

Madness at the Gates of the City: The Myth of American Innocence

Barry Spector

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As voices from America's different political camps vie for supremacy, explanations about why our society contains the imbalances and injustices that it does often rely on unspoken assumptions about the relationship between the self and the state. The far left and far right both participate in the fray, and to many, it seems as though Tea Partiers and their ilk use far more ink and bandwidth than the voices of Amy Goodman or Thomas Friedman.

Barry Spector's first book goes a long way towards redressing that imbalance with a Jungian-based analysis of the perpetual American "myth of innocence." His starting point is Euripides' last play, *The Bacchae*, which concerns the fall of the House of Thebes, and whose king rejects the god of wine, Bacchus/Dionysus, because he represents blurred boundaries, ecstasy, and "matricentric" celebrations of birth, growth, and death. As Spector uses myth to explore how order suppresses disorder and power relies on disempowerment, readers will appreciate how seamlessly the guilt and repressed anxieties of Athens were transferred to the New World even as our Constitution's framers sought to reproduce its best contributions to American political life.

Spector argues that Euripides' audience of male Athenian citizens knew that "psychological repression was the price they paid for relative stability." The king in *The Bacchae* inherits his throne from his grandfather instead of his father, and many Americans now see fatherlessness as an endemic weakness within our society. They are beginning to connect these individual failures to the stunning failures of our (male) leaders to uphold the tenets of democracy.

Spector theorizes that boys need initiation ceremonies because they lack the physical proof of adulthood that girls have when they first menstruate. By separating the male initiate from society until his biologically programmed violent tendencies are channeled into an acceptable pathway, ancient goddess-worshipping societies prevented the rape and carnage that now envelop much of the world. Although mythic and therefore idealized, Spector's argument is persuasive against America's backdrop of fathering deficits: before boys are emotionally developed enough to become responsible husbands and fathers, their capacity to inflict damage can overtake their "feminine" impulses to nurture and build if they are not appropriately guided.

Spector references Freud's argument that "culture obtains much of its mental energy 'by subtracting it from sexuality.'" The Puritans denied this "feminized" aspect of themselves and projected it onto the racial "others" they encountered in the "New World." Using the "demonic" redness of Native American skin, they rationalized their genocidal actions by assuring themselves of their own purity. As an illustration, Spector reminds us of the wildly popular captivity narratives that insisted that "red" men lusted for the pure skin and undefiled bodies of white women. In reality, more than half of the women captured by Native Americans chose to remain with the tribes because more fluid gender roles offered greater validation and satisfaction.

However, our country's myth of innocence omits such records, and perpetual surprise that the natives (in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan) don't intuitively recognize our benign intent negates historical reality and absolves the national conscience. Recalling the "fathers" who sent a previous generation of mostly "other" sons to war, Spector's readers will recognize that it simply is not possible to atone for destroying the village in order to save it: "the most dysfunctional among us...enact our national myths most clearly." National guilt for unforgivable crimes leads Spector to deplore how well-timed outbursts of patriotic fervor distract the poor and disempowered from glaring evidence that they are not equal members of the *polis*. From Hurricane Katrina to Hollywood's popularization of "wily, shifty, turbaned, bearded" terrorists who "almost invariably" have "dark skin," Spector has ample evidence with which to

support his claims that American equality continues to be a sham and that our government remains intent on enriching itself at the world's cost.

Spector's rhetoric is a persuasive reminder that there is still no consensus about how to construct a *polis* comprised of different racial and sexual bodies: "Over the years, the image of the external Other has shifted from the Indians, resting briefly on Mexicans, Spanish, Germans, and Japanese before finding its home among the Communists." Today, of course, terrorists and illegal immigrants vie for equal space in the darkness of America's subconscious. As we move towards the seemingly ever-elusive goal of true inclusiveness in the "land of the free," this book will challenge, motivate, and inspire readers to continue working for the day when it becomes reality.

ELIZABETH BREAU (January / February 2011)

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