Looking back on the Convention of the People’s Party in 1892, the historian Paul Glad offered this description of the scene of the adoption of the Omaha platform:

The three cheers were still echoing from the rafters when the black-bearded Pennsylvanian in the amen corner shouted. “Amen, let everybody say amen to that.” Again the chorus responded. But these outbursts were nothing compared to the wild enthusiasm that prevailed when the reading of the platform had been completed. Hats and coats were thrown in the air...Delegates and spectators joined in a strange, brawling demonstration that almost resembled the ritualistic dance of a primitive people. For thirty-eight minutes the delirium persisted. Finally relative calm was restored. “The old parties go wild over their candidates,” Chairman Henry L. Loucks told the convention. “We go wild over our principles. There is a difference.”

This is curious language for a historian, even allowing for the fact that Glad’s account is some four decades old and conformed to a more colorful rhetorical style than is currently in vogue in the historical profession. But this is not an isolated example. Confronted with the task of how to talk about emotionally charged political performances, the historian John Hicks described the Populist convention of 1896 as “a tremendous oratorical orgy” and journalists such as a New York Times reporter concluded about the Democratic convention of 1896 that: “Oratory was more potent than reason.” In the spectacle of delegates going wild was an incarnation of one of the recurring nightmares of democracy: the mob, the rabble, the uninstructed masses behaving like dancing primitives easily swayed out of their political wits and seeking power. The persuasion of the crowd worked through an overloaded sensorium that overpowered the delegate’s ability to make rational decisions. The crowd’s frenzy seduced and intoxicated, compelling an abdication of the individual will in favor of the collective will. As Hicks argued, this lead to a peculiar relationship between populist and platform: “Little wonder that a platform so christened should come to have among Populists a sort of religious sanction. These demands were not like ordinary political demands. They were a sacred creed.”

The fervor of the crowd sanctifies beliefs that become something other than political demands, held with an intensity that exceeds and eludes historians’ analytical grasp and leaves them with rhetorical flourishes that approximate but cannot adequately communicate what the public spectacle felt like. However, Loucks’s insistence on the difference between going wild over candidates and going wild over principles problematizes the Cartesian dichotomy of rationality and sense perception. According to Loucks, the Populist demonstration was a celebration of a

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detailed plan with reasonable principles. It was not a cult of personality in which emotional responses were controlled and disciplined from above to demonstrate support for candidates selected in back rooms. Rather, the Omaha platform (with its planks calling for such things as the establishment of an income tax, the elimination of the gold standard, the direct election of senators, and the government ownership of railroads) was an organic expression of the will of the people, an authentic cause to celebrate.

But in light of the economic and governmental sophistication of the populist platform, one might pose the question of why it was necessary to go wild at all? Would it not be more efficacious to present to the world a sober, reasoned and restrained articulation of a rational political agenda, especially considering the repeated charges that Populists lacked the proper manners for the public sphere? After all, when the convention did select a candidate, the nominee would likely be subjected to charges of demagoguery. This was certainly the case for the nominee of both the Democrats and the People’s Party in 1896, the “Great Commoner” William Jennings Bryan, whose “Cross of Gold” speech was described by the New York Times in the following passage:

Under the spell of the oratory of the gifted blatherskite from Nebraska, the convention went into spasms of enthusiasm. Amid roars of cheers, rising and falling like the noise of a tremendous storm, they lavished attentions upon him...[T]here was a dance of the standard bearers, and after that a march around the section occupied by delegates, with two bands playing furiously and helping on the babel of confusion. The convention had found an object upon which to lavish its noisiest attentions.5

This is not to say that it was only Populism’s opponents who stressed the emotional and affective excitement of their political activity. The ability to become excited, to embody passion and fervor, was one of the tests of true commitment to the populist cause, as seen in one North Carolinian’s description of a selection process for political delegates: “Stand ‘em up in a row, spit on ‘em, and don’t let any man go first until he is so hot he sizzles.”6 The hypothetical spit-and-sizzle test measured the emotive and affective qualities that animated and invigorated commitment to political principles. It was one thing to have a political platform, it was another matter to mobilize people to political action. This normative tie between feeling and action can be found in Frederick Jackson Turner’s description of frontier democracy: “Whether Scotch-Irish Presbyterian, Baptist, or Methodist, these people saturated their religion and their politics with feeling. Both the stump and the pulpit were centers of energy, electric cells capable of starting widespread fires. They felt both their religion and their democracy, and were ready to fight for it.”7 For Turner, feeling democracy, manifested in the willingness to fight for what one believed, was a crucial component of the American spirit.

What is distinctive about Democratic feeling is that it arouses sentiment both for and against particular political agendas. Bryan’s ability to cause excitement was both his greatest strength and weakness. What was energizing to some was terrifying to others; and William McKinley’s lack of charisma may have been one of his greatest assets to defeat Bryan. As Nell Irvin Painter explains: “McKinley needed only to appear reassuring, because after the Democrats had nominated Bryan, the burning issue for many conservatives – Republicans and Democrats – was whether Bryan would utterly ruin the country by bringing Populists, socialists, and anarchists into the


government.” Whether it attracts or repels, the affective nature of Bryan’s appeal makes an impact. Furthermore, these attractions and repulsions are visceral in that they are intuitive, instinctive responses, more a reflex than a coherent political critique. Not that the coherent political critiques don’t exist. Of course they do. But the moment of visceral identification is not reducible to possible rational motives.

There are a number of ways to differentiate between McKinley and Bryan. They had different stances on the gold standard, on imperialism, on the relationship of government to corporations; they had different sectional bases for their political support, different understandings of the role of women in politics. However, Glad summarizes a key distinction in a couple of telling passages. First, here is his description of Bryan’s convention of 1896: “Bryan’s eloquence crowded thought out of the minds of the delegates and set reporters to groping for words. It tingled the scalp; it brought tears to the eyes; it took one’s breath away. There are demonstrations and demonstrations. Some of the longest on record have been contrived and artificial; the one that followed Bryan’s speech lasted only fifteen minutes, but it was the real thing.”

Compare that to this description of the Republican convention of the same year:

Actually everything had gone according to the script McKinley and Hanna had written. There was, to be sure, a lack of spontaneity in the proceedings. “The applause is hollow; the enthusiasm dreary and the delegates sit like hogs in a car and know knowing about anything,” reported William Allen White. Probably McKinley and Hanna would never rival Gilbert and Sullivan in showmanship, but they did achieve most of their objectives. There is something to be said for that.

Well yes, McKinley won the election. That is no small accomplishment if one is running for president. But in Glad’s depiction there was something fake and hollow in McKinley’s victory. It lacked the emotion and spontaneity of Bryan’s nomination. However, McKinley had one thing that Bryan did not have. Money. Lots of it. McKinley outspent Bryan at a ratio of ten to one in the 1896 campaign. But what exactly is it that money is able to buy? Clearly, it does not buy convincing and thorough political arguments. Rather, money buys the ability to mimic and reproduce the tropes and conventions of political discourse. The distinction here is not so much between rationality and emotion as much as it is between real emotion and fake emotion. This, by extension, opens up a space to consider the possibility of distinguishing real democracy from fake democracy. Indeed, one of the distinguishing marks of fake democracy was its susceptibility to purely rational calculation, its ability to be manufactured, manipulated, and scripted by those who desired a predetermined result. Reduced to a set of calculations, democracy was emptied of its spirit and became just another modern machine.

American populism is rife with the suspicions of the rationalizing trends of modernity. In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, critiques of modern technological developments as well as the institution of new bureaucratically structured corporate entities were juxtaposed against nostalgia for a simpler, more organic past. The rise of the corporation and the political power that it accrued was cast in an undemocratic light. As Michael Kazin puts it: “The ‘money power’ now signified a non-productive, immeasurably wealthy octopus whose long, slimy tentacles reached from private firms on both sides of the Atlantic to grasp every household, business, and seat

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9 Paul Glad, McKinley, Bryan, and the People, 139.
10 Ibid., 112.
of government. According to Alan Trachtenberg: “In the eyes of those farmers, laborers, and radicals who joined the People’s Party of the 1890’s, America incorporated represented a misappropriation of the name.”

But blaming corporations, money, and machines still begs a question about democracy. Attributing faulty politics to the influence of corporations does not explain why people are persuaded to support causes so antithetical to their own interests. Shouldn’t the sacrosanct people know better? Why are they so easily duped? The faith in the people celebrated by democratic institutions can quickly turn into a frustrated pessimism as expressed in the lament of the Minnesota populist Ignatius Donnelly after Bryan’s 1896 defeat: “The people are too shallow and too corrupt to conduct a republic. It will need a god come on earth with divine power to save them. And are they worth saving? Will they stay saved?”

The efficacy of democratic politics can be no better than the effort and activity expended by the people to whom democratic institutions are accountable. As Jeffrey Stout states:

Without help from the people, no constitution can prevent and wealthy and powerful class from rigging the electoral system to favor the wealthy and powerful. If such a class were to gain control of the government, it would then be able to use all available constitutional means, including taxation, expenditure, and regulation, to rule plutocratically. It might then succeed in fostering conditions in which gaps between social classes would widen and democratic participation would atrophy. These conditions, in turn, could strengthen a potential oligarchy’s hold on power while weakening the people’s ability to resist. The result could hardly be termed democratic. It would more accurately described as a caste system in modern dress – a feudal regime without the grace of chivalry.

But this still begs the question of why the people allow such a takeover of democratic institutions to take place. According to Jürgen Habermas, one of the ironies of democratic politics is that because those who are most politically involved tend to have firm pre-existing political commitments, election campaigns focus their attention on precisely those who tend to be the least politically motivated and interested. As Habermas states: “The parties address themselves to the ‘people,’ de facto to that minority whose state of mind is symptomatically revealed, according to survey researchers, in terms of an average vocabulary of five hundred words.” Whether or not one wants to join Habermas in his elitist dismissal of the ignorant middle, this problematic does pose the question of how to theorize the tactics of persuasion used to influence political decisions that do not necessarily follow coherent ideological or even pragmatic logics, particularly the visceral choices people make when they explain their political preferences in terms such as “George Bush seems like a nice man” or “Michael Dukakis seems weak and ineffectual.”

Bryan, not one to give up his faith so easily, continued to press forth, always convinced that the people would in the end be vindicated. After losing an 1894 campaign, William Jennings Bryan was asked how he could continue to have faith in the

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13 Ignatius Donnelly, quoted in Paul Glad, McKinley, Bryan, and the People, 197.
people if the people had voted Republican. His response was illustrative of how he understood democratic politics: “Paraphrasing the language of Job, each public servant can say of departing honors: ‘The people gave and the people have taken away, blessed be the name of the people.”16 Bryan conceded that he did not always understand the people’s actions, but that he must always respect their wishes. In substituting “people” for “God” in a Biblical passage, Bryan indicated that he understood his duty toward the people as a Christian obligation. He accepted that the people worked in mysterious ways, and it was not the place for any individual to question their authority.

Thus, any theory of democracy must answer two deceptively simple questions. First, who are the people? And second, how does one determine what they want? There is, of course, a potentially simple answer to this question. The people are the collection of citizens that live within the boundaries of a given state, and their will is measured by the outcome of elections, supplemented by occasional opinion polls that scientifically discern the people’s preferences. But of course it is not so simple. The people are not a mere collection of individuals. They are the basis of the sovereignty of the nation-state. Giving power to the people raises as many questions as it offers guidelines for political practice. As Michael Kazin points out: “For Washington, Adams, Madison, Jefferson, and Hancock, “we the people” was more incantation than description, like speaking of the Almighty Himself, it indicated who the ultimate sovereign was but did not specify who was actually to rule the nation.”17

The nation, then, proves to be the great riddle of democracy. What the nationalist argues is that the legitimacy of the state is based on an organic, homogenous, internally unified community that vigorously defends its rights to self-determination. This is not an obvious principle to defend but nor

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is it an obvious one to dismiss. Nationalism’s defenders have to delineate the essential principles that constitute the hard and fast boundary between those who belong and those who don’t as well as accounting for the particular historical moment at which a given people became a people and therefore merited the right to sovereign self-rule. Nationalism’s detractors run the risk of a certain naivete about the realities of collective identification and the kinds of internal oppressions and dominations that can occur in multi-national states in which different communities have unequal access to power. The temptation to simply discard collective identities that threaten to fragment the political life of the state might end up masking existing inequalities. Moreover, any attempt to do this would most likely be ignored as members of the existing communities would not participate in the dismantling of what they see as the pursuit of their collective self-interest.

This is not to say that the solution to perceived infringements on the sovereignty of nations can be resolved by creating a state for every nation that wants one. One can create all kinds of ethnic, religious, or other communitarian majorities depending on where one draws lines on a map. Democratic voting presupposes an already existing polity. Voting cannot itself constitute a polity or determine the identity of the collective self that is supposed to rule itself.18 The concept of self-rule does not specify how much internal diversity can be incorporated into the body of a collective self or how one would even distinguish between self and other. Hypothetically, if one were to draw a boundary around certain sections of the Idaho panhandle and call that a state, one might find a polity in which the outcome of free democratic elections called for pure Aryan blood as the marker of citizenship. And while this is an extreme example, the question of race often haunts nationalist discourses.

For William Jennings Bryan, a state of individual citizens without organic national attachments and affective ties could not possibly function. The state needed a People, in the organic, even racialized sense of the word, in order to have any vitality. Bryan’s politics were consistently framed in terms of his service to a homogeneous, unified nation. Even in his own Memoirs, Bryan attempted to erase the difference between public and private selves. In the preface to his life story, Bryan announced that he viewed himself as an entirely public person, taking no individual credit for his political successes:

I trust that with the two purposes in view I may be able so to shift the accent from “I” to “they” as to purge my Memoirs of every trace of egotism or self-assertion. I shall relate my own connection with individuals, measures, and events, but I shall endeavor so to interweave the actions of others with my own acts as to make the results appear as the result of a joint effort in which I have played but a part, and often but an inconsequential part.19

There was no virtue in privacy for Bryan. In this sense, it would be difficult if not impossible for him to make a distinction between his private religious life and public political career. The logic of his nationalism proceeded through a series of conflations. For example, in listing some of the fortunate accidents of his birth, Bryan gave thanks for his race, his nationality, and his familial upbringing:

I was born a member of the greatest of all the races – the Caucasian Race, and had mingled in my veins the blood of English, Irish, and Scotch...I was born a citizen of the greatest of all lands. So far as my power to prevent was concerned, I might have been born in the darkest of the continents and among the most backward of the earth’s peoples. It was a gift of priceless value to see the light in beloved America, and to live under the greatest of the republics in history. And I was equally fortunate, as I shall show, in my family environment. I cannot trace my ancestry beyond the fourth generation and there is not among them, so far as I know, one of great wealth or great political or social prominence, but so far as I have been able to learn, they were honest, industrious, Christian, moral, religious people – not a black sheep in the flock, not a drunkard, not one for whose life I would have to utter an apology. The environment in which my youth was spent was as ideal as any that I know.20

Sandwiching America between race and family, Bryan delineates a Christian nation with a rigor that few before or since have done. The genius of American democracy was not so much its opportunity for individual expression as its ability to give voice to a popular will so that “the creed of Christ may be exemplified in the life of the nation.”21 Bryan’s privileging of the collective self over the individual put him at odds with the individualistic ethos of modern capitalism. He had little patience for the narratives of hard work and diligent self-advancement that enshrined capitalist opportunity: “I sometimes meet a man who calls himself ‘self-made,’ and I always want to cross-examine him. I would ask him when he began to make himself, and how

20 Ibid., 10-11.
21 Ibid., 188.
he laid the foundations of his greatness. As a matter of fact, we inherit more than we ourselves can add.”

Because a secularizing modernity celebrated individual achievement over social responsibility, secularization threatened both religious and national integrity. The encroachments of modern values and predatory markets (his term) destroyed Christian and American corporate identities and left in their place a heartless, empty, mechanistic state bereft of human sentiment. In the closing lines of the “Cross of Gold” speech, Bryan described how capital (in this case, those people who supported the gold standard) crucified mankind: “Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests, and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.” The people were themselves the very embodiment of Christ. Thus, to defend one’s private rights against the demands of the public good was an undemocratic and unchristian political stance.

But the paradox of homogeneity and unification as the basis of national discourse or even as a critique of capitalism is that it depends upon rhetorical exclusions that demarcate the boundary between imagined self and imagined other. For example, the practice of identifying the nation through exclusion can be seen in this famous passage from Bryan’s Cross of Gold speech of 1896: “You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard; we reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.”

Taken at face value, this is almost a bizarre statement. If the country could exist without the city and its markets, then why was Bryan arguing for expanding the powers of government? Why not simply retreat to within the borders of the self-sustaining family farm and ignore what was going on outside? The answer is that Bryan’s rhetorical flourish had almost nothing to do with the economic and political realities of the relationship between town and country. Rather, he was implying that there were some people who were more representative of the People than other people. To this end, Bryan employed a narrative form of the agrarian myth, which Richard Hofstadter describes: “Out of the beliefs nourished by the agrarian myth there had arisen the notion that the city was a parasitical growth on the country. Bryan spoke for a people raised for a generation on the idea that the farmer was a very special creature, blessed by God, and that in a country consisting largely of farmers the voice of the farmer was the voice of democracy and of virtue itself.”

Implicit in Bryan’s invocation of the agrarian myth was an outrage over the condition of the farmer in the late-nineteenth century. As the story goes, farmers were self-sufficient men who worked the land and passed it down through their families. However, with increased technological innovations that made the land more productive and allowed access to larger markets, farmers were encouraged to take out debt to buy new equipment and seed as well as farm single crops explicitly destined for the market. With the deflationary trends in the currency due to the adherence of the gold standard, the values of the farmer’s debts increased while the price of crops decreased, making life increasingly difficult if not forcing foreclosures. Among other things, Bryan wanted to eliminate the gold standard and monetize silver so as to create some inflationary conditions that might help farmers. Overall, Bryan did better in rural areas, securing 48.34 per cent of the rural vote as opposed to 40.61 per

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22 Ibid., 197.
24 William Jennings Bryan, The First Battle, 205.
cent of the urban vote. But sectional divisions were the real story of the 1896 election. Bryan’s support came from two main regions of the country: the West and the South. What is significant about this regional basis is that it undermines Bryan’s claim to speak for the yeoman farmer. There were farmers in both of these regions, but not yeoman farmers. In the West, unusually heavy rainfall patterns between the years 1880 and 1886 gave many the impression that the prairies of western Kansas and Nebraska as well as Eastern Colorado could be profitably farmed, a task which Native Americans and earlier European settlers knew to be unsustainable in the long run. As drought set in (or more correctly, as rainfall patterns returned to their normal levels), farmers went bankrupt. But the farms that went belly up were not handed down over the course of generations as only a generation earlier they were filled with Native Americans and buffalo about to undergo a brutal and bloody removal. The farmers of the West were speculators who were entirely dependent upon new modes of transportation such as railroads both to reach their new homes as well as transport their crops to market. Furthermore, a large basis of Bryan’s Western support came from silver miners.

In the South, the crop-lien system, also known as sharecropping, meant that very few farmers had control over the profits from what they grew or could even make decisions about which crops to plant. In regards to the agrarian myth in the South, the historian C. Van Woodward argues that: “It was an inspired vision, and it represented everything that the Southern farmer was not and had not.”26 The story of both Southern and Western farmers was not one of independence but of dependence on the markets of cities. What is also remarkable is that in New England, Bryan got 33.5 per cent of the urban vote but only 24.5 percent of the rural. While there are a number of different factors involved in this, one irony is that New England was one of the few places where something like a yeoman farmer might actually be found. Bryan’s invocation of the agrarian myth was not persuasive because it accurately represented the plight of his constituents, but rather, the power of Bryan’s imagery lay in its misrepresentations, in a rhetorical fashioning of the kind of imaginary life that was more compelling than the one his supporters were actually living. Bryan’s imagery of cities springing up like magic on the foundation of rural stability was a picture of the way the world should be, not the way it was.

This use of the agrarian myth brings up a problem usually eschewed in religious studies. That is, the distinction, often made by historians, between myth and history or between myth and fact. In this familiar usage of the term myth, myths are the distortions and misrepresentations of reality for some kind of narrative or ideological end. This conception of myth is one that almost every introductory course in religious studies seeks to disentangle itself with. In the history of religions, myths are not patently false versions of events but are stories that communicate cultural meaning. Myths resonate not on the literal but on the symbolic level. But might it be possible for some techniques from the analysis of myth in the history of religions to be useful for understanding this sense of myth as well? To put it another way, how might the history of religions respond to Hofstadter’s statement: “Oddly enough, the agrarian myth came to be believed more widely and tenaciously as it became more fictional.”27 But is this really so odd? What appears odd to Hofstadter the secular historian might make perfect sense from the perspective of the history of religions. Labeling the agrarian myth as such and then proceeding to show why it is not an accurate depiction of reality does not explain the appeal or the allure of the myth. Every successful myth that gains currency and validity through subsequent retellings had some reason to be compelling and persuasive, especially for those people whose objective material conditions it did not actually describe.

One example of the historian’s predilection to extract mythic misrepresentations from history in order to get to real history is Lawrence Goodwyn’s account of the agrarian revolt.

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Goodwyn is clear fan of populist attempts to change the material conditions of the farmer’s lives and has a number of heroes in his story. Among these is the Tennessean William Lamb who, unlike Bryan, eschewed the agrarian myth in favor of a more materialistic analysis of the condition of farmers. As Goodwyn explains:

His argument reflected a new conception about the farmers’ place in American society. The farmer as producer-entrepreneur and small capitalist-the “hardy yeoman” of a thousand pastoral descriptions-is nowhere visible in Lamb’s view. This traditional portrait, dating from a simpler Jeffersonian era and still lingering in the social tradition of the Grange, was patently out of place to a man who saw society dominated by manufacturers and their “agents.”

According to Goodwyn, members of the Farmer’s Alliance such as Lamb also recognized the futility of the argument for the silver standard without the adoption of fiat currency, and that the entire silver issue was in some sense a red herring. On this matter, I agree with Goodwyn’s assessment. The silver standard, while possibly augmenting the deflationary policies of strict adherence to the gold standard, still reproduced the idea that money required an intrinsic value. Thus, the money supply could not be expanded or contracted in order to meet the economic needs of farmers. Furthermore, the movement began by agrarian radicals had to confront not only the prejudice on the silver issue, but had to face an entire series of invidious distinctions of section, race, ethnicity, and religion that impeded their ability to form a unified movement. For Goodwyn, the fact that rural laborers in the South and West could not see past their narrow prejudices led to their inability to adequately critique the monetary policies of Democratic and Republican parties as well as their failure to develop solidarity with their true brethren, the members of the working class. Thus for Goodwyn, economic conditions were not just real, they were The Real. They were the ontological standard against which all other values needed to be judged. By this standard, one of the villains of Goodwyn’s book is none other than William Jennings Bryan, as Goodwyn states: “The democratic agenda embedded in the Omaha Platform had shrunk to the candidacy of a Democrat named Bryan. The cause of free silver was intact. The agrarian revolt was over.”

In other words, Goodwyn is upset at the People for not recognizing their own material interests. They were bogged down in myths when they should have been taking a clear view of history. Goodwyn’s insistence on demonstrating that people were not valuing the right things neglects to explain the motives behind what they did value. Why is it that commitments to sectional, racial, ethnic, or religious identities are necessarily less significant than material concerns? To the extent that myths and not material history dictated the political choices that historical actors made, what exactly is being explained by debunking the logic behind mythological commitments? Telling historical actors that they were wrong might be a politically legitimate practice, but it leaves gaps in the historical narrative. Furthermore, because myths actually affected the historical course of events, they changed the noumenal stuff of history. If myth and not historical facts are the driving force behind certain kinds of political decision-making, then the quest to separate myth from history becomes a kind of fool’s errand. Myths do not just represent or misrepresent history; they change history. The capacity of myth to distort the world is also the capacity to change the world. Trying to extract the mythological from the historical becomes a kind of fools errand that is less likely to understand why things happened the way they did.

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29 Ibid., 263.
Cassirer and Adorno

Goodwyn’s dual frustrations with mythic idealizations of the agrarian past and with the communitarian identities that stood in the way of worker’s solidarity might be a useful point of departure for an analysis of myth. Both tend away from sober, rational material discourses toward affective, visceral commitments. Getting back to the questions with which I began this presentation, to what extent do people go wild about myths and what is the status of rational or Enlightenment critiques of those myths? To answer this, I would like to briefly examine the ideas of myth of two thinkers of the last century: Ernst Cassirer and Theodor Adorno. Cassirer and Adorno may seem like odd choices considering that they are hardly the first figures one considers in the canon of theorists on the subject of myth. However, both theorists offer important perspectives on the normative value of the Enlightenment’s attempt to explain away myths, such as the historian’s attempt to use historical facts to correct for mythological misrepresentations.

Ernst Cassirer, despite his commitment to the philosophical ideals of the eighteenth century, recognized that Enlightenment rationality was ultimately limited in its ability to make sense of myth. Myth, as he understood it, was quintessentially irrational. Therefore, Cassirer found that much scholarly interpretation of myth was hindered by its own rationality. Logical syllogisms were appropriate for philosophical logic, but their heuristic value for myth was limited: “By virtue of this conception myth becomes, as it were, a chain of syllogisms which follow all the well known syllogistic rules. What is entirely lost out of sight in this theory is the ‘irrational’ element in myth—the emotional background in which it originates and with which it stands or falls.”\(^{30}\) Perfectly antithetical to the rational task of dividing the world into its categories and constituent parts, myth pressed together disparate entities, thus confusing the boundaries between things. Mythical putting-together contradicted logical breaking-down: “Hence the relations which it postulates are not logical relations in which those things which enter into them are at once differentiated and linked; they are a kind of glue which can somehow fasten the most dissimilar things together.”\(^{31}\)

Mythic consciousness saw innate, even causal, relationships between dissimilar objects for a set of reasons entirely different from the logical syllogisms of the Enlightenment. Gravitating toward physical space instead of ethereal abstraction, myth was based on a movement toward the sensual and material. “The mythical fantasy drives toward animation, toward a complete ‘spiritualization’ of the cosmos; but the mythical form of thought, which attaches all qualities and activities, all states and relations to a solid foundation, leads to the opposite extreme: a kind of materialization of spiritual contents.”\(^{32}\)

In this mythic valorization of the material world, concrete objects became invested with power as concrete objects. The object did not signify a deeper meaning hidden someplace else, but was itself the bearer of supernatural power. According to Cassirer: “It is a general principle of magic that one can gain possession of things by a mere mimetic representation of them, without performing any action which we would call purposive because for the mythical consciousness there is no such thing as mere mimesis, mere signification.”\(^{33}\)

The stakes in signification were high due to the fact that mythic consciousness saw an intrinsic physical relationship between the signifier and the signified, employing metonymic equations in which corporeal contact bestowed power. As Cassirer pointed out: “It is characteristic of myth that despite all the ‘spirituality’ of its objects and contents, its ‘logic’—the form of its contents—


\(^{32}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 68.
clings to bodies.”

Mythic consciousness, therefore, referred less to a set of ideas, or even more remotely, to an encoded message, but performed its work of signification on the surfaces of objects, in the way it ordered concrete things in the material world.

Failure to pay proper attention to formal operations doomed any analysis of myth. This was a particular obstacle for those who searched for intelligible messages in mythic content. For example, philosophers of religion who read sacred numerology for its expressive or allegorical content missed precisely what was most powerful about these teachings in the history of religions:

Particularly in connection with the number three the history of religious ideas suggests that the purely “intelligible” significance which is almost everywhere achieved in highly developed religious speculation is only a late and derivative consequence following from a relationship of a different kind, which one might call “naïve.” While the philosophy of religion immerses itself in the mysteries of the divine triunity, while it determines this unity by the triad of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the history of religion teaches that this triad itself was originally understood and felt very concretely.

Looking for the “logical relations” among mythic elements was a misguided line of inquiry. After all, if the point of a myth were to do little less than to communicate a certain message, why not simply enunciate the message and do away with the cumbersome machinations of myth? Theoretically, one could reveal the decoded meaning, but it would have none of the rhetorical power and magical efficacy of myth. As Cassirer stated: “Word and

name do not designate and signify, they are and act. In the mere sensuous matter of language, in the mere sound of the human voice, there resides a peculiar power over things.”

The peculiar power of myth necessarily intersected with a politics of myth. The illogical connections between objects in physical proximity created a new myth: the myth of the state. In his description of Nazi alterations in language in his native Germany, Cassirer wrote that words no longer meant what they had previously: “What characterizes them [the new terms] is not so much their content and their objective meaning as the emotional atmosphere which surrounds and envelops them. This atmosphere must be felt; it cannot be translated nor can it be transferred from one climate of opinion to an entirely different one.” The new Nazi language had learned not so much to change the meaning of words, but changed instead their emotional and sensuous impact. This modern state, through its manipulations of the sensuous power of language, sedimented its own power.

Because myth employed metonymic modes of signification, the relationship between signifier and signified was not an arbitrary linguistic convention, but was instead invested with magical power in which: “The magic word takes precedence of the semantic word.” Modern myths developed their own sorcerers: what would today be called the spin doctors and public relations consultants who understand that political power is negotiated through the ability to manipulate images (i.e., the people who convince us to eat McDonalds and vote for George Bush). In Cassirer’s words, the new modern myths of the state were designed by “cunning artisans:"

The new political myths do not grow up freely; they are not wild fruits of an exuberant imagination. They are artificial things fabricated

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34 Ibid., 59.
35 Ibid., 151.
36 Ibid., 40.
37 Cassirer, Myth of the State, 284.
38 Ibid., 283.
by very skilful and cunning artisans. It has been reserved for the twentieth century, our own great technical age, to develop a new technique of myth. Henceforth myths can be manufactured in the same sense and according to the same methods as any other modern weapon – as machine guns or airplanes. 39

The manufactured myth, the myth that was more machine than body, mimicked and supplanted the organic myth, employing a fake, scripted sensuality over and against an organic sensuality. But despite finding myth to be a pervasive element of modernity, Cassirer still believed that the best method for fighting myth was to take a firm stand on Enlightenment ground. Myth was an irrational enemy to be countered with rational thought. Myth’s resistance to universal intelligibility and abstraction had to be fought with the rational philosophical tools of the Enlightenment. Cassirer’s ideal was the eradication of myth in favor of a universal commensurability. As he stated: “If there was to be a really universal system of ethics or religion, it had to be based upon such principles as could be admitted by every nation, every creed, and every sect.”40

For Theodor W. Adorno, the task of rejecting myth in favor of the Enlightenment was not so easy. A principle as seemingly innocuous as universal ethics became intensely problematic in the context of the universalizing impulses of market capitalism. Rational abstraction and intelligibility took on a different set of connotations when one considered that:

Abstraction, the tool of the enlightenment, treats its objects as did fate, the notion of which it rejects: it liquidates them. Under the leveling domination of abstraction (which makes everything in nature Repeatable), and of industry (for which abstraction ordains repetition), the freedom themselves finally came to form that “herd” which Hegel has declared to be the result of the Enlightenment.41

While Adorno would agree on some level that universal intelligibility and abstraction was pitted against the particular forms of myth, Adorno was not willing to uncritically valorize the former. Adorno’s understanding of Nazi genocide led him to be intensely suspicious of modernity’s capacity to exterminate the particular. Whereas Cassirer viewed the extermination of the Jews as an interruption in modern progress brought on by a slippage into mythic consciousness, Adorno saw it as modernity’s logical conclusion. The catastrophe was not a subversion of modernity; it was modernity. The liquidation of the particular in the form of the extermination of the Jews was not surprising in light of the Enlightenment’s suspicion of anything it could not explain. Enlightenment inclusivity could not tolerate an unintelligible outside:

Man imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown. That determines the course of demythologization, of enlightenment, which compounds the animate with the inanimate just as myth compounds the inanimate with the animate. Enlightenment is mythic fear turned radical. The pure immanence of positivism, its ultimate product, is no more than a so to speak universal taboo. Nothing at all may remain outside, because the mere idea of outsideness is the very source of fear.42

39 Ibid., 282.
40 Ibid., 169.
42 Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 16.
Demythologization was not “free” from myth. It was juxtaposed in dialectical relation. Enlightenment universality was a strategy for breaking down the particular forms of resistance that stood as an obstacle in its path to universal domination. In this sense, the Enlightenment reproduced what was most characteristic of myth, namely, its power tactics veiled in enchanted forms of signification. As in Cassirer’s analysis of myth, Adorno was less interested in what the Enlightenment meant than in what it did. In other words, abstraction and intelligibility became the machine guns and airplanes of modern myths.

The explanation of all particularity in favor of abstract universals pointed to the ideology of capitalism. The ability to wrest things from their particular contexts in order to assess them by a universal standard was a formula for the absolute domination by an all-encompassing market. As Adorno stated: “Not only are qualities dissolved in thought, but men are brought to actual conformity. The blessing that the market does not enquire after one’s birth is paid for by the barterer, in that he models the potentialities that are his by birth on the production of the commodities that can be bought in the market.”

Unlike the blunt exercise of traditional power that granted different rights to different people by virtue of their birthright or social standing, the new equality apparently gave the same set of choices to all individuals. Under this market totalitarianism, all of the particular qualities and idiosyncracies of human beings were subordinated to a universal system of evaluation and commodification. Therefore, the ultimate test of market domination was its ability to standardize and evaluate what was seemingly incommensurable with the language of commodities: “The realm of reification and standardization is thus extended to include its ultimate contradiction, the ostensibly abnormal and chaotic. The incommensurable is made, precisely as such, commensurable.”

While maintaining his Marxist hostility to the capitalist world order, Adorno’s suspicion of abstraction, intelligibility, and commensurability left him looking for a novel ground from which to critique global markets. Adorno was searching for a space of resistance, something that could not be bought and sold, something whose impenetrability to the work of commodification granted it an autonomous existence from which to critique prevailing social norms and structures. To this end, he turned to art: “The work of art still has something in common with enchantment: it posits its own, self-enclosed area, which is withdrawn from the context of profane existence, and in which special laws apply.” What is significant about this conception of art is its remarkable similarity to the language of the sacred. Art existed in a special area withdrawn from profane existence. It was in this sacred space that one was most likely to encounter something approximating truth: “For only what does not fit into the world is true. What is requisite of the artistic act no longer converges with the historical situation, which is not to say that they ever harmonized. This incongruity is not to be eliminated by adaptation: The truth, rather, is in carrying through their conflict.”

The question then became how one recognized art. Where was the space between the sacred and the profane? Where should one locate the truth that does not fit into the world?

To address these questions, Adorno speculated on the capacity to “shudder.” The shudder alerted the individual to a space apart from the profane world. Adorno claimed that this physiological, sensual response to the encounter with art was the definition of aesthetic comportment: “as if goosebumps were the first aesthetic image.” Notably, Adorno’s aesthetic comportment was felt precisely on the skin, on the surface area that constituted the zone of erotic, sensuous contact.

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43 Ibid., 12-13.
45 Horkeimer and Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 19.
47 Ibid., 331.
But the increasing opacity is itself a function of transformed content. As the negation of the absolute idea, content can no longer be identified with reason as it is postulated by idealism; content has become the critique of the omnipresence of reason, and it can therefore no longer be reasonable according to the norms set by discursive thought. The darkness of the absurd is the old darkness of the new. This darkness must be interpreted, not replaced by the clarity of meaning.\textsuperscript{48}

Despite my sympathy with Adorno’s attempts to find an aesthetic resistance to global markets, I am uncomfortable with his need to separate art off from the rest of everyday life. This is problematic for a couple of reasons, not least of which is that its elitist orientation toward high art fails to explain the resonance of populist aesthetics. Remember, the intensity of the populist sensorium invigorated a critique of predatory market capitalism. Also, it doesn’t help us to think about fake democracy. It grants the culture industry almost unlimited power to sway the masses and does not allow for a theorization of the conditions that fake democracy must meet in order for it to be persuasive. After all, it is not so easy to simply manufacture cultural forms. It takes work and skill and insight and money, and even then the public must decide that they like what they see. If corporations could manufacture effective cultural forms at will, then every sitcom would be funny, every movie from Paramount or Universal studios would be a success, and every political candidate with the most money would necessarily win. Why is it that the people embrace some aesthetic forms and not others? Or in a related question, why do some groups of people find certain aesthetic styles compelling whereas others do not, and how does one account for the intensity of these cultural clashes?

\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., 27.

\section*{Aesthetics and Collective Identity}

Part of the answer to this question may lie in understanding the collective aspect of aesthetic experience. In other words, the energized spectacle of delegates gone wild both depends upon and is intended to create a sense of heightened solidarity with like minded political activists sharing the social space of a convention. The mythic quality of political rhetoric heightens communitarian loyalties and sentiments, making it at once powerful and dangerous. Aesthetic experience invigorates both individual sense perception and communities of subjects living in intersubjective sensual environments. In Susan Buck-Morr's brilliant article entitled “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” she attempts to reground aesthetic theory in sensual experience: “Aisthitikos is the ancient Greek word for that which is ‘perceptive by feeling.’ Aisthesis is the sensory experience of perception. The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality – corporeal, material nature.”\textsuperscript{49} The aesthetic, then, is not set apart from ordinary experience, but is interwoven into human perception, feeling, and emotion. Furthermore, the nature of sense perceptions blurs the distinction between the individual body and the surrounding environment, as we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell what is in immediate proximity. Thus, Buck-Morr describes what she terms “synaesthetic” experience:

The nervous system is not contained within the body's limits. The circuit from sense perception to motor response begins and ends in the world. The brain is thus not an isolable anatomical body, but part of a system that passes through

the person and her or his (culturally specific, historically transient) environment. As the source of stimuli and the arena for motor response, the external world must be included to complete the sensory circuit. (Sensory deprivation causes the system's internal components to degenerate.) The field of the sensory circuit thus corresponds to that of “experience,” in the classical philosophical sense of a mediation of subject and object, and yet its very composition makes the so-called split between subject and object (which was the constant plague of classical philosophy) simply irrelevant.\(^{50}\)

The problem with trying to extract the aesthetic in order to assess the material interests of the people is that the very constitution of the people is always already an aesthetic project. In this sense, it might be helpful to see religious and national identities in terms of their respective attempts to order and discipline synaesthetic environments. Understanding America as an aesthetic project helps to understand Bryan’s desire for a racially homogenous, unified sensibility that forms the basis of a Christian nation and his suspicion of the distinction between private and public bodies. One of the paradoxes of Bryan’s legacy was that his critique of capitalist individualism drew on the same imaginary resources as his belief in racial supremacy. This might makes sense, however, when considering the role of synaesthetic environments in collective identification.

This is not to say that aesthetic analysis simplifies questions of subjectivity. Buck-Morss’s blurring of the boundary between the individual self and his or her synaesthetic environment problematizes the boundary around any given identity. Nationalist fervor is constantly engaged in the task of trying to demarcate a circle or center that distinguishes inside from outside or self from other that would then create the self that would be the sovereign basis of self-rule. This is where it gets tricky. If identity is cast in terms of an attempt to discipline a synaesthetic environment, the visceral, improvisational, affective, and sensual qualities of collective experience problematize theories of culture that look for a stable or coherent system of meaning that can be intelligibly decoded. In other words, the history of religions demands a hermeneutics that examines what myth does in addition to what it means. While communicating political, religious, or cultural meanings is a crucial dimension of social discourse, one’s sense of collective identity cannot entirely be reduced to an intelligible logic or coherent worldview that stands behind aesthetic and cultural forms.

Instead of reducing cultural communication to discursive logics that structure social thought, one might see social, religious, and political discourse in terms of social stimuli that sensually impact upon one’s synaesthetic environment. In other words, I would like to take Turner’s democracy of feeling literally. The spectacle of going wild is not antithetical or peripheral to political discourse, but may be a crucial element in the formation of political commitments in that it is what excites or invigorates the self into political action in solidarity with a perceived collective self. This is why myth is and always will be such a powerful aspect of political discourse. What was important about Bryan’s “Cross of Gold” speech, for example, was not that it was a brilliant economic argument against the gold standard that no one had ever heard before. Rather, it made a rhetorical, sensual, aesthetic impact in a way that appealed to visceral, emotive, and affective registers to mobilize political sentiment. In other words, the “Cross of Gold” speech was about a lot more than its “message.” To understand the mechanics, as opposed to the content, of Bryan’s appeal, religious studies may provide a theoretical apparatus to investigate the “spirit” of American nationalism. I think Weber’s discussion of spirit can be helpful here:

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 128-129.
“Spirit” is neither soul, demon, nor god, but something indeterminate, material yet invisible, nonpersonal and yet somehow endowed with volition. By entering into a concrete object, spirit endows the latter with its distinctive power. The spirit may depart from its host or vessel, leaving the latter inoperative and causing the magician’s charisma to fail. In other cases, the spirit may diminish into nothingness, or it may enter into another person or thing.51

To talk of the “spirit of America” is nothing new. But despite its ubiquity in the political rhetoric of the last couple centuries, I would argue that the construction of an American spirit remains remarkably undertheorized. Looking at nationalism in terms of spirit can help to address historical and contemporary questions such as what does it mean (or even more pertinently, what does it “do”) to say that the spirit of America is “strong”? Is this a rational calculus quantifying national resources such as a strong military, economic infrastructure, or law-abiding citizenry? Or, is it a kind of mystical measure for assessing the invisible affective bonds between people? American spirit is not the representation of an already existing collective body or a statistical measure of demographic reality, but rather, it is a loaded symbol employed as an instrument for the institution of various political collectivities, of making up and normatively disciplining new national environments.

Contending with synaesthetic environments poses new problems for history of religions. In particular, it complicates (although it doesn’t eliminate) the practice of hermeneutics as a method of decoding mythic meanings. In Susan Sontag’s essay “Against Interpretation,” she called on aesthetic criticism to resist hermeneutics:

What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more. Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all. The aim of commentary on art now should be make works of art – and, by analogy, our own experience – more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means.52

Whether Sontag was really rejecting meaning or simply redefining meaning is a semantic question. Ultimately, it makes no difference whether this is a post-hermeneutics or a different kind of hermeneutics. What is consequential is that the visceral and emotive qualities of aesthetic impact are not reducible to some other form of cultural meaning or content.53 In other words, the aesthetic experience of national spirit is not merely code for some economic or political interest; it is the interest. To quote from John Dewey’s discussion of the social totem: “Be the origin of the totem what it may, it is not a cold, intellectual sign of a social organization; it is that organization made present and visible, a centre of emotionally charged behavior…Such symbols are not indicative or intellectual signs; they are condensed substitutes of actual things and events, which embody actual things with more direct and enhanced import than do things themselves with their distractions, imposition, and


53 I would emphasize that the point here is the danger of reductionism. My worry about reducing cultural communication to cultural content does not imply that the propositional content or meaning of discourse is insignificant.
irrelevances. A pneumatology of American nationalism attempts to locate the animating source of power that gives a nation its vitality. People’s sense of national identity is heightened and diminished as the invisible affective stuff becomes more or less intense. In other words, nationalism is not only a matter of identity, but also a measure of degree. Posing the problem in terms of the degree of emotional intensity creates serious problems for a hermeneutical approach dedicated to finding meaning. While hermeneutics can identify what people believe, it is less well-equipped to ascertain how strongly, fervently, and passionately (or dispassionately for that matter) they believe it.

To put the problem of hermeneutics another way, let me return to William Jennings Bryan. In particular, to his famous exchange with Clarence Darrow in the Scopes trial of 1925.

Q--You believe the story of the flood to be a literal interpretation?
A--Yes, sir.
Q--When was that Flood?
A--I would not attempt to fix the date. The date is fixed, as suggested this morning.
Q--About 4004 B.C.?
A--That has been the estimate of a man that is accepted today. I would not say it is accurate.
Q--That estimate is printed in the Bible?
A--Everybody knows, at least, I think most of the people know, that was the estimate given.
Q--But what do you think that the Bible, itself says? Don't you know how it was arrived at?
A--I never made a calculation.
Q--A calculation from what?
A--I could not say.
Q--From the generations of man?
A--I would not want to say that.

This exchange is often taken to be the climax of science over religion, of the narrow-minded bigot backed into a corner left with no response to the forces of reason, mocked and beaten by the victor Darrow. While this interpretation might have some limited merit, it fails to take into account that what Bryan was saying was, in some sense, true. In other words, in my reading of Bryan’s speeches, memoirs, and other writings as well as in what I have been able to reconstruct from reading about Bryan, I can assert with reasonable historical authority that he really was the kind of person who didn’t think about things he didn’t think about. This question that this poses to us, the interpreters, is how to think about Bryan’s refusal to think about Darrow’s question. Darrow was not the first person to wonder about where Cain and Abel’s wives came from or the age of the earth or the logistics of Noah’s flood. There were countless explanations with the Christian or even Protestant Fundamentalist worldview that would have been able to answer Darrow’s question. Many fundamentalists were furious with Bryan for giving what they thought was an entirely inadequate defense of Biblical literalism. But the irreducible historical fact remains that Bryan chose not to think about it. So the question for religious studies is do we think about it for him. In other words, to extrapolate from the underlying logic of the Christian worldview in order to develop a theological explanation of how Bryan’s position might actually be coherent would be in some sense to misrepresent the historical specificity of Bryan’s position. Bryan is completely comfortable with some of the apparent inconsistencies and incoherencies of his Biblical reading. This same problem haunts hermeneutic attempts to decode the symbolic meanings of myth. Fundamentalists are aware of attempts to read sacred texts


55 Scopes Trial
symbolically, looking for cultural meaning rather than literal historical and scientific claims, and they explicitly reject such attempts. It is crucial to recall that hermeneutic decodings of symbolic meanings represent a normative stance about how sacred texts should be read, a certain theological position taken by religious studies, and not a neutral account of religious worldviews.

Taking this problem seriously means accepting that myths may not have internal logics to be decoded. In the face of apparent inconsistencies, the historian of religion needs to resist the temptation to find an intelligible logic where it does not otherwise exist. What this blinds us to is the arbitrary and visceral ways in which social stimuli may make particular impacts that demand responses that do not necessarily reflect a coherent, internally bounded epistemological system. Because different aesthetic expressions are experienced with varying intensities, not everything will receive a consistent response. It may be possible that there is no single epistemological foundation that orders a religious worldview.

In other words, a shared system of meaning may not be a prerequisite for social discourse or even the best way of identifying collective subjects. This assertion takes issue with many of the basic assumptions that guide social theory. Take for example, this passage from Durkheim’s Elementary Forms:

If, at every moment, men did not agree on these fundamental ideas, if they did not have a homogeneous conception of time, space, cause, number, and so on. All consensus among minds, and thus all common life, would become impossible. Hence society cannot leave the categories up to the free choice of individuals without abandoning itself. To live, it requires not only a minimum moral consensus but also a

minimum logical consensus that it cannot do without either.\textsuperscript{56}

The logic of this pervades religious studies and the study of culture, both in the way similarity and difference are imagined. But is it possible that the common sense view that culture depends upon some minimal consensus is just an assumption. I would argue that, empirically speaking, social discourse is made up of all kinds of provisional, contingent, momentary, and inconsistent practices that resist intelligible explanation.

If social cohesion does not require a least common denominator of similarity, then collective bodies may be formed in ways other than through shared meanings. This may better explain the way in which selves say and do things that are incommensurable with their own avowed theological and political principles. On an everyday level, we deal with this all of the time. One is confronted by political positions that seem to be incoherent and inconsistent with the very principles that one’s interlocutor claims to hold. One ordinary response is to try to expose inconsistent positions. But what fails to do is to explain how it is that people can come to hold them. In other words, it ignores the contingent, provisional, unstable, and visceral decisions that political and religious actors make, especially considering that people change their minds all of the time. I would argue that people can be persuaded by social stimuli that have no need to reason, to resonate with preexisting cultural or epistemological assumptions. The stability of social systems may not necessarily rest on their ability to reproduce, reiterate, repeat, and represent existing social structures, but on their ability to change and adapt to different sensual environments, environments that seek new stimuli in order to become excited. This too might be a familiar aesthetic problem. Aesthetic expressions are not compelling simply because they reproduce cultural codes. They demand variety and innovation. Indeed,

their resonance can rest precisely upon their novelty and their ability to upset cultural conventions and assumptions. With endless repetition comes boredom, a problem that tends to be undertheorized in social scientific or hermeneutic attempts to ground stable meanings. Thus, historical change might not pose a problem for social systems, it may be the source of new stimuli and excitements that social systems depend upon for their vitality. The fact that things fall apart and the center does not hold may actually be the prerequisite for the maintenance of social identities.

In conclusion, the relationship between myth and aesthetics I have described can lead down some down some very dangerous paths. It is very hard to control the aesthetic power of myth, and it lends itself as easily to fascism and demagoguery as it does to populist progressivism. In this sense, I sympathize with the Habermasian fear of the irrational power of the aesthetic in politics. However, against this we have to remember that disinterested politics, like disinterested scholarship, often isn’t very interesting. The danger and possibility of the aesthetic is that it is the source for fascism and progressivism. Despite Bryan’s racism and Christian bigotry and despite the fact that he did not win the presidency, he may have offered one of the most successful articulations of leftist politics in American history, and did so in a way that would be impossible for a purely rational calculation of political or economic interests. As Garry Wills points out:

No other populist agitator had Bryan’s impact. His wife listed with justifiable pride the many reforms, later adopted, that he had championed in their embattled earlier stages — women’s suffrage, the federal income tax, railroad regulation, currency reform, state initiative and referendum, a Department of Labor, campaign fund disclosure, and opposition to capital punishment. His campaigns were the most leftist mounted by a major party’s candidate in our entire history.57

How many secular leftists can lay claim to a similar set of political achievements? The attempts to remove the aesthetic and the religious from the public sphere may also remove the particular concerns that gave rise to political action in the first place. Avoiding demagoguery in favor of a calculable, rational public sphere runs the risk of losing those people whose interest democracy is supposed to serve. If the left is to have a political future, it cannot simply dismiss the affective, aesthetic, and communitarian commitments of the people (although it should hardly remain uncritical of the bigotry demagoguery either, and in many ways, taking aesthetics seriously may be the beginnings of such a critique). To this end, religious studies might be uniquely posed to address the question of whether democracy is something that we can continue to believe in.