulate national myths from critique or contestation as such. Such myths serve to entrench status quo power relations, in part by reifying collective

<sup>60</sup>I am grateful for this point and example to an anonymous referee.

<sup>61</sup>"Myths, lies and historical truth," pp. 477–8.

identities in a way that stifles difference to boot. One must be able to speak truth to power.

The same point should be made with reference to myth-as-omission (as I have redefined it). In Renan's lecture, "forgetting" appears as a *functionalist* imperative, not a normative one. Whatever the empirical merits of this putative functionalist imperative, it cannot be recast as a normative injunction at the level of liberal democratic *political* philosophy designed to insulate such myths from critique. Turning Renan's functionalist observation into a normative injunction about what political institutions *should* do or should not permit is incompatible with liberal democratic theory's account of how to legitimate the exercise of political power. What remains is the possibility of a justifiable *ethical* principle, which in certain circumstances might encourage individuals, including political leaders, to sacrifice their self-interest, to exercise restraint and wisdom in their speech, and to forgive and maybe even "forget"—by relegating to the insignificant—historical facts whose constant recalling would be debilitating for the collectivity. But this is an ethical issue that is up to political actors to contest in the public sphere, not an issue that political philosophy can settle and use to justify the constitution of the state and its exercise of power. On the one hand, if national identities really do always depend on myths-as-lies, myth-as-embellishment, and myth-as-omission, and these myths can only be sustained through the exercise of state power, then liberal nationalist political philosophy faces a serious challenge; on the other hand, to prove that, empirically, liberal democracy necessarily requires national myths of these sorts may be to prove that liberal democracy is unviable. Or, more optimistically, it may relegate the defence of myths to the realm of ethics and political contestation (rather than political philosophy) by suggesting the role that democratic leadership must play in this regard. Otherwise, liberal democratic political philosophy can only defend the propagation of myth-as-story to service the functional needs of modern society.

However, even in the case of myth-as-story, where historical truth is irrelevant, my argument here rules out one of the ways in which liberal nationalists sometimes rely on national myths to secure social integration. For defenders of national myths, it is often the taken-for-grantedness of a myth that is supposed to ground its efficacy in forging identities and effecting social integration. National myths are supposed to be indispensable for the mobilization of democratic citizenry because they would provide a background for social action that could be taken for granted. But if the assumption is that, in order to subject the exercise of power to liberal democratic legitimation, groups must be able democratically to contest national myths with alternative narratives, then it follows that the myths constituting national identity are not always taken for granted. Some other bases for the integrative power of myths must be adduced. One basis, I would suggest, is that they effectively express moral or ethical "truths"—that is, that they inspire action by virtue of resonating with or

effectively shaping social actors' moral or ethical aspirations. And a moral cognitivist would say that such normative "truths" or claims of practical reason are only really "truths" insofar as they could withstand the test of practical discursive critique and rational justification as well. But that, as they say, is another story.

Liberal Democracy: On the Coherence of Liberal Nationalism\* Arash Abizadeh Political Science, McGill University. WHEN, in his famous 1882 lecture *Quest ce qu'une nation?*, Ernest Renan claimed that national identity constitutively depends upon a selective and even distorted memory of past events, he was not casting ethical aspersions on nationalism. Rather he was simply making a functionalist observation about the viability of large-scale national identities.Â But the question here is whether or not such historical narratives should be open to contestation on the basis of the criterion of truth. An obvious objection to Anderson's account is that to abandon the criterion of truth undermines the possibility of disciplining power via sociopolitical critique. The claim that liberal democratic normative commitments are compatible with nationalism is challenged by the widely acknowledged fact that national identities invariably depend on historical myths: the nationalist defence of such publicly shared myths is in tension with liberal democratic theory's commitment to norms of publicity, public justification, and freedom of expression. Recent liberal nationalist efforts to meet this challenge by justifying national myths on liberal democratic grounds fail to distinguish adequately between different senses of myth.