CHAPTER 7

MYTHOLOGIES AND POWER

State mythologies confirm and uphold the power of the social group which holds power. Locke’s Two Treatises on Government, the mythological base of the modern state, was a justification of the power of the propertied classes which had broken the power of the English kings. The mythology of English kingship was that the king was God’s representative on earth. Monarchical apologists like Thomas Hobbes believed that there had to be some absolute or sovereign power to rein in man’s brutish instincts and that it was preferable for that power to reside in a king. The rising commercial class, wishing to preserve their property against the exactions of the king, saw property rights as being part of the state of nature before the Fall and therefore before the development in man of the brutish instincts requiring a king to control. Thus in their mythology property rights antecedent kingly rights.

Usurpers and groups on the rise need to legitimize their power in the imaginations of society as a whole. They do this by appealing to historical precedents which support what they represent or predict their coming. The democrats of the English Revolution of 1640 appealed to the history of the Saxon era, before the autocratic kingship which William of Normandy brought with him in 1066. They saw it as a golden era in which democracy prevailed and the rights of ordinary people were protected, before the ‘yoke of Norman Kingship’ was placed upon their necks. What they were proposing was a true revolution in the sense of a return to a starting point, to how things were before. When the Welshman Henry Tudor killed the last of the Plantagenet kings and assumed the English throne he could point to stories preserved by the bards which predicted that a Celtic king would one day rise to the English throne, overthrowing the Saxons who had driven the Celts into the wilds of Wales (the fact that Richard III was of French descent was not held to spoil the story). Shakespeare’s historical plays are widely interpreted as justifications for the Tudor Monarchy – Richard III was portrayed as a hunch-backed villain and tyrant, deserving his fate. In fact he was neither a hunch-back (he had scoliosis and was very handsome and a great dancer) nor a villain, at least by the ruthless standards of mediaeval kingship. Locke’s Two Treatises on Government was simply one in a long line of justificatory mythologies.

None of these statements should be taken to mean that what Locke, for example, wrote was a knowing pack of lies cynically justifying the power ambitions of the great lord who was his mentor. He wrote truly out of what he believed were humane and defensible religious beliefs and common sense observations of how the world around him appeared to work based on the use of his senses and deductive logic as the great natural philosophers of his time, like Bacon, Boyle, Newton and Descartes advised. He drew from the past those stories which resonated with his worldview. He was writing a story which he believed represented the views of most educated men of his time as to what was best for English society as a whole, that would help it to move beyond the social and political turmoil which had made life a misery for everyone for the past several decades into a period of peace and stability from which everyone would benefit.

Not every myth writer has been so disinterested, though. Henry Tudor certainly wasn’t and neither are today’s mythmakers in the corporate world. There is no difference between the way in which today’s
giant business corporations use the mythology of the market to buttress their political power and to create a new international charter for capitalism, in the form of the MAI, putting them on a level with nation states, and the way in which Henry Tudor and the Parliamentarians of 1640 used the myths of previous golden ages. Margaret Thatcher continually harked back to the First Industrial Revolution as a golden age of free markets for Britain to emulate. Yet it reflected social reality then no more than it does now. The English cotton industry, the driver of that Revolution, was protected in its home market by an embargo on Indian cottons and supported in its export markets by a subsidy on printed goods. Goods imported to Britain could only be brought in English ships, a rule enforced by the British Navy. The great Carron ironworks in Scotland, where Watt began his experiments with improving Newcomen’s steam engine, was heavily subsidized and supported by generous contracts for artillery from the British Army and the British Navy (the heavy naval gun, the carronade, was named after the works, where it was made). Henry Maudslay’s specialized cutting and boring machines, which were the first machine tools on which manufacturing industry came to be based, and made identical parts which could be assembled without fitting – another innovation of modern manufacturing (often attributed, incorrectly to Samuel Colt), was all done under contract to the British Navy which needed to rectify a shortage of blocks (devices used in great quantities in the running rigging of sailing ships). That is to say, the state played a heavy handed role in the first Industrial Revolution. Moreover, it was achieved by ruining the Indian cotton industry through trade restrictions, and heavily subsidized by cheap cotton fibre produced by black slaves on plantations in the Caribbean and the Southern United States. Nothing much free market about any of that. The financial capital which made all this possible was obtained from the production of sugar in the West Indies again using slaves and from the exploitation and plundering of the Indian subcontinent by the East India Company. As the historian William McNeill documented in The Pursuit of Power, the European Powers expanded economically by using superior military technology to wrest control of existing production and trading systems in the Indian Ocean, the China Sea and the Americas from native rulers and traders. The gold and silver earned from the sale of sugar ultimately came from Spanish mines in South and Central America which were manned, again, by slaves who died in their millions. Again, not much of the free market about all that. Modern capitalism grew by exploitation of military technology by the state for the benefit of traders and industrialists and by rigging markets through state power. Britain in her time and the United States now have only adopted free trade policies when they dominated the world economy and had made it play by their rules on a precipitously slanted playing field. Trade in free markets, poppycock.

The classical economic theory of comparative advantage, which is the central myth used by the free traders, suffers, like all myths, from having been abstracted from its original context and thus presents a distorted, abstract and totally unrealistic view of the world. It was first proposed by the English economist, David Ricardo in his Principles of Economics in 1817. He based his discussion on an example of trade in wine and cloth between Portugal and England, an example which has been faithfully followed in every economics textbook in the English language ever since. It has been used to argue that free trade will always benefit everyone, even a country which is a low cost producer of all goods. Ricardo’s example of trade between Portugal and England had a basis in a historical controversy over the Anglo-Portuguese trade treaty of 1654. But let us begin at the beginning, as we must if the issue is to be understood properly.
Trade and diplomatic relations between Portugal and England go back to a treaty of 1373 which was renewed and/or renegotiated seven times down to the beginning of the 20th century. It is the oldest active treaty in existence. What is of interest to us is the renegotiation in 1654 whereby England gained use of Lisbon as a naval base and access to the Portuguese market for cloth. By the treaty, Portugal gained England as an ally in its war of independence from Spain. Portugal was a satrapy of Spain at the time, though it had its own king, and had been in revolt since 1640. Spain eventually recognised Portugal’s independence in 1668. England gained an ally in its own efforts to prevent Spanish hegemony in Europe. England’s allies in the war were France and Sweden. It was essentially a cleaning up operation from the Thirty Year’s War (1618 to 1648) which was about religion and politics in the Holy Roman Empire (most of present day Germany plus sundry other bits of Europe) which was ruled by the Hapsburgs who also ruled Spain. The Spanish Hapsburgs had been put in their place regarding the Holy Roman Empire, now they were being put in their place in regards to their ambitions in the rest of Europe. England sought the quid pro quo of exporting cloth to Portugal to help pay for the war and the defence of Portugal. Spain eventually backed off it’s ambitions in the Treaty of the Pyrenees signed in 1659. Having Lisbon as a naval base materially helped the alliance defeat Spain.

The Portuguese, once they had independence, reneged on the deal. This was highly inconvenient for England at the time. It was fighting a series of wars to contain the expansionary ambitions of the French under Louis XIV. The lynch pin of this whole strategy was the subsidies which England paid to its allies, the Austrians and the Dutch, who fielded most of the armies. Gold and silver on the barrel, so to speak, and Portugal had England over it, for that was its primary source, through the abrogated trade deal. The wily old King Manuel of Portugal by a commercial treaty of 1703 got from the English a promise to allow Portuguese wine into England for two thirds the duty paid by the French, who were the Portuguese wine trade’s biggest competitors in the English market. In return, exports of English cloth to Portugal could resume. Everyone at the time thought that the English had the short end of the deal.

Adam Smith framed his discussion of the 1703 treaty entirely in terms of the benefit to England from the flow of specie, though he did not mention the background I have just presented. He framed it entirely within the context of the mercantilist theory of economic development which states that the country with the most gold wins.

The whole business of comparative advantage doesn’t enter the discussion until 1817 when David Ricardo published his Principles of Economics. It was Ricardo who proposed that England didn’t get the short end of the stick after all. He reasoned that England gained in the deal because it was exchanging a good which it produced comparatively efficiently for one which it produced comparatively inefficiently in contrast to the trading partner. It’s scarce resources would thus provide a bigger bang for the buck if they were diverted to cloth production from wine production and the cloth surplus exported in exchange for wine.

All of this, was, of course quite abstract, as while England had been a major producer of wine from the 9th through 14th centuries (and was in fact accused by French wine producers of dumping cheap wine on the Continent!) when the climatic warming known as the Little Optimum made it practicable, she was not producing wine in 1703. Where the real problem emerges however, is that free traders ever since
have used the theory to justify free trade on purely economic grounds, completely ignoring the politicalealities that have always surrounded it and directed it in practice. It is quite correct and all very nice to
say that comparative advantage proves gains from trade, but it totally ignores the fact that trade is
never in fact free and that it always serves a higher political purpose. And that is as true today as it ever
was.

Comparative advantage is another example of state one science. It is a neat piece of Newtonian
clockwork which ticks away in its case, isolated from the real world of the dynamic social and political
and ecological context. Like all state one science it describes a temporary way station in a dynamic
world. It contains an unstated assumption of the Enlightenment, the notion that it is a natural state of
affairs founded on natural advantages. You will recall the fascination that Polynesians and Amerindians
had for savants like Rousseau, seeking ‘natural’ human societies, before civilization spoiled them. A large
part of the fascination with science was the conviction that answers lay in ‘nature’ and could be found
by observing it. The English radical sects were convinced that God was to be found in ‘nature’. God had
made nature and he could be found and understood in it therefore.

But England raising sheep and producing cloth was not ‘natural’. It was founded on a long history of
happenstance and deliberate human action, from the introduction of sheep to England by Neolithic
settlers, to the development of advanced sheep raising and cloth production by the Cistercians
hundreds of years before. The Cistercians got into these activities not for economic but for religious
reasons. They were disgusted with the old sybaritic monastic life and determined to live an ascetic life
remote from the temptations of civilization. Living remotely they had to be economically self sufficient
and efficient. England became the European centre for woollen cloth production because the Cistercian
originated industry was there to build on and because of Edward III’s need for revenue to fight the
French and his observation that the Dukes of Burgundy were wealthy because they could tax the
Flemish cloth merchants. He therefore established an export tax on raw wool and from time to time
banned exports altogether (known in Flemish history as the Wool Famines), deliberately undermining
the Flemish cloth industry and stimulating it in England. He was helped by the greed of the Spanish
monarchs who drew revenues from wool and encouraged sheep husbandry to such an extent that
landowners felled the forests and made the land subject to erosion which in turn reduced the pastures
and the flocks of sheep, laying the way open for English domination (a pre modern example of ecological
damage caused by humans constraining a society economically).{33}

What the relation of these events clearly shows is, that like all state one models, the theory of
comparative advantage does not describe the dynamic circumstances which led to the emergence of the
state one condition in the first place, or the conditions by which it will descend into chaos, and undergo
a dynamic of self-organization to be replaced by another state one solution (which will likely be ruled by
an entirely different myth). That all lies in the ecological effects of changing landscapes through new
economic activities (like sheep farming or three rotation agriculture or deep plough cultivation) and in
natural climatic cycles which can turn England from an exporter of wines to France, to an importer from
France and Portugal, as happened between 1300 and 1400 AD, and in the inventiveness of human
beings which, as we have seen, is closely entwined with the history and development of human
consciousness (the nonconformists and the technical innovations which drove the Industrial Revolution
of the 18th century, or the Cistercians and the innovations which drove the Medieval Industrial Revolution).

It also ignores the organic dynamic within the larger economic process. As Portugal specialized more and more in wine it would have to put more and more arable land and pasture into vines, thereby reducing sheep herds (which provided most of the fertilizer for agriculture) and the production of grain for bread (the staff of life). Other things being equal, these events would cause the price of bread in Portugal to rise. Whether or not Portugal would benefit from concentrating on wine production for the English market thus depends on what happens to things like soil fertility and the cost or living flowing from the concentration on wine production.

Moreover, in the long term Portugal would become locked into agriculture and lose it’s capacity to develop manufacturing industry, the wave of the future, because the trade deal undermined the cloth industry out of which the industrial manufacturing era was to develop. This in turn would relegate it to the status of first a second class and then a third class military power incapable of influencing the geopolitical events which would set things like the ratio of agricultural to manufacturing prices and the whole regime of trade and production and prosperity. In essence the treaty locked it out of the next great state one to state four to a new state one transition of the European economy. It is only just joining it now, 250 years later.

What we should not lose sight of is that the mythology of Modernism is just that: a mythology. Modern myths like Locke’s myth of property, or Ricardo’s Theory of Comparative Advantage, on which modern capitalism are based, are no more complete and justifiable a picture of how the world works or ought to work than their mythological twin, Newtonian science, which we have seen to be an equally incomplete view of reality. The issue always is: does the prevailing mythology fit the times? Does it help a society to move beyond where it is to a more desirable future which is better in tune with reality? Where does it place it in the power stakes (and therefore its relative capacity to determine its own future)? These are all questions which Canadians should be asking themselves as they ponder what mythology will work best for them in a Post Modern world.

We should not lose track of the fact that the social group which gets to write the mythology gets to control society.

This begs the question of who should get to write Canada’s Post Modern mythology. In my opinion it should be a representative group of Canadians in a constitutional convention which employs the latest in computer technology to ensure the broadest possible participation. Exactly how that might be done is discussed later in the book.

People need to know that there was an alternative story to Locke’s, which was represented by the Levellers and the Diggers (also known as True Levellers). The underlying problem of the 17th century was how to feed a growing population. The answer of the propertied classes articulated by Locke was to enclose the common lands and exploit them as private property. The answer of the Diggers was, retain them as common land for the common good in a communally controlled way, employing the latest technology. It is to be noted that the Diggers (see Winstanley) were just as much in favour of
encouraging and indeed institutionalizing technological progress as the propertied were (in fact their method may have advanced it quicker – their Office for Disseminating Innovation. In the event, the Lockeian solution/mythology worked, it raised agricultural efficiency and ensured a growing population was better fed. That is not to say though, that the Digger solution could not have worked also. It was never tried. The movement was suppressed by force.

Ironically, we are faced today with the same situation – how to feed a growing population. Now, as then, we have rejected the communal approach in favour of the private, but have coopted the communal approach in the organization of the private corporation (TQM, learning organization theory, quality circles, project teams etc). We continue to regard the earth’s resources not as common resources for mankind but as private property of giant corporations. The present day Diggers have not given up, as the successful sidelining of the MAI demonstrates, and the Internet and Charter of Rights and Freedoms put levers into the hands of today’s Diggers that the 17th century ones never had. There is hope yet, as it is the Digger’s narrative which accords with the meta message of the New Science and the New Technology. It belongs to the Post Modern age, the Lockeian to the waning Modern one.