

Defining the Myth of Innocence

The Myth of Innocence is a 400-year series of narratives (novels, songs, children's stories, political rhetoric, sermons, advertisements, films, TV, etc) that justify American capitalism, racism, imperialism and environmental destruction by blaming its victims and removing all guilt and responsibility from both its perpetrators and its beneficiaries.

These stories describe a people who built a nation out of the wilderness and brought freedom and equal opportunity to the world. America is the divinely inspired savior among other nations. But our story has a huge shadow: both the systematic deprivation of large numbers of our own population, as well as massive violence perpetrated against the Third World.

We make sense of these contradictions by repeatedly telling ourselves stories of our own innocence. Our basic story (told in countless Westerns and crime, superhero and war stories) concerns the evil Other who threatens our good and innocent community, and the Christ-like stranger who appears from nowhere to defeat this threat and restore innocence.

But the myth is inherently unstable. Periodically, when our national story shows great tears in its fabric, the elite and their intellectual apologists go to great lengths to shore up the myth, as in the current War on Terror. This is the systematic manufacture of consent and identity based upon terror of the Other. **We know who we are because we are not the Other.**

What makes America unique? No other nation has gone to such lengths to define itself by excluding so many from full membership, including rigid legal systems deliberately intended to divide natural allies, while simultaneously telling itself pervasive stories of freedom and opportunity. We are the only nation (S. Africa?) to confuse class with race. **Zinn:** "There is not a country in world history in which racism has been more important, for so long."

Championing human rights and presenting America as an ideal for other nations to emulate while persistently exempting itself from the most basic standards of decency. **West:** "No other democratic nation revels so blatantly in such self-deceptive innocence, such self-paralyzing reluctance to confront the night-side of its own history."

Only Americans justify invasion and genocide with stories of idealism, good intentions and the theology of "manifest destiny." The myth is subscribed to in deep, unconscious ways by almost all Americans, liberals no less than conservatives.