The studies that follow pursue the question of how certain specific modes of discourse—myth, ritual, and classification—can be, and have been, employed as effective instruments not only for the replication of established social forms (this much is well known), but more broadly for the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of society itself. Before we can turn to this topic, however, there is another that must be treated: No consideration of discourse is complete that does not also take account of force. Together, discourse and force are the chief means whereby social borders, hierarchies, institutional formations, and habituated patterns of behavior are both maintained and modified.

Force and Discourse

Force (i.e., the exercise or threat of physical violence) is an instrument open to a variety of uses by individuals and groups within any society. It is regularly employed by those who hold official power to compel obedience and suppress deviance. Thus they preserve generalized social stability and, what is more, a specific configuration in which they—and certain others with whom they have close and complex relations—occupy positions of privilege and enjoy disproportionately large shares of those classic scarce and desired resources Weber identified as wealth, power, and prestige as well as such other desiderata as education, information, health, leisure, and sumptuary goods of various sorts. Further, force may also be used by ruling elites to effect significant social change, for instance, when they direct the violence at their disposal beyond the borders of their own society in campaigns of expansive conquest through which ever-larger social aggregates with more varied and complex patterns of organization can be constructed.

Moreover, elites hold no monopoly on the exercise of force, and how-
ever much they attempt to define all that lies outside their control as illegitimate, nondominant groups of all sorts always retain some measure of force—if only that of their own bodies. They can use a variety of ways disruptive to the established order, including scattered assaults on persons and property as well as more organized struggles in which they seek (1) to remove themselves from an encompassing and exploitative social aggregate (secession), (2) to dislodge and replace those in positions of power and privilege (rebellion), or (3) to reshuffle established social forms and habitual patterns of behavior in sweeping and fundamental ways (revolution).

In all instances, however, force—be it coercive or disruptive—remains something of a stopgap measure: effective in the short run, unworkable over the long haul. The case of imperial expansion (already mentioned) is an instructive one: Although new territories may be added by conquest, successful integration of the populations within those territories depends on—better yet, amounts to—the transformation of these peoples’ consciousness so that they come to consider themselves members of an imperial society rather than the vanquished subjects of a foreign nation. Such a radical recasting of collective identity, which amounts to the deconstruction of a previously significant sociopolitical border and the corollary construction of a new, encompassing sociopolitical aggregate, can hardly be accomplished through force alone. Nor is the exercise of force an adequate long-term response to the episodes of revolt and rebellion that occur in empires within which conquered peoples remain imperfectly integrated and retain their preconquest loyalties to a large degree, because force can quell these outbreaks only at the cost of further alienating subject populations.

Similarly, it must be recognized that although force can surely be used to protect the interests of a ruling elite against the agitation of subordinate strata, this is quite different from saying it can ensure social stability. The coercive violence employed by elites itself effects change, in that it removes certain persons and groups from their previous places within society—for example, by death, banishment, incarceration, and the like—thereby modifying the size, shape, and nature of the total social aggregate. Genocide is the extreme case. Further, the employment of coercive force by a ruling elite modifies the affect of all members within society, sometimes dramatically so: Some groups and individuals may be emboldened, some intimidated, some depressed, some enraged. Such shifts are always significant, both in and of themselves and for the way they inform actions that produce still further change.

Discourse supplements force in several important ways, among the most important of which is ideological persuasion. In the hands of elites and of those professionals who serve them (either in mediated fashion or directly), discourse of all sorts—not only verbal, but also the symbolic discourses of spectacle, gesture, costume, edifice, icon, musical performance, and the like—may be strategically employed to mystify the inevitable inequities of any social order and to win the consent of those over whom power is exercised, thereby obviating the need for the direct coercive use of force and transform-

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**Myth, Ritual, and Ideology**

It has been common, ever since Marx and Engels coined the term, to contrast ideology with some other mode of thought and discourse, called variously knowledge, science, consciousness, or the like, but always characterized as both accurate and illuminating in its representations and thus an appropriate instrument of critique, analysis, and demystification. Among other studies that implicitly adopt this position—and one of considerable importance to the present inquiry—is Roland Barthes’s brilliant and influential essay “Myth Today,” in which he characterized myth in an unusual but insightful fashion as a second-order semiotic system, that is, a form of meta-language in which preexisting signs are appropriated and stripped of their original context, history, and signification only to be infused with new and mystificatory conceptual content of particular use to the bourgeoisie. Myth, Barthes argued, “has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal . . . . This process is exactly that of bourgeois ideology. If our society is objectively the privileged field of mythical significations, it is because formally myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion which defines this society.”

To myth—the most ideological form of speech—he contrasted a form he took to be its dialectic opposite: the direct and transformative speech of labor and of revolution. Barthes maintained:

There is therefore one language which is not mythic, it is the language of man as a producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, meta-language is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible. This is why revolutionary language proper cannot be mythic. Revolution is defined as a cathartic act meant to reveal the political load of the world: it makes the world, and its language, all of it, is functionally absorbed in this making. It is because it generates speech which is fully, that is to say initially and finally, political, and not, like myth, speech which is initially political and finally natural, that Revolution excludes myth.

More recently, a line of analysis similar to that which Barthes proposed for the category of myth has been advanced with equal verve and brilliance by Maurice Bloch regarding the category of ritual, which he defines broadly to include “greetings, and fixed politeness formula, formal behaviour and above all rituals, whether social, religious or state.” Such phenomena, he argues, are characterized first by severely attenuated parameters of discourse and second by thought categories that, being socially determined, render
criticism of society quite impossible insofar as they are "already moulded to fit what is to be criticised." Such criticism—and the contingent potential for social change—becomes possible only through thought and discourse that originate within a nonritual sphere, where they are shaped by something other than society and thus afford an objective, nonmystified perspective that allows one to talk about society and not just within society. This sphere, Bloch locates in the experience of productive labor, where, he contends—making particular reference to the way in which time is structured and perceived—the categories of thought are determined not by the givens of preexisting social structure, but rather by those of nature. Summarizing his argument, Bloch states:

This lecture starts by considering the old problem of how to account for social change theoretically. . . . The source of this problem is traced to Durkheim's notion that cognition is socially determined. By contrast it is argued that those concepts which are moulded to social structure are not typical of knowledge but only found in ritual discourse, while the concepts using nonritual discourse are constrained by such factors as the requirements of human action on nature. This means that there are terms available to actors by which the social order can be criticized since not all terms are moulded by it. 6

Thus, like Barthes, Bloch located a nonmystified and potentially revolutionary mode of thought and discourse within the experience of productive labor, and here, of course, they both follow Marx. This they dialectically oppose to another mode of thought and discourse that serves only to mystify and thereby perpetuate the sociopolitical status quo: This latter category they locate in myth (Barthes), ritual (Bloch), and ideology (Marx). 7 Notwithstanding the importance of the questions these authors have raised and the considerable interest their formulations hold, there are problems with their common line of analysis. Both Barthes and Bloch present the experience of productive labor in somewhat romanticized (one might even say mythologized) form, for it is hardly a sphere in which thought and discourse are conditioned solely by nature in the absence of society. Indeed, the very processes of production are themselves socially determined (e.g., by technology, division of labor, and patterns of access to, and ownership of, the means of production), as are the conceptual models through which laborers experience, reflect on, and discuss the givens of their work. It thus overstates things to posit an accurate and nonmystified "knowledge" existing within the sphere of productive labor, and it is preferable to argue that what one may find there is ideological systems that differ from those that dominate in other spheres of activity (myth and ritual included). Any criticism or struggle that ensues might then be described not as a case in which knowledge opposes mystification or science ideology, but one in which a hegemonic ideology is challenged by one of the many counterhegemonies that exist within any society.

This set of observations leads me to a second, more general point: To hold that thought is socially determined does not mean that all thought reflects, encodes, re-presents, or helps replicate the established structures of society, for society is far broader and more complex than its official structures and institutions alone. Rather, such a formulation rightly implies that all the tensions, contradictions, superficial stability, and potential fluidity of any given society as a whole are present within the full range of thought and discourse that circulates at any given moment. Change comes not when groups or individuals use "knowledge" to challenge ideological mystification, but rather when they employ thought and discourse, including even such modes as myth and ritual, as effective instruments of struggle.
ment for the construction of society. And to the extent that taxonomies are socially determined, hegemonic taxonomies will tend to reproduce the same hierarchic system of which they are themselves the product. Within any society, nonetheless, there exist countertextaxonomic discourses as well (inversions and others): Alternative models whereby members of subordinate strata and others marginalized under the existing social order are able to agitate for the deconstruction of that order and the reconstruction of society on a novel pattern.

Sentiment and Society

Whether such agitation can succeed in any given instance will depend on a great many factors, many of which are contingent to the specific situation. In general three factors must be taken into account. First, there is the question of whether a disruptive discourse can gain a hearing, that is, how widely and effectively it can be propagated; this largely depends on the ability of its propagators to gain access to and exploit the opportunities inherent within varied channels of communication—formal and informal, established and novel. Second, there is the question of whether the discourse is persuasive or not, which is only partially a function of its logical and ideological coherence. Although such factors, which are by nature internal to the discourse, have their importance, it must be stressed that persuasion does not reside within any discourse per se but is, rather, a measure of audiences' reaction to, and interaction with, the discourse. Although certain discourses may thus be said to have (or lack) persuasive potential as a result of their specific content, persuasion itself also depends on such factors as rhetoric, performance, timing, and the positioning of a given discourse vis-à-vis those others with which it is in active or potential competition.

Finally, there is the question of whether—and the extent to which—a discourse succeeds in calling forth a following; this ultimately depends on whether a discourse elicits those sentiments out of which new social formations can be constructed. For discourse is not only an instrument of persuasion, operating along rational (or pseudorational) and moral (or pseudomoral) lines, but it is also an instrument of sentiment evocation. Moreover, it is through these paired instrumentalities—ideological persuasion and sentiment evocation—that discourse holds the capacity to shape and reshape society itself (Fig. 1.2).

In talking about society, it should be clear that I do not mean to focus primarily on political institutions: A state, a government, a system of laws, and the like, do not in and of themselves constitute society. Nor do I place primary emphasis on economic structures or those of kinship, although these, like politics, are a crucial part of any social entity and contribute powerfully to its stability and durability. Accordingly, consideration of these must inform any serious discussion. Often, however, analyses of social institutions or systems of social organization pass for the analysis of society itself, and it is worth recalling that the elusive and ill-defined entity that we call society (from the Latin verb socio, to join or unite together, to associate) is basically a grouping of people who feel bound together as a collectivity and, in corollary fashion, feel themselves separate from others who fall outside their group.

This state of affairs is often described by means of the metaphor of social borders, that is, those imaginary lines that distinguish one group of persons from another. Numerous and varied factors may help to mark and enforce such borders, for instance, differences in language, topography, diet, patterns of economic and marital exchange, habituated behaviors (customs), normative preferences (values in the moral sphere, aesthetics or taste in others), and so forth. However important such considerations may be to the parties involved, of infinitely greater analytic significance is the general pattern: That is, as groups and individuals note similarities and dissimilarities of whatever sort between themselves and others, they can employ these as instruments with which to evoke the specific sentiments out of which social borders are constructed. These I refer to as affinity and estrangement, meaning to include under the general rubric of these terms, on the one hand, all feelings of likeness, common belonging, mutual attachment, and solidarity—whatever their intensity, affective tone, and degree of consciousness—and, on
the other hand, those corresponding feelings of distance, separation, otherness, and alienation. Although in practice the capacity of discourse to evoke such sentiments is closely conjoined with its capacity to persuade, analytically the two are separate.

To cite a simplistic example, an inevitable part of any verbal discourse—and one quite unrelated to ideological persuasion except as a precondition for the latter—is the implicit statement “I speak language X.” Ordinarily, this level of communication goes unnoticed, but within a multilingual group where X is not the language of choice, the introduction of a speech-act in X will evoke some minimal (and probably ephemeral) sentiments of affinity between the speaker and other X speakers present and will simultaneously evoke sentiments of estrangement between this group and that constituted by nonspeakers of X. The same can happen in less dramatic fashion when a particular idiom, accent, or patois is introduced into a conversation. In this moment and by this process, an act of discourse thus reconstructs the social field, catalyzing two previously latent groupings and (at least temporarily) establishing a border between them. What is more, this process is unrelated to the specific content of the catalyzing discourse. That is, ideological persuasion has nothing and sentiment evocation everything to do with it.

Because there are virtually infinite grounds on which individual and group similarity/dissimilarity may be perceived and corresponding sentiments of affinity/estrangement evoked, the borders of society are never a simple matter. In practice there always exist potential bases for associating and for dissociating one’s self and one’s group from others, and the vast majority of social sentiments are ambivalent mixes in which potential sources of affinity are (partially and perhaps temporarily) overlooked or suppressed in the interests of establishing a clear social border or, conversely, potential sources of estrangement are similarly treated in order to effect or preserve a desired level of social integration and solidarity.

Several points follow from this way of seeing things. First, the metaphor of social borders may be understood to describe those situations in which sentiments of estrangement clearly and powerfully predominate over those of affinity, so that groups of persons experience themselves as separate and different from other groups with whom they might potentially be associated. Second, such borders being neither natural, inevitable, nor immutable, affinity may in the course of events come to predominate over estrangement, with the consequent emergence of a new social formation in which previously separate social groups are mutually encompassed. Third, within any society there exist what are commonly called (metaphorically again) cleavages, by which is meant those situations in which strong sentiments of estrangement persist between constituent subgroups of an encompassing social aggregate. These subgroups are, thus, only imperfectly and precariously bound together by the officially sanctioned sentiments of affinity that coexist with, and partially mask, the disintegrative and most often officially illicit sentiments of estrangement.

Society is thus a synthesis, in the most literal sense of the term: something that is con-structed, put together (from the Greek compound verb syn-tithēmi, to put or place together). And like all synthetic entities, a society may either recombine with others to form syntheses larger still, or—a highly significant possibility ignored in most Hegelian and post-Hegelian dialectics—it may be split apart by the persisting tensions between those entities that conjoined in its formation, with the resultant formation of two or more smaller syntheses. That is to say that the formation of any synthesis (intellectual, social, political, etc.) is never a final step. Any synthetic entity, having its origin in a prior dialectic confrontation, bears within it the tensions that existed between the thesis and antithesis involved in its formation, and this residual tension remains ever capable of undoing the synthesis. Ultimately, that which either holds society together or takes it apart is sentiment, and the chief instrument with which such sentiment may be aroused, manipulated, and rendered dormant is discourse.
which this introduction and the concluding chapter were added, albeit at the expense of distorting a situation in which theory effectively coevolved with practice and remained always embedded therein.

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Myth, Sentiment, and the Construction of Social Forms

The Putney Debates and the Power of the Past

As the English Civil War (1642–48) drew to a close, it was evident to all that, with the overthrow of Charles I, major changes were likely in the nature of politics and society alike. In October–November 1647, fully cognizant of the momentous nature of the occasion, members of the General Council of Cromwell’s victorious New Model Army met at Putney Church to debate the shape in which English society would be remade. Specifically, the group, itself deeply divided on numerous issues, assembled to discuss a document, the \textit{Agreement of the People}, that was nothing less than a draft of a sweeping new constitution proposed by leaders of the radical and populist Leveller faction, who then stood at the height of their power.

Among the central provisions of this document was the granting of suffrage to all adult males without regard to their social station or property holdings. Such an extension of the franchise had clear implications for the nature of politics in the post-Civil War era, and it was on this issue that debate—and a ferocious debate, at that—predictably centered. Failing to gain their desired ends, the Levellers lost their influence, their force, and their following; as a result England’s revolution took a decisive turn to the right.

Against the Levellers stood the more conservative army grandees, led by Henry Ireton, commissary general of the army. Backed by Cromwell (who was not only his commander, but also his father-in-law), Ireton argued relentlessly for preservation of the existing electoral system, which restricted the franchise to those having “permanent fixed interest in the kingdom” by virtue of property holdings. The differing class interests, ideological positions, and rhetorical styles that so clearly divided the adversaries at Putney are highly instructive and have been subjected to close scrutiny, for we are fortunate enough to possess near-verbatim transcripts taken by the army council’s secretary.

Of particular interest is an exchange that followed immediately upon the \textit{Agreement}’s first formal presentation, when Ireton rose to speak against
its First Article, in which the suffrage demands were put forth. Against those demands, he praised the delimitation of the franchise as established within the existing civil constitution, a constitution that—as he put it—"is original and fundamental, and beyond which no memory of record does go." At that precise moment, however, as he sought to establish an absolute terminus ante quem to that past which might be considered as precedent, Ireton was challenged by a call from the floor: "Not before the Conquest."1

With these words, one Nicholas Cowling alluded to the popular belief that only with the Norman Conquest of 1066 were distinctions based on property and birth introduced, obliterating a paradisally egalitarian Anglo-Saxon society, a view which he amplified in later remarks, saying "In the time before the Conquest [all had a right of election], and since the Conquest the greatest part of the kingdom was in vassalage."2 To meet this objection, which he clearly saw coming, Ireton was forced to cut his speech short, and to specify that whatever constitution may have existed before the Conquest was irrelevant, for "that hath been beyond memory."3

In the ensuing discussions, Ireton insisted time and again on the value of that historic precedent which he favored, while scorning the one invoked by Cowling and others. Witness, for instance, the following remarks:

I am sure if we look upon that which is the utmost (within [any man's view]) of what was originally the constitution of this kingdom, upon that which is most radical and fundamental, and which if you take away, there is no man hath any land, any goods, [or] any civil interest, that is this: that those that choose the representatives for the making of laws by which this state and kingdom are to be governed, are the persons who, taken together, do comprehend the local interest of this kingdom; that is, the persons in whom all land lies, and those in corporations in whom all trading lies. This is the most fundamental constitution of this kingdom, and [that] which if you do not allow, you allow none at all. This constitution hath limited and determined it, that only those shall have voices in elections.4

The debate over the extent of the franchise was thus encapsulated within a debate over the nature of English history, or—to put the issue in its starkest terms—over when relevant time began. For his part, Ireton portrayed the framing of the civil constitution as the absolute and authoritative point of departure for all rational discussion, and sought to consign accounts of all preceding time to the realm of fantasy and legend, just as he consigned the social patterns represented in these accounts to the realm of chaos and anarchy. In this he was aided by a consideration that remained implicit and subtextual: the prestige of written records. In contrast to the written constitution that Ireton championed, Leveller leaders could produce no comparable documentation for their beliefs regarding the period prior to imposition of the "Norman Yoke," and accordingly, were forced to relinquish them.5 Faced with this dilemma, they attempted to restructure their arguments in other, more general terms. As the foremost historian of seventeenth-century England has put it, at Putney "bogus history was abandoned for political theory based on natural rights: it is a momentous transference."6

Discourse and the Construction of Society

Perhaps. But was Ireton’s "history" less "bogus" than that of the Levelers? And if the shift of the latter to "political theory based on natural rights" was such a profound advance, why is it that they lost both the debate and the broader struggle to adversaries who never faltered in their invocation of the past? In recent years there are those who have argued that the narrative presentation of the past is by its very nature a means of securing the replication of the past in the present, in which case one must conclude that poor Cowling was misguided in his intervention and should have left the past to Ireton and contested on some other, more promising grounds. I am inclined to believe that things are a good deal more complex, however, and that the sociopolitical instrumentality of the past is rather more varied than the adherents of such a position are prepared to admit.

Trotzky and the Spanish Revolution

Let me begin with a set of texts in which the problem of how to produce social change is treated as a practical, not a theoretical problem: the writings of Leon Trotsky regarding events in Spain under the Second Republic.7 These documents are of particular interest because it was in Spain, just after his expulsion from the Soviet Union (1930), that Trotsky sought to guide others to a replication of the Bolsheviks' success of 1917. Toward this end his observations—particularly in the period between 1931 and 1933 when he maintained close relations with Andres Nin (at that time a leading figure in the left opposition of the Spanish Communist party [PCE])—are a remarkable mixture of lucid analysis and grandiose fantasy. It is obvious that Trotsky was not always well informed. Furthermore, so anxious was he to vindicate his positions against those of Stalin that he deluded himself badly regarding the strength of the left opposition within the PCE and that of the latter vis-a-vis other Spanish parties.

The numerical weakness of his sympathizers in Spain was, in fact, one of the chief problems with which Trotsky wrestled. Wishing to transform this tiny group into the vanguard of a Spanish revolution, he counseled Nin and others on ways to build their popular support. Yet it is here that Trotsky seems most unrealistic of all: Stripped of all effective weapons—cadres, money, leadership positions, access to mass publications, and so on—he repeatedly impressed on his comrades the value of slogans as a means to accomplish great things. Witness, for instance, his advice on the eve of elections to the first Constituent Cortes of the Republic (18 June 1931):

We have few forces. But the advantage of a revolutionary situation consists precisely in the fact that even a small group can become a great force in a brief space of time, provided that it gives a correct prognosis and raises the correct slogans in time.8

A few months earlier, when the fortunes of the left opposition seemed dim, in spite of the fact that other parties were making great gains and the fall of
the monarchy seemed near, Trotsky wrote to Nin in a similar vein (15 February 1931):

Unfortunately the communists were not the stars in the boycotters’ performance. That is why they did not achieve any important victories in the campaign of the last two or three months. In periods of stormy revolutionary flux, the authority of the party grows rapidly, feverishly—if, in decisive turns, at new stages, the party immediately advances the necessary slogan, whose correctness is soon confirmed by the events.  

The apparent weakness of this advice notwithstanding, one does not dismiss a practitioner and theoretician of Trotsky’s stature lightly, and it is worth considering why he put such confidence in the use of slogans. In the passages cited—to which others could easily be added—it is clear that he saw in slogans the means to catalyze a latent revolutionary movement. That is, by giving voice to the deeply felt but officially unacknowledged aspirations of those who are marginalized under existing social structures, even the tiniest party can mobilize a large, unified, and active following.

Three points require emphasis. First, although it is clear that the slogans Trotsky envisioned have a certain anticipatory quality to them (they depend on “correct prognosis” and are to be “confirmed by the events”), they are not a species of prophecy born of either divine inspiration or scientific analysis. Rather, it is only when a slogan—a call for a demonstration, strike, or boycott, for example—successfully rallies a following that it can be “confirmed by events.” That is to say, the slogan is itself a contributing factor, necessary but not sufficient for its own fulfillment. Second, it is not the accomplishment of such projects per se that is of paramount importance; rather, the very formation of such a group as can be mobilized by these slogans is itself a revolutionary action. Indeed, it is the revolutionary action par excellence: It is nothing less than the embryonic appearance of a social formation arising in opposition to the established order. Third, Trotsky clearly felt that a “revolutionary situation” presents extraordinary possibilities for success by means of slogans. To put it differently, one may define as “revolutionary” those situations in which traditional, accepted, and customary social formations are in process of collapse, one aspect of this collapse being that the discursive instruments that had previously sustained those formations are in the process of losing their capacity to mobilize and persuade. At such moments dramatic change—that is to say, the emergence of new social formations—becomes possible, even through the agency of slogans.

Ancestral Invocations and Segmentary Lineages

Revolution and civil war offer instructive data: In such situations is revealed the potential fluidity of all social formations. Equally revealing are the segmentary lineage systems described in classic anthropological research, where one can perceive not only fluidity, but also certain of the ways in which stability may be maintained in the midst of flux.  

Basic to the segmentary pattern is the principle of fission and fusion whereby the members of a total social field can recombine at different levels of integration to form aggregates of varying size. The situation is most easily conceived in diagrammatic form as in Figure 1.1, where the roman numeral one (I) represents the social whole (e.g., the tribe—using this term and those that follow only for the sake of convenience), capital letters represent the chief constituent subunits (clans), and arabic numerals represent sub-subunits (lineages).

Such a diagram as Figure 1.1—which could be extended both vertically (to encompass greater time depth) and horizontally (to encompass the synchronous interrelations of more subunits)—maps social organization in the form of a family tree. Indeed, it is often patterns of descent (real or fictive) that govern structures of social segmentation, for instance, when all members of a tribe (I) trace their family line to a primordial (often eponymous) ancestor, whom we may also call Ancestor I. Similarly, members of clans A and B descend from children of Ancestor I (Ancestors A and B), whereas members of the lineages (1, 2, etc.) trace their lines to the children of Ancestors A and B. It follows that the more remote a given ancestor, the larger will be the social group that is made up of his or her descendants. Further, because all individuals have multiple ancestors located at different generational depths, they simultaneously belong—in potential, at least—to multiple social groups, each of which takes a different apical ancestor as its point of origin. Moreover, these groups vary in size and nest comfortably one within another, like Russian dolls or Chinese boxes. At any given moment only one such level of social integration is active and evident, whereas the others exist as latent structural possibilities: alternate groups that may be mobilized under other circumstances.

One must also take note of the specific means whereby any given level of integration is mobilized and, as a consequence, all others are relegated to latency. In descent-based segmentary systems, it is not enough to observe blandly that the various groups and subgroups are defined by reference to apical ancestors: Rather, they are constructed, literally called into being by ancestral invocation—understanding within this term not only certain...
formal and ceremonial speech acts, but all of the means whereby persons remind themselves and others of the ancestral figures around whom their groups take shape: allusions, gestures, narratives, displays of emblematic objects or designs, and so forth.

Consider, for instance, what happens when individuals rally groups around themselves in a situation of conflict. To take an arbitrary example, when a man of lineage 1 struggles with a man of lineage 2, they invoke Ancestors 1 and 2, respectively, that is, the apical ancestors from whom they and all members of their lineages claim descent—but not more remote antecedents nor others more proximate. When the time arrives to make peace, however, they invoke Ancestor A together: the figure through whose recollection may be formed that social group in which they are reunited.

Here, we may perceive, first, how society is constructed from nothing so much as from sentiments, as Durkheim and Mauss recognized. These sentiments—above all those of internal affinity (affection, loyalty, mutual attachment, and solidarity) and external estrangement (attachment, alienation, and hostility)—constitute the bonds and borders that we reify as society. Second, the shape of society changes as these sentiments change. Within segmentary systems, affinity in a set of circumstances can become estrangement in another, as when persons who had previously been encompassed within a single social formation (e.g., 7) redefine themselves as members of smaller, differentiated, and competing groups (A and B). Third, the mechanism that accomplishes such redefinitions is the recollection of specific moments from the past—those associated with different apical ancestors. It is when separate individuals recall their common descent from (and thus attachment to) a given ancestor that they reawaken their (latent) feelings of affinity for, and attachment to, one another. In that very moment and by that very act of memory, they (re-)define themselves as kin, that is, persons who are joined together in the same familial group. In this way the past shapes the present, invocation of an ancestor being simultaneously the evocation of a correlated social group. Conversely, the present also shapes the past that is recollected, for specific ancestral invocations, being stimulated by the needs of a present situation, must be appropriate to those needs: One cannot rally tribal-sized groups for clan-level conflicts, or vice versa.

In practice, within a segmentary lineage system ancestral invocations function very much as Trotsky expected slogans to function in a revolutionary situation, that is, given a relatively fluid social field, they are capable of deconstructing established social forms and constructing new ones. A significant difference, however, is that although the temporal orientation of Trotsky's slogans tend to be toward the future, that of ancestral invocations is to the past. Moreover, whereas with slogans it is possible to call into being radically novel social formations, it would appear that with ancestral invocation one can only remobilize groups that existed previously but that have more recently fallen into latency. The identity of the ancestors being fixed by historic fact and collective memory, one can only call forth the groups that are defined by those specific ancestors—unless, of course, one tampers with the genealogy, a practice that is—to judge from the anthropological record and from the social register—not the least uncommon.

Myth and the Construction of Social Borders

Such strategic tinkering with the past introduces the question of myth, a mode of discourse that may, I submit, be employed much in the manner of ancestral invocations or, alternatively, in that of revolutionary slogans. Here, I intend to explore the former possibility; in chapter 2, the latter. For the moment let us focus on a familiar example: The Myth of the First Cattle Raid as told among the Nuer, a people of the Nilotic Sudan for whom cattle are the primary means of production, measure of wealth, means of exchange, and the foremost prestige goods. The Nuer live in close proximity to, and maintain complex relations with, the Dinka people; although the two groups freely intermarry and Dinka are readily adopted into Nuer society, until colonial “pacification” the Nuer regularly raided their Dinka neighbors’ cattle, often on a massive scale. Within the rather limited corpus of Nuer myth, one story stands out as of cardinal importance. As recorded by E. E. Evans-Pritchard, it reads, “Nuer and Dinka are presented in this myth as two sons of God [sc. Kwoth], who promised his old cow to Dinka and its young calf to Nuer. Dinka came by night to God’s byre and, imitating the voice of Nuer, obtained the calf. When God found that he had been tricked, he was angry and charged Nuer to avenge the injury by raiding Dinka’s cattle to the end of time.”

Evans-Pritchard went on to assess the story as a “reflection of the political relations between the two peoples” and “a commentary on their characters.” Indeed, Nuer have persistently raided the cattle of the Dinka, taking them by force of arms: in a successful adaptive response to the situation, Dinka have resorted to theft, relying on stealth and cunning to replenish their herds, which would otherwise have been long-since depleted. In proper functionalist fashion, one might say that the story charters and thereby perpetuates continuing patterns of intertribal relations: “And to this day,” as one informant put it, “the Dinka has always lived by robbery, and the Nuer by war.” But one can go beyond functionalist formulations (and other simplistic models that treat discourse as purely superstructural to a socioeconomic base) to see that the telling of this story calls forth a familiar, if temporarily latent, level of social integration. Consider, for instance, the social dynamics evident in Evans-Pritchard’s account of how Nuer men reacted to the sight of a Dinka driving a newly bought cow through their village shortly after colonial-imposed “pacification”: “The whole incident filled the Nuer with bitterness. To them it was grotesque. The cow by all that was right should not have been safe from them even in the heart of its owner’s country and its passage through their own villages was certainly contrary to what had been ordained by God.” No idle rhetorical flourish, this last phrase alludes to the myth we have been considering, recollection of which serves not
only to legitimate Nuer claims to the possession of cattle, but also (and perhaps more important) to mobilize those sentiments of internal affinity and external estrangement that distinguish those groups and individuals who are able to identify themselves as descendants of Nuer and to separate them from those whom they identify as descendants of Dinka, while the latter group is defined, for the moment, as persons who hold cattle only by virtue of theft.

Details apart, stories that are similar to this one in their general narrative structure and social instrumentality are not difficult to find, and I offer two examples gathered informally during 1984-85 when I taught first at the University of Siena and then at the University of Uppsala. In both places colleagues and acquaintances tried to orient me (sometimes more and sometimes less self-consciously) by explaining themselves and their world. A striking feature of these conversations was that references to the historic past were quite conventionalized and thus, after a time, highly predictable. In practice a minuscule set of events drawn from the totality of past experience entered such discussions, although these signal events were themselves cited quite often. In Siena past-oriented discourse was dominated by the Battle of Montaperti (1260), the last and greatest defeat the Siensene inflicted on their Florentine archivals. In the decades that followed, Florence eclipsed Siena permanently and became the dominant military, political, artistic, and commercial power in Tuscan. Yet in Siena to this day, any reference to Florence—a mention of the city's soccer team, for instance—is enough to prompt an allusion to the battle or even a richly embroidered account of the cowardice and humiliation of i cani fiorentini at Montaperti.

In Sweden several stories from the past were recounted on occasion, yet that which was told most often, with greatest ceremony and greatest apparent enjoyment, was an incident that occurred toward the end of that period in which Sweden and Denmark were united under the Danish throne (1397-1523). This event, the Stockholm Bloodbath, involved the public decapitation of leading Swedish aristocrats in consequence of their opposition to Danish rule (1520). One leader of resistance to the Danes survived, however; the young Gustav Vasa. He had recently escaped from Danish captivity and, in the wake of these events, initiated the rising that made Sweden independent, with him as its king (1523). For all their differences of narrative detail, these three stories bear a similar structure, as is shown in Figure 1.2.

These stories recount formative moments from the past: moments in which the enduring tensions that divide rival groups were dramatically at issue. Moreover, all three narratives construct social identity at a specific level of integration—civic (Sienese), tribal (Nuer), or national (Swedish)—whereas other potential social formations and sentiments of affinity (e.g., Nilotic, Tuscan, or Scandinavian unity) are deconstructed in the process.

Rather, the story evokes certain stereotypical sentiments, to wit: (1) pride among Siensene, (2) shame, anger, annoyance, or bemused tolerance among Florentines, and (3) puzzlement or tedium among outsiders. Moreover, although the sentiments experienced by given individuals vary according to their prior social identity, this bland and undialectical observation obscures more than clarifies the complex processes that are actually at work, for it is precisely through the repeated evocation of such sentiments via the invocation of select moments from the past that social identities are continually (re)-established and social formations (re-)constructed. Thus, it is not just because one is Siensene that one feels pride on hearing the story of Montaperti; rather, when one feels pride in this story, in that very moment one (re-)becomes Siensene, that is, a person who feels affinity for those others who also take pride in Montaperti and estrangement from those who do not. Individuals who feel attached to the same moment of the past—like those who share a common ancestor—can thereby be brought to feel attached to each other. And just as one can mobilize social groups of varying size and shape by invoking different ancestors, one can do so by recounting different episodes of the past, as when Siensene and Florentine identities are (temporarily and imperfectly) deconstructed in favor of Italian solidarity at the mention of Dante, Garibaldi, or Italian victories in World Cup soccer.

### Figure 1.2. Common patterns in three narratives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative</th>
<th>No. 1</th>
<th>No. 2</th>
<th>No. 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primordial or potential level of unity</td>
<td>Nuer and Dinka are brothers</td>
<td>Tuscan region and language</td>
<td>Union of Sweden and Denmark (1397-1523)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial episode of rivalry</td>
<td>Dinka steals Nuer's calf</td>
<td>Siensene victory at Montaperti (1260)</td>
<td>Stockholm Bloodbath (1520)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second episode of rivalry</td>
<td>Nuer authorized to raid Dinka cattle</td>
<td>Florentines gain ascendency (late thirteenth century)</td>
<td>Rising of Gustav Vasa (1523)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enduring social divisions</td>
<td>Nuer and Dinka</td>
<td>Siensene and Florence</td>
<td>Sweden and Denmark</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Toward a Redefinition of History and Myth**

For all that I have stressed the similarity of these narratives, there persists an important difference among them. In the form in which I have presented them, this difference is signaled most obviously by the dates sprinkled through the Montaperti and Stockholm Bloodbath narratives but lacking in the Nuer and Dinka narrative: For the Battle of Montaperti and the Stockholm Bloodbath are history (given conventional definitions of this volatile term), whereas the first Nuer cattle raid is myth as the latter term is commonly (but misleadingly) used. The semantics of the term myth in common
discourse is particularly revealing, for this word marks less the intrinsic truth-content of a narrative (i.e., myth = false story) than it serves to register the speaker's sense of estrangement from, and superiority to, the social group in which a given narrative normally circulates. For myth most precisely signifies, in its pejorative and condescending usage, a story that members of some other social group (or past era) regard(ed) as true and authoritative, but that the speaker and members of her or his group regard as false.

This is not the place to belabor either the logic or the self-serving nature of the Eurocentered taxonomy that grants a privileged position to history, that is, those past-oriented narratives that meet these criteria: (1) a numerically specified position in the sequence of elapsed time can be affixed to them; (2) written sources attest to them; and (3) their only significant actors are human. In general we are not inclined to accept the truth-claims of stories that fall on one or more of these counts, and for these we reserve a bewildering array of other designations: myth, legend, folklore, and the like. Yet a taxonomy that forces us to separate narratives so similar in form, structure, and effect as the three discussed earlier surely serves us ill as an analytic tool. In its place I should like to suggest an alternative that is admittedly arbitrary in certain ways (and in this, it is only like all taxonomies) but that, nevertheless, has its advantages.

In my view we would do better to classify narratives not by their content but by the claims that are made by their narrators and the way in which those claims are received by their audience(s). Thus, some narratives make no truth-claims at all, but rather present themselves and are accepted as fictions pure and simple: These I propose to call Fable. Others, in differing styles and degrees, purport to offer accurate accounts of past events. But of the stories that make such truth-claims, only some have sufficient persuasive power to gain general acceptance, and the others—those that, in the opinion of their primary audience, lack credibility—I shall classify as Legend, calling those that do have credibility, History. And although these two categories are mutually exclusive (i.e., one cannot simultaneously accept and reject the truth-claims of a given story), reclassification of any individual narrative from one class to the other is always possible should the story either gain or lose credibility. Beyond this, there is one further category, and that a crucial one: Myth—by which I designate that small class of stories that possess both credibility and authority (see Fig. 1.3).

Having offered such a definition of Myth, it is necessary, of course, to define authority, on which the definition of Myth hangs. In part I have in mind something similar to what Malinowski meant when he described myth as a form of social charter and what Clifford Geertz meant in his characterization of religion as being simultaneously a "model of" and a "model for" reality. That is to say, a narrative possessed of authority is one for which successful claims are made not only to the status of truth, but what is more, to the status of paradigmatic truth. In this sense the authority of myth is somewhat akin to that of charters, models, templates, and blueprints, but one can go beyond this formulation and recognize that it is also (and perhaps more important) akin to that of revolutionary slogans and ancestral invocations, in that through the recitation of myth one may effectively mobilize a social grouping. Thus, myth is not just a coding device in which important information is conveyed, on the basis of which actors can then construct society. It is also a discursive act through which actors evoke the sentiments out of which society is actively constructed.

In the cases we have examined thus far—Nuer, Siamese, Swedish—we have seen how the frequent repetition of the same authoritative story can help to maintain society in its regular and accustomed forms, the instrumentality of these familiar and traditional myths being quite similar to that of ancestral invocations. But other possibilities also exist, ones in which myths can be employed to construct new or unfamiliar social formations, much in the manner of revolutionary slogans. Among the ways in which those agitating for sociopolitical change can make use of myth, the following are some of the most common:

1. They can contest the authority or credibility of a given myth, reducing it to the status of history or legend and thereby deprive it of the capacity to continually reconstruct accustomed social forms.
2. They can attempt to invest a history, legend, or even a fable with authority and credibility, thus elevating it to the status of myth and thereby make of it an instrument with which to construct novel social forms.
3. They can advance novel lines of interpretation for an established myth or modify details in its narration and thereby change the nature of the sentiments (and the society) it evokes.
Obviously, these strategies can be combined, for instance, when a group seeks to deprive one narrative of authority while claiming authoritative status for another or when a new line of interpretation is advanced for a familiar story and is then used to justify a change in its status. Further, should any of these gambits succeed, the consequences are major and can amount to nothing less than the deconstruction of established social forms and the emergence of new formations. It is just such possibilities we shall pursue in chapter 2.

The Politics of Myth

The Instrumentality of the Past

In chapter 1 I indicated several ways in which myth could potentially be employed in attempts to change the nature of existing social formations. I suggested that, among other possibilities, one might struggle to deprive an established myth of its authority; one might agitate for the elevation of a lesser narrative to the status of myth; or one might modify the details in an accepted myth's standard narration or advance new lines of interpretation for it. The time has now come to put flesh on these bare bones and provide some examples.

Consider, for instance, a minor skirmish that took place in Swaziland during the middle 1930s as part of the ongoing struggle being waged at that time between British colonial authorities and the traditional leaders of the indigenous population:

It happened that a high official spoke to Sobhuza [the Swazi king] about a landing site for planes. Near the Swazi National School was a level field, and Sobhuza either suggested or agreed that it would be suitable. When the people heard this they were resentful and asked—"Why Native Areas and not a European farm? Who would benefit from a 'fly-machine'? Why do white people always speak of generosity and yet take everything and give nothing?" The councillors thought of a way to prevent the transaction. The proposed ground was the site of an old royal village, marked by the shady tree under which the council of King Mbandzeni [the last independent Swazi king, r. 1872-89] had met in debate. To prepare the ground the tree would have to be removed. On their advice the King said that the ground could be used if the tree were not touched. There have since been negotiations to buy land from a European.

Here, under the pressure of events, actors sought and found a story from the past that could serve their interests in the present. From Hilda Kuper's reporting of the event, it would appear that this story enjoyed some mea-
sure of credibility; but from the standpoint of theory, it would make no difference were it a total fabrication, although in strictly practical terms it is considerably more difficult to win authoritative status for a story that previously lacked credibility—a legend, or a fable, that is—than for one that already possessed the status of history. But whatever its source and prior status may have been, once this account had been re-collected by Sobhuza's councillors, they went on to claim an authoritative status for it, asserting that it exerted continuing demands and obligations on actors in the present moment. Insofar as these claims were accepted—by the Swazi and by the British—who advanced them had succeeded in creating, at least temporarily, a new myth, one that resolved their initial problem by rendering the strategically located tree under which Mbandzeni met in council quite inviolable.

In its newly achieved status as myth, this story, previously little regarded—if known at all—proved an effective instrument of resistance and enabled the Swazi, most immediately, to keep the foreigners' airstrip off their land. More important, Sobhuza and his councillors were able to use this newly elevated myth as an effective slogan with which to mobilize a social formation—the traditional Swazi Nation—that was in danger of slipping into latency or even oblivion under colonial domination (see a further discussion in chap. 4). For in recounting this story of King Mbandzeni, they evoked strong sentiments of affinity among those who remembered and revered him, and these persons in that very moment reaffirmed their Swazi identity: That is, they re-became Swazi and, as such, experienced also sentiments of estrangement from those non-Swazi outsiders who would profane the sacred ground of their late monarch.

In many respects the dialectic interaction of past and present evident in this Swazi episode are similar to the way in which the Nuer Myth of the First Cattle Raid was seen to operate (described in chap. 1). In both instances a problematic situation in the present—the sight of a Dinka holding cattle or the request from a colonial officer that a piece of land be ceded—prompts an exploration of the past, a search for models and precedents that might be of help. In the Nuer case such a search entailed little difficulty and locating the desired story was virtually a reflex action, as the narrative was a familiar one that already enjoyed an unquestioned authoritative status. For the Swazi, however, the task was more demanding, and a story that would speak to the contingencies of the moment had to be either discovered or, failing that, fabricated afresh, after which claims for its authority had to be successfully advanced. This done, however, the Swazi could accomplish with their newly elevated myth what the Nuer could do with their more traditional one: That is, they could legitimate the actions and mobilize the social groupings that would enable them to deal with the initially problematic situation. Beginning in the present, they sought and appropriated that piece of the past—real or imagined, familiar or novel—that could best serve them as an instrument with which to confront and reshape their present moment (see Fig. 2.1).

### Variation and Contestation

Whereas the Swazi use of stories about Mbandzeni's council was novel and ingenious, Nuer use of their Myth of the First Cattle Raid tends to be habituated and formulaic, the narrative being one of the chief instruments through which they maintain themselves separate from, hostile toward, and convinced of their moral and military superiority to their Dinka neighbors and "brothers." This is not to say, however, that this, the most frequently recounted of Nuer myths, is no more than an unproblematic charter through which well-established social forms are continually legitimated and reproduced. Rather, given its considerable import, this story has also been contested territory at times, the site of a struggle waged by those who would construct Nuer and Dinka society in rather different fashion from that which normally prevails. Their attempt, it appears, was not to discredit the myth—to rob it of its authority or credibility—but to reshape it in subtle ways that might open up new possibilities for Nuer-Dinka relations. This becomes evident when we consider a variant of the myth that differs markedly from the one obtained by Evans-Pritchard (quoted in chap. 1). The version collected by H. C. Jackson in the early 1920s:

In the dim and distant past Deng Dit, the Great God of the Dinka, married a woman called Alyet in the Dinka language and Lit in that of the Nuer. While living in an aradeib tree Alyet gave birth to Akol, who married Garung, from whom are ultimately descended Deng and Nuer, the respective ancestors of the Dinka and Nuer tribes. . . . When Garung died he left behind him a cow and a calf, the former being bequeathed to Deng and the latter to Nuer. Deng, however, as can readily be believed by anyone with only the slightest acquaintance with the habits of this tribe, stole the calf of Nuer who was the younger brother and not able to retaliate. Nuer consequently left the family and, when he had grown to man's estate, returned with some friends and retook his calf. From that day to this the Nuer and Dinka are constantly raiding and counterraiding one another for cattle, the
original theft of the only calf in the tribe still being remembered with the bitterest of feelings.  

In contrast to that recorded by Evans-Pritchard, this variant is skewed in a number of details that render it considerably more sympathetic to Dinka interests. Most striking, of course, is the fact that here God—who is, after all, presented in this variant as a Dinka god—makes no judgment regarding Dinka’s acts, and neither he nor anyone else authorizes Nuer to recover the stolen calf or to conduct future raids. Rather, Nuer undertakes these on his own initiative, acting only after some years have elapsed and with the (apparently necessary) help of allies. Other significant differences between the two variants also become apparent when one compares the genealogies that they give for Nuer and Dinka, as depicted in Figure 2.2.

Here one may note the differences:

1. The deity with whom the genealogy begins is the Nuer Kwoth in variant A, whereas in variant B he is the Dinka Deng Dit (Great Deng, Great Dinka), whose name is also taken by that grandson of his who becomes the eponymous ancestor of the Dinka people.
2. In variant A the deity appears as the father of Nuer and Dinka, but he appears as their mother’s father in variant B; given patrilineal descent, the two youths are thus not of his lineage in B.
3. Although no birth order is specified in variant A, Deng (= Dinka) is said to be the elder in variant B.

Important differences in the narrative line also follow from these genealogical details. Both versions tell how Nuer was initially supposed to have received a calf and Dinka a cow from their father. However, in variant A this is the free gift of a sovereign deity; in variant B it is the last bequest of a deceased and allegedly human father. The deity plays no role in it and his relation to his daughter’s son remains distant throughout. In truth, it is somewhat unusual that Garung’s cattle are distributed only after his death. The more normal procedure is that a man divide his holdings among his sons before his death in strict order of seniority so that the youths may marry in the order of their birth. The favoritism shown to the second-born Nuer in this variant may be explained by a detail of familial practice, for when a Nuer man marries a Dinka woman, the latter returns to her natal home for the birth of a child and, what is more, her firstborn will often remain there until puberty in the care of her (or her) Dinka matriline. Akol, being the daughter of Deng Dit, is a Dinka woman, and her firstborn son, Deng, is an interstitial figure of this type: A Nuer by birth who is in the process of becoming Dinka, a transformation that is finally and fully effected through the events recounted in this myth.

It is also worth noting certain facts regarding the collection of variant B. Jackson—a political officer of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan—published the first systematic account of the Nuer, but he knew neither the Nuer nor the Dinka language. As a result his ability to collect data was quite restricted, and he was (as he confessed) totally dependent on a single individual who served as his chief informant and translator. “The chief Government Interpreter at Malakal, one Tut Deng—or Bilal Said as he prefers to be called—a Dinka with an encyclopaedic knowledge of all that pertains to the Nuer with whom he now chooses to identify himself.” Tut Deng (to give him back the ethnically significant name that he sought to erase) was then, one of the many Dinka who took up residence among the Nuer and was gradually assimilated into Nuer society. Regarding such persons, Evans-Pritchard observed:

We have already described how Nuer scorn Dinka and persistently raid them, but they do not treat those Dinka who are permanent members of their community differently from its Nuer members, and we have seen that persons of Dinka descent form probably at least half the population of most [Nuer] tribes. These Dinka are either children of captives and immigrants who have been brought up as Nuer, or are themselves captives and immigrants who are residing permanently among Nuer. They are ‘Jaang-Nath,’ ‘Dinka-Nuer,’ and it is said, ‘Taang-Nath,’ ‘they have become Nuer.’ As we have explained, once their membership of a community is recognized, in most of Nuerland, their legal status is the same as that of a free-born Nuer, and it is only in relation to ritual and rules of exogamy that attention is drawn to their origin. In structural relations of a political kind they are undifferentiated members of a segment. Although in his domestic and kinship relations a Dinka has not so strong a position as a Nuer, because he has not the same range of kinship links, I have never observed that they suffer any serious disabilities, far less degradation.

So Tut Deng was himself an interstitial person, a Dinka in the process of becoming Nuer, and thus in a position symmetrically opposite to that of the mythic Deng, son of Garung, but like the latter (and like a great many others), an individual whose social identity situated him squarely on the border of the categories Nuer and Dinka. That the Myth of the First Cattle Raid as told by such a person was systematically skewed in its details—so as to minimize the crime of Dinka while deleting any hint of divine authorization for Nuer’s retributive violence—can hardly be an accident but must be
considered a serious and ingenious attempt to reconstruct authoritative stories and, through the agency of such modifications in myth, to reformulate social sentiments, borders, and, ultimately, society itself.

Myth, Countermyth, and the Iranian Revolution

In the myth of the First Cattle Raid as told to Jackson by Tut Deng and that of Mbandzeni’s council as told by Sobhuza II and others, we can see how struggles about stories of the past may also be struggles over the proper shape of society in the present. Another example, more complex than either of these, may be found in Iran of the period leading up to the revolution of 1977–79. Here we observe a situation in which two bitterly antagonistic segments of society both employed chosen moments from the past as instruments with which to pursue their struggle. Thus, it is clear that Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941–January 1979), cognizant of Iran’s growing wealth and power in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a result of OPEC-generated oil wealth and American military backing, sought out that moment from the national past that could best serve as a model and a slogan for the imperial society he hoped to create. This he found in the Achaemenian Empire of Cyrus the Great, Darius I, Xerxes I, and their descendants, which was, in truth, the first true world empire (c. 550–330 B.C.E.). Now, stories of this ancient Iranian dynasty were well-known and well respected, but seldom had they been taken to exert any call for replication in the present. In a series of highly publicized gestures, however, the shah made plain his intention to pattern himself and his realm on the Achaemenians, thereby attempting to elevate them from the level of history to that of myth. Among other examples, one may note the shah’s 1969 self-coronation, in which he drew heavily on Achaemenian symbolism; the 1971 extravaganza he organized to celebrate the putative 2,500th anniversary of the founding of Achaemenian rule by Cyrus the Great; and his 1976 revision of the calendar so that time was no longer to be measured from Muhammad’s hegira, but rather from Cyrus’s accession.

As the paradigmatic model that the shah repeatedly invoked, the Achaemenian Empire included a number of characteristics he sought to establish as prominent features of his own realm. Among the most important of these were: (1) projection of Iranian influence and military power on an international scale. (2) a cosmopolitan populace in which national and religious minorities were peacefully integrated, and (3) kingship as the central, indispensable, and divinely ordained institution for the unification and direction of the empire. Another, less obvious item might also be implied, inferred, or denied as the situation warranted: That is, an end to the privileged position of Islam, which did not enter Iran until nearly a millennium after the last Achaemenid. Although a careful ambiguity was preserved regarding this last point, it does not seem to have been lost on the Islamic clergy (‘ulama) or on others, as is witnessed by the fact that in the late 1970s a significant (if improbable) rumor circulated to the effect that the shah would soon reveal himself a Zoroastrian and would proclaim Iran once more to be a Zoroastrian nation.

The ‘ulama had, in fact, long been among those most dissatisfied with Pahlavi rule. Since 1963 the shah had attacked them directly in a number of ways, depriving them of many traditional sources of income, undercutting their influence in education and culture, and driving some of their leaders into exile, most notably the Ayatollah Khomeini. In their discontent the ‘ulama were hardly alone, however, although it was not until the late 1970s that opposition to the shah’s regime became both widespread and vocal as a result of numerous factors. Among these were a pattern of corruption and nepotism within the government, excesses of the repressive apparatus, especially the secret police (SAVAK), and the uncritical imitation of Western mores in areas that violated Islamic law and offended the sensibilities of traditionalists (e.g., women going unveiled, public consumption of alcoholic beverages, etc.). Most important of all were the economic dislocations that resulted from fluctuations in oil revenue. Although oil prices quadrupled in 1973 as a result of policies implemented by OPEC at the shah’s insistence, Iranian petrodollar profits remained concentrated in the upper strata of society and served only to exacerbate preexisting class antagonisms. Moreover, recession followed in 1977 as the conservation policies of oil-consuming nations took effect and oil sales declined.

Given the extremely restrictive government policies of censorship, the shah’s critics had very few channels of discourse open to them through which they could voice their dissent and rally a movement of opposition. Among the most important of these was a story that has long been regarded as the most authoritative of all narratives by the vast majority of Iranians, that of Karbala: a story that recounts aspects of early Islamic history and has played an ongoing role in the construction of Iranian society through the centuries.

In order to appreciate the nature and importance of the Karbala myth, it is necessary to fill in some background regarding the struggles for succession to the office of caliph after the death of Muhammad in 632 C.E., struggles that have remained of enormous interest and importance to Muslims ever since (see Fig. 3.3). As Marshall Hodgson observed, “Later Muslims have identified themselves in terms of these events and the factions that grew out of them. They have interpreted the whole of history in symbolic derivation from them, and have made the interpretation of those events and of the leading personalities in them the very test of religious allegiance.”

On Muhammad’s death, political power and religious authority within the rapidly growing community of Islam passed at first to Abu Bakr (r. 632–634), the father of Muhammad’s second (and favorite) wife, Ayesha, and one of the prophet’s earliest converts; then it passed to another father-in-law, Umar (r. 642–644); and thirdly it passed to Muhammad’s son-in-law, Uth-
man (r. 644–656). Each of the first three caliphs thus came from clans other than that of Muhammad (i.e., the Hashemite clan), as they were all related to him by marriage and not by birth, although all were members of the same tribe, that of Quraysh. At each succession, however, there were those who argued that the caliphate should rightly remain within the line of Muhammad’s own clan and family, passing to ‘Ali, his father’s brother’s son and his closest surviving male relative, who had further cemented his agnatic tie to the prophet by his marriage to Fatima, Muhammad’s favorite daughter. Finally, when Uthman died by assassination, Ali fulfilled his ambitions and became the fourth caliph. His reign, however, was a turbulent one, and he was contested by Uthman’s clansman Mu’awiyah, himself a brother-in-law of Muhammad. Their struggle ended in ‘Ali’s assassination, whereupon both Mu’awiyah and Hasan, ‘Ali’s elder son, were elected caliph by rival factions; but Mu’awiyah quickly induced his younger rival to withdraw his claim. Then, during his long and relatively successful reign (661–80), Mu’awiyah worked to transform the caliphate from an elective into a dynastic office, one he could pass to his son, Yazid, and thus keep the caliphate, its power and authority, within the Umayyad clan. This was challenged, however, by ‘Ali’s younger son, Husayn, who cast himself as the rightful heir to the office and charisma of his grandfather, the prophet, and rallied a group of followers. Their rebellion ended, however, at Karbala, where Husayn and his adherents died in battle against the vastly superior forces of Yazid (10 Muharram 61 A.H. [680 C.E.]).

Husayn’s martyrdom notwithstanding, the struggle did not end, but rather it assumed a different and enduring form. For within Islam there is one sect, or branch, that has continued to withhold recognition of Mu’awiyah, Yazid, and the Umayyad dynasty they founded. That sect maintains that by rights the caliphate should have passed to Husayn and through him to direct descendants of the prophet. This sect is known as the Shi’a, the party (shi’a) of ‘Ali and Husayn. Holding themselves separate from the majority faction (the Sunni), Shi’is take the story of Husayn as their central mythic narrative, one they recount in elaborate detail, dwelling on the treachery of Yazid; the courage, determination, and righteousness of Husayn; and the suffering of Zaynab, Husayn’s sister—all of whom provide mythic models for the actions and attitudes of Shi’is in the ongoing present. Bit by bit pieces of this master narrative are given ritual celebration over the course of each year, building toward the month of Muharram and the festival of ‘Ashura, which commemorates Husayn’s martyrdom at Karbala. At this time in particular, but more broadly, whenever the Karbala story is told, Shi’i society is reconstructed, as Shi’is recall Husayn. In so doing they come to experience powerful sentiments of attachment both to Husayn and to one another along with complementary sentiments of estrangement from those other Muslims who perversely continue to accept the legitimacy of the archvillain Yazid. Furthermore, this myth has had an important role in the construction of national as well as sectarian borders and identities, for since the inauguration of the Safavid dynasty in 1501, Shi’a has been the official state religion of Iran, where Shi’is are in the vast majority, whereas Sunnis hold sway elsewhere, particularly within Arab nations. Invocation of the Husayn myth ever since has served, inter alia, to separate Shi’i from Sunni and Iranian from Arab, as is shown in Figure 2.4.

From the sixteenth century well into the twentieth, this myth was thus a useful instrument, one through which Iranian national identity could be continuously reconstructed along the same traditional pattern. Yet as many scholars have recognized, in the middle and late 1970s, the embattled Iranian ‘ulama gave a radical new twist to the story as they identified the
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Figure 2.5. Sectarian, international, and internal Iranian divisions as evoked by the Karbala myth in its radical reinterpretation of the late 1970s.

shah—guardedly at first, then ever-more openly—with the quasi-demonic assassin and usurper Yazid. Thus interpreted, the Karbala myth no longer served primarily as the ancestral invocation through which Shi'i Iranians could define themselves in contradistinction to Sunni Arabs, but more important it became the revolutionary slogan through which the emerging movement of opposition to the shah was mobilized (Fig. 2.5).

Through skillful use of the Karbala myth, the previously fragmented members of this revolutionary coalition—some of whom were opposed to the shah on religious, some on political, and some on economic grounds—were welded together and came to view themselves collectively as the righteous descendants of Husayn confronting an evil and fundamentally alien ruler: a shah more Zoroastrian than Muslim, more Sunni than Shi'i, more Arab than Iranian, more Yazid than Husayn. Moreover, in the years of the revolution, the 'ulama within their preachings increasingly depicted Husayn as a paradigmatic model who demonstrated not the need to accept life's injustices and suffering (as he had usually been presented in preachings of the prerevolutionary period), but the need for fearless and militant opposition to tyranny.

In Iran of the 1970s two rival parties thus employed different moments from the past in their discourse as they struggled to construct very different kinds of society in the present. By means of the history of the Achaemenians, which he sought to elevate to the status of myth, the shah struggled to construct an imperial and non-Islamic Iran; with the myth of Karbala, to which they attached a radical new interpretation, the 'ulama sought precisely the opposite, that is, an Islamic and stridently anti-imperial nation.

In this struggle it was the 'ulama who proved successful. As Pahlavi power dwindled, it proved ever-more difficult to convert stories of the Achaemenians from the status of history to that of myth. Although credible, such stories lacked authority, even in the best of times, and for all that the shah might invoke them, the Achaemenians remained ancestors to whom few Iranians felt deeply attached. Use of them as a slogan rallied no mass following and stirred little interest beyond the circle of those who were already favored by, and obligated to, the shah. In the final months of his reign, the shah was driven to rely almost entirely on force and the threat of force, having lost all capacity to rally or persuade the bulk of the Iranian populace through mythic or any other sort of discourse. At the same time the ability of his adversaries to mobilize a mass following grew rapidly, their lack of firepower notwithstanding. Significantly, the most potent and spectacular forms of their revolutionary agitation took the form of ritual dramas: re-presentations of Husayn's passion, in which participants emulated the latter and actively sought martyrdom, parading their defiance of the shah-cum-Yazid. Following the climactic marches of 'Ashura in December 1978, in which millions of Iranians took to the streets rallying simultaneously around Husayn and against the shah, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi was forced to abdicate. His attempts to construct an imperial Iran had come to an end and those of others to construct an Islamic republic were beginning, attempts in which—on one side as on the other—discourses focusing on the mythic past served as a primary instrument.