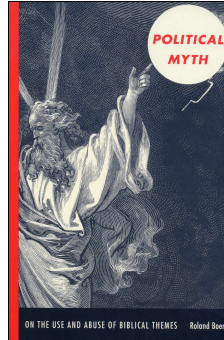


○ **REVIEW OF ROLAND BOER, *POLITICAL MYTH: ON THE USE AND ABUSE OF BIBLICAL THEMES***  
(DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009)

*Craig Martin, St. Thomas Aquinas College*



Roland Boer's *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* is about ancient Israelite, Australian, American, and capitalist myths: their virtual power, their oppressive elements, and their internal contradictions. Boer is ashamed neither of his Marxist and Lacanian debts nor of his opposition to capitalism – which permits him to produce exciting critical readings of the Hexateuch (the narrative in the Hebrew Bible from Genesis to Joshua), official Australian and American positions on Israel, and Milton Friedman's legacy. While this might seem an idiosyncratic and random collection of objects of criticism, they are all connected for Boer insofar as each involves a myth with a 'constitutive exception' that both makes the myth possible and prevents it from being realised.

Boer begins by providing his own theory of political myth, drawing on a variety of theorists, including Alain Badiou, Theodor Adorno, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Slavoj Žižek. He notes that for some critics of myth, the definition of myth is either centered around a sense of myth as duplicitous or distorting, or centered around a sense of myth as something that props up the status quo. Boer doesn't deny that myths may do these things, but he is interested in using the word 'myth' to draw attention to other sorts of functions.

The first general feature of political myths – in Boer's sense – is that they are motivating fictions of future worlds that *will have been*. Political myths are utopian in that they posit an alternative future that readers or listeners are motivated to work toward; myths therefore contain a 'virtual power' that *produces* new truths rather than simply reflecting past truths (22). Such myths are neither true nor false because they are fundamentally *not yet*; they can be true only after they have been achieved. They cannot, in principle, be false; myths that are not realised are just that – not yet realised. To put it in my own words: myths are blueprints rather than maps; one can say that a map is wrong or inaccurate, but there are no grounds for calling a blueprint true or false.

The second general feature of political myths is that while they open up some possibilities, they foreclose others, and their foreclosures may be oppressive. Ernst Bloch ‘enables us to make a start in identifying those elements within a myth that are oppressive, misogynist, racist, that serve a ruling elite, and those that are subversive, liberating, and properly democratic (i.e., socialist)’ (26).

The third general feature of political myths is that they always contain a constitutive exception, something repressed by the myth that makes it possible and impossible at the same time. The clearest example I can give of this is from Boer’s reading of the Hexateuch, which he shows is made possible by the ‘threat’ of rebellious women upsetting the social order. Insurrection makes up the ‘fantasmatic kernel’ that makes the narrative possible but which is simultaneously the thing the narrative needs to shut down, repress, control, or deny.

For Boer, critical readings attentive to this third feature can show how a myth’s constitutive exception – or internal contradiction – will lead it to ruin. For instance, in the last chapter Boer shows how capitalism’s myth contains internal contradictions that would ruin capitalism if Freidman got his wish and capitalism were left entirely unimpeded. These sorts of readings of myth he calls ‘facing the beast’ or ‘calling the bluff.’

Following this theoretical chapter, which is fundamental to the rest of the book, Boer’s remaining chapters consider each of the following topics: the place of women in the Hexateuch (‘Women First? On the Legacy of “Primitive Communism”’), the opposition between order and chaos in the Hexateuch (‘The Fantasy of Myth’), economic contradictions in the Hexateuch (‘The Sacred Economy’), the myth of Israel in contemporary Australian discourse (‘Foreign Policy and the Fantasy of Israel in Australia’), the myth of Israel in contemporary American discourse (‘Christianity, Capitalism, and the Fantasy of Israel in the United States’), and the myth of unimpeded capitalism in the vision of Milton Friedman (‘Mythmaking for the Left’).

I don’t have the space to elaborate on each of these chapters, so I’ll outline the arguments of just two. In the chapter on women in the Hexateuch, Boer shows that a number of scholars have demonstrated that underlying the Hexateuch was a society that utilised a ‘domestic mode of production.’ Communities organised themselves in groups of extended families centred around the wives’ parents’ home (what used to be called ‘matrilocal,’ but which Boer, following Mike Bal, calls ‘patrilocal’ – i.e., based on the wife’s father’s home). The people in these communities were subsistence farmers and therefore did not have capital to pass on to future generations. In sum, this was matriarchal primitive communism, without substantial private property or patriarchal inheritance laws. Boer thankfully resists romanticising these communities as feminist institutions; the best that can be said is that women would have been marginally better off than in patriarchal communities.

Boer goes on to note that this idea of a ‘primitive communism’ behind the Hebrew Bible was originally Friedrich Engels’ idea. However, the scholars currently working on this material no longer use the language of ‘primitive communism’ and fail to acknowledge (or even outright deny) their debts to Marxist theory. This is where the idea of a constitutive exception comes in; according to Boer, ‘this denial of primitive communism is a necessary step in their arguments; they need to get rid of that albatross before they can proceed, lest their work be tainted by such associations. But, to be a little more sophisticated about this, *primitive communism must be denied since it is a structuring principle in their work*’ (49). In sum, the theory of primitive

communism is a constitutive exception because it is central to their work but simultaneously is the thing they must deny or repress.

The last chapter, which focuses on Milton Friedman, focuses both on how the critical reader of myth can bring out a myth's internal contradictions, run them out to their logical conclusions, and thereby 'call the bluff' or 'face the beast' of the myth. Friedman dreamed of a form of capitalism with a market free from any and all interventions. Unfortunately (in Friedman's opinion), 'big government' interferes with the economy and prevents it from functioning optimally. For this myth, the crises faced by capitalist regimes are produced by those interventions. Boer, however, argues that these crises are what the capitalist myth both hopes to repress and what it requires in order to persist. Boer takes the myth to task and asks what would happen if all of those interventions in the market were removed. In sum, his answer is that it would cause the death of capitalism. How so? Friedman's myth assumes that there are infinite resources available for the system of production, when, in fact, natural resources are limited. Boer argues persuasively that an unimpeded global capitalism would quickly consume the world's remaining oil reserves. The twofold result: first, the rise in carbon emissions would speed up global warming, creating a number of ecological disasters, and, second, the forthcoming absence of oil would destroy the world economy. Unimpeded capitalism would result in the death of capitalism – in which case the present limits that currently impede the progress of capitalism are precisely what permit capitalism to continue. Those limits make up the constitutive exception that Friedman's myth of capitalism both needs and needs to repress.

I find that Boer is at his best when he is hard at work showing the repression or contradictions inherent in particular myths (whether biblical, Australian, American, or capitalist). I had several 'wow!' moments as I was reading, particularly in the chapters on Australian and American discourses on Israel and on Milton Friedman. Boer has a gift for drawing the reader's attention to absurdity and making it seem obvious (how could we have missed it?!).

What I found most frustrating about the text was its central thread: the idea of constitutive exceptions. The way in which Boer understood constitutive exceptions to function seemed variable throughout the text, and sometimes incomprehensible to those of us untrained in Lacan and Žižek. I'll consider just one case. As I briefly noted above, Boer argues that insurrection from rebellious women was the constitutive exception of the narrative in the Hexateuch. He states,

what really needs to be concealed [in the myth] is political insurrection. But I went on to argue that fantasy [or myth – Boer uses these analogously] is responsible for creating the kernel [or the constitutive exception] in the first place. Thus, if we move one step further, the very telling of the fantasmatic story produces the rebellious kernel ... It is not merely that such rebellion somehow escapes the hand of the censor, surviving in bits and pieces that must be retrieved ... Rather, the repressive myth we have here *produces the possibility of insurrection*. (emphasis mine; 73)

At this point I became lost. I can understand how the myth creates the possibility of insurrection and must repress it at the same time *if* by this we mean that the narrative has insurrection as its *raison d'être*. However, this wouldn't be saying much; this practically amounts to saying that since it's a story about repression of insurrection, it *has to produce* story elements about

insurrection. This would be like saying that the story of Darth Vader's defeat in the *Star Wars* necessitates the invention of Darth Vader as someone to be defeated. It makes sense, in a way, but it's not saying much.

However, perhaps Boer wants to make a claim beyond the construction of the narrative itself; perhaps he wants to say that the possible insurrection of women in ancient Israel is first made possible by the myth in the Hexateuch itself. But this doesn't seem right either. Are we to believe that no women resisted the institution of patriarchy until the appearance of the text?

I can't believe that Boer intended either of these two meanings, but I'm at a loss to provide a third. I'm left scratching my head about what it means that the myth creates its own constitutive exception in this case. However, I fully admit that this may be entirely due to my lack of knowledge of Lacan and Žižek. I should also note that my confusion on this matter takes nothing away from my enjoyment of other elements of Boer's analysis. For instance, his argument that the Hexateuch is designed in part to put women in their place makes complete sense; I just couldn't follow how that point fit precisely with the psychoanalytic frame.

While some Bible scholars may be interested in this text, I expect that it will get more attention from critical theory types who are well versed in the works of Adorno, Althusser, Lacan, Žižek, Jameson, and Badiou, particularly those who are concerned with contemporary politics or who are sympathetic to Marxist or Marxian theory. I fully recommend it to such scholars, as well as for graduate level courses (the level of difficulty of the book would make it beyond the reach of all but the most advanced undergraduates) on political myth, critical theory and the interpretation of the Bible, the Bible and contemporary ideology, Marxist critiques of religion, etc.