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Myths and the definition of policy problems

An exploration of home ownership and public–private partnerships

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Abstract. In this paper we argue that behind widely accepted problem definitions are myths, stories which draw on tradition and taken for granted knowledge. These myths, which may or may not be true in a factual sense, are important to the definition of problems because they link public issues to widely accepted ways of understanding the world and to shared moral evaluations of conditions, events, and possible solutions to problems.

Such myths perform a double-edged function in a policy or planning process. On the one hand, they can provide creative inspiration for policies, a way of translating community values into action proposals, and a powerful means to communicate to a broad public and rally support. They can mediate social and economic change by allowing new policies to carry familiar meaning. On the other hand, a myth can conceal crucial contradictions and realities, legitimize policies that benefit the powerful, and support anachronistic perceptions of policy problems.

These ideas are explored in case histories of two areas of urban policy. In one we trace the support for home ownership to a transformation of the Jeffersonian myth of the independent yeoman farmer as the ideal citizen. This use of myth made home ownership the cornerstone of US housing policies and helped suppress alternatives. Though debate over home ownership occurs in the context of housing policy, the tacit purpose is to maintain a myth which is central to our identity as a nation. In the second example, public officials and analysts engaged in an explicit myth-making process to garner support for public–private partnerships as a central tool in urban redevelopment. The myths, which drew on familiar themes, made socially beneficial cooperation seem easy to achieve and legitimized new political and institutional arrangements though it also concealed implementation difficulties.

Though myths complicate the effort to use rational, systematic analysis, they are an inevitable part of policy making and planning processes. Planning professionals must openly confront myths and make creative, responsible, use of them rather than allow policies and plans to be subject to their unexamined influence.

In August 1986 *Newsweek* announced, 'Home ownership has finally joined motherhood and apple pie on the list of unassailable American institutions' (August 25, 1986, p. 19). The news was decades old, but the 1986 tax reform package highlighted the privileged status of home ownership. Though little else was held sacred – the middle class lost its popular IRA deductions and the real estate lobby its short depreciation schedules – the mortgage deduction, despite its massive revenue costs, was never seriously considered for elimination. Why were tax incentives for home ownership singled out for protection even though the interests that benefit from them lost other significant tax benefits? Why has home ownership been a cornerstone of US domestic policy since the Hoover Administration? What is the policy problem that home ownership solves?

The answer, this paper will contend, lies to a great degree in myths, culturally shared stories dating back to Thomas Jefferson, which reflect beliefs, aspirations, and values that link home ownership to the American Way of Life. Home ownership is not unique among US policy issues in being held in place through myth, though it is one of the most visible. Myths have been identified as part of the problem definitions which frame foreign as well as domestic policy on topics ranging from Vietnam and the Soviet Union to poverty and abortion (see, for example, Baritz 1985, Hellman 1986, Kautsky 1965, Lewis 1978, Luker 1984, McNeil 1982, and Nimmo and Combs 1980). Nonetheless, our understanding of how myths work to shape problem definition remains sketchy.

Myth, as we use the term in this paper, fits Webster's primary definition, 'a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon.'[1] Myths are an important source of meaning, even in modern societies. They provide analogies which help make sense of events and provide simplifications of a more complex reality. Myths have a moral component, speaking of good and evil or simply providing object lessons. Because they are well known in a community they provide shared rationales to behave in common ways. Because they take dramatic form and touch on deeply held values, they evoke strong, shared emotions. They are created in a particular culture from its repertoire of images, symbols, characters and modes of action.[2] Thus, new versions may be created over time, but they represent continuing familiar themes. Through stories of this mythical kind belief systems are given life and transmitted from one generation to the next.[3]

Stories with mythic qualities may be found in every area of modern life. They affect our personal lives, by providing an image of the proper form of a family and the responsibility of each of its members, our professional lives by providing a model of the appropriate way for the scientist to gather information and reach conclusions, and our public life by telling us the meaning of events. In this paper we have chosen to use the term myth, rather than some more neutral term, such as story or model, because it carries implications important to our argument. The taken for granted nature of myth, the sedimentation of meanings myths acquire over time and their moral components are all crucial to the stories we are going to examine. Moreover, several social science disciplines offer us insights into the nature and functions of myth in a community which further our analysis of the problem definition process.

We recognize, however, that the reader may at times be disconcerted by our usage of the term myth because of the popular notion that it is a false or ill-founded belief. We mean to imply nothing about the literal truth or falsity of a story in describing it as myth since some myths are well grounded in historical fact, while others are largely invented. The important point to us is that myths represent ideal types of situations and people, which many in a community take to express truths. One need not believe a myth to be literally true to take its message as true. Myths express ideas and emotions which resonate in their listeners. The correspondence of any myth to facts or other notions of truth is a matter for investigation.

Myths as problem definers

Myths are particularly important for defining public problems. For a problem definition to gain widespread popular appeal, it must reflect a shared image of what is wrong in the present and how the future might be different. A myth provides such an image. It serves as a common metaphor for all to make similar sense of events. It allows people to say, 'this new and unfamiliar situation is really an example of this other familiar situation.' Moreover, its shared moral allows leaders to justify that an issue is worthy of concern. It permits them simply to refer to known stories and to communicate a way of seeing an issue quickly to a wide audience, while also delivering a complex and emotionally charged message. Collective agreement to act on a problem formulation requires strong emotions to overcome the normal resistance to change and the inevitable objections by groups which expect to be harmed. The myth's emotive content, vivid imagery and links to shared values mean that it can generate intense support or opposition to a policy.[4] Since formal theory and existing information are normally insufficient to provide certainty in predicting results of policies, a myth helps to overcome doubts and offers a source of faith that a risk is worth taking. Indeed, it is virtually tautological to say that stories which inform widely accepted definitions of policy problems must be, to some degree, myths.

While myths perform necessary and creative functions in shaping the problem definitions that garner public support, they also introduce dysfunctions and ambiguities into the policy process. First, the logic of myths is a magical one. The myth persuades by simply and vividly demonstrating the way things are. Cause and effect in a scientific sense are not at issue. It is hard to argue with a problem definition justified by a myth except in terms of other myths. And the logic of the myth may not produce the expected results when it is applied to practice. Even more troubling, the myth itself may prevent us from seeing how a policy is working. The analogy it offers may conceal more than it reveals.

Second, though a myth may be part of shared knowledge in a community, it exists in different versions, and even a single version has meanings which differ according to the personal experience through which individuals interpret it. Because the moral of a myth is not explicit, ambiguity is inherent in its public use.

One can never be fully sure what it means to its audience, nor predict definitively how its use will affect decisions. The myth's use in a problem definition can allow those with very different objectives to unite behind a single policy though each is looking for different consequences.

Third, myths change very slowly. A story which may have once been a productive way to make sense of events, one which applies relevant contemporary values and reflects the best accepted theories at its inception, is apt to persist long after conditions have changed. Thus the myth may encourage the pursuit of anachronistic policies.

Fourth, because a myth has a primary function of helping to maintain the political and social structure in a community, it also can provide rationalizations to cover tensions and contradictions inherent in the structure (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Thus, while a myth may be an enlightening analogy which allows a policymaker or the public to 'see' a set of relationships (Schon 1970), it may turn attention away from thorny or intractable issues, uncomfortable realities, and discrepancies between public values and actual conditions. Thus, myths enabling us to 'blame the victim' allow us to maintain a value of caring about the poor without having to change a social system that permits poverty. Such covering of contradictions can also lead to policies that do not work.

Finally, because myths legitimize and rationalize a political and social system, in practice, the construction, maintenance, or alteration of a myth may become the crucial policy problem – more important than solving the housing problem or redeveloping a city. As Bennett (1980) has argued, one major function of public policy is 'to help create and stabilize social reality in terms that conform to the dominant myths that produced them.' Thus rather than the myths being designed to support policy strategies, policies may be designed to support the myths. Maintaining myths which embody national ideals as well as making new myths may both be legitimate, though little recognized, functions of government. If myth making is openly incorporated into policy making, however, it is more likely to be accountable. Political actors are less likely to be able to cynically manipulate myths to mislead the public.

Because myths provide so much of the tacitly recognized meaning of policy problems, surfacing and examining them can be crucial to explaining policy decisions. Myths can provide insight into why policymakers so often ignore the supposedly 'efficient' solutions. The image for the problem and its solution provided by a myth is quite different from the measurable goals and criteria (such as efficiency) which systematic policy analysis employs. Myths are an essential starting place for insight into how values shape policy, a starting place those analysts often do not recognize.

This paper will provide evidence about the role of myths through two examples in US domestic policy where myths have played a crucial part in problem definition. In both cases our research relied primarily on analysis of public documents and public statements, as well as on analytic and academic arguments justifying or analyzing the issues.

The first case explores how the Jeffersonian myth of the independent yeoman farmer has influenced US housing policy to focus on a central problem of creating and maintaining widespread home ownership. This myth has persisted for two centuries, while those who debated policy adapted and reshaped it to fit changing circumstances. The myth has supplied them creative guidance for new policies, but also obscured alternative problem definitions that could have dealt more effectively with housing the population. But the myth obscures alternative housing policies because it has less to do with housing than with citizenship. Because the myth is linked to ideas about American democracy and associated with the founding of the nation, it has, however, been durable and important. Its political function has been so important that the maintenance of the myth itself is the most significant problem for some policy makers.

The second case looks at a restructuring of popular myths about business and government into new stories designed to gain the status of myth and designed to support a new definition of the urban policy problem in the 1970s. Whereas in the 1960s urban policy focused on how to deliver services and design programs, by the 1980s the urban policy problem mainly focused on how to create partnerships between public and private sectors. Policy makers and analysts explicitly pieced together a new myth to justify and encourage a restructuring of the responsibilities of government and the private sector. The myths allowed policy makers to rationalize a change in their own positions, in a way that linked it to enduring values and beliefs and made it politically acceptable. The myths invoked their magical logic to inspire public confidence in the potential of this partnership concept and to help bypass much controversy. Practical problems remained, such as how this cooperation could be designed within the framework of a democratic process, but the myth glossed over such contradictions and practical questions. It provided instead a utopian image which left ambiguous how it would be achieved. In this case the myth was as much a rationalization of ongoing processes as a leading force for a new policy. But the myth had an important function in reframing the policy problem to make legitimate a view of the relationship between government and private sectors which represented a significant change from one predominant since the New Deal.

Home ownership and the Jeffersonian ideal[5]

> [T]he far-seeing founders of our Republic... [visualized]... a race of free men, made independent by individual ownership of the land. Life has indeed grown more intricate... but never has arisen any sound reason to question the ideal that goes to the heart of our economic existence – widespread home ownership. (Undated quote in Dean, 1945: 3)

Home ownership, perhaps the most durable of all US domestic policies, owes its influence to the mythological baggage it carries with it. The quote, from a president of the National Association of Real Estate Boards, could easily have come from many other prominent Americans at any time in this century. The language should suggest why those who have tried to analyze the promotion of home ownership simply as housing policy have so often found the strategy irrational.[6] On a number of occasions in our history, other strategies would, arguably, have been more effective ways of housing the population. But home ownership is not just used as a solution to a housing problem. It is popularly seen as a basic way of maintaining a free, stable, and democratic society. It plays so critical a role in the myths about protecting democracy that the objective of maintaining high levels of home ownership has persisted in US housing policy for over a century. The myths have evolved in that time, as have both the ideas of ownership and of the policies to promote it. The persistence of this policy objective can only be understood in the light of the myths that give home ownership its public meaning.

The public rhetoric of home ownership can readily be traced to the myth of the yeoman farmer. Political writers of the Revolutionary period, most notably Thomas Jefferson, adopted this image of the ideal citizen for the future American society. The myth was of the small property owner, who, with his family, worked his land, producing enough to be basically self sufficient. He was close to the purifying influence of nature and dependent on no powerful or wealthy person for his livelihood. Such people would be politically independent and responsible, economically productive, and morally respectable. A society largely composed of such yeoman farmers would differ fundamentally from society in Europe, where inevitable conflict between those with property and those without would prevent the development of democracy. American society in contrast would be egalitarian, because the majority of its people would have modest amounts of property, and stable, because this property ownership would assure that the majority had a stake in the society.[7]

Though this agrarian myth was originally a product of the educated classes, and had much of its roots in the English experience and literature, by the early nineteenth century it had become in the words of Hofstadter (1956: 92), 'a mass creed, a part of the country's political folklore and its nationalist ideology.' The family farm and American democracy became intimately connected through this myth. Its influence on policy making began in the early years of the Republic, as Jeffersonians called on the moral primacy of the farmer in their debates with the Federalists. The myth then provided the basis for the strategy of developing the continent. Policies of the early 19th century, such as limitations on slavery in the newly settling regions and the priority accorded to individual settlers over larger landholders through limitations on parcel size and preemption rights for squatters, reflected the effort to achieve the ideal of a nation of yeoman farmers.

The Homestead Act offered 160 acres per person to settlers, expressly because its designers thought this to be just the amount needed for self sufficiency (de Neufville 1983a). Agricultural subsidies continue in the 1980s, supported by popular appeals to protect the endangered family farm. They are testimony to the endurance of the myth, even in a period when farmers represent a tiny proportion of the population.

The small farmer was a sufficiently large part of the electorate at first, however, for the myth to constitute a plausible and flattering description of American society. As cities and manufacturing employment grew, the myth continued, perhaps as a counterbalance to new conditions that threatened existing ways of life and beliefs. The cities were perceived in much of American thought as sources of corruption, alienation, and harmful speculation (White and White 1962). In the later 19th century, urban mob violence, the spread of disease and crime, and the growing body of non-English speaking immigrants and alienated industrial labor increased public fear of the urban way of life.

By the end of the century a new version of the myth began to be formulated – one which would better suit the emerging reality of an urban, industrialized society. This version, which can be found throughout the public statements and writings of political leaders, businessmen, and housing reformers from the Progressive period to the present day, attempts to retain the values of the agrarian myth, but in a new and more usable form.[8] The hero of the myth was transformed from the yeoman farmer into the suburban home owner. This home owner would be the head of a family and live in a single family house, physically separated from its neighbors and surrounded by its own private yard with grass and shrubbery (Perin 1977, Tremblay and Dillman 1981). In other words, the house should be a visual symbol of a farm house or country cottage. The house should be owned by one nuclear family, rather than shared or cooperatively owned, and the land should be owned outright. While the myth recognized that the owner no longer would make his living from the land, but commute to work elsewhere, the visual imagery and the property ownership dimension of its predecessor myth continued to provide a powerful symbol of independence and civic virtue, of family life and personal success.

The myth brought old meanings to the new realities of the period. Street railways in cities had just begun to open the outskirts of cities to the development of such housing. City governments were often seen as corrupt and run by political bosses, and the move to the suburbs could be justified as an effort to return to the virtues of the rural life (Jackson 1985). Moreover, people continued to see common sense in the notion that property owners would be more conservative, stable members of the community than those who had less financial stake in it. The myth may have been stretched to new applications but it still meshed with popular experience and perceptions.

As suburban neighborhoods developed in the early part of this century, the myth evolved further to incorporate them. The single family house had to be located in a neighborhood of similar houses, well separated from the workplace. Shielded from the Darwinian struggle for survival in the world of work, the home would be a haven in which women brought up children and preserved morality. It was a short step to the view that single family housing spatially associated with business, industry, or apartments was less moral than housing in a single-family neighborhood (Wright 1981).

Herbert Hoover, a long time advocate of home ownership, expressed a distillation of this mythic imagery in his address to the White House Conference on Home Building and Home ownership in 1931. He extolled

> ... [T]he high ideal and aspiration that each family may pass their days in the home which they own ... This aspiration penetrates the heart of our national well-being. It makes for happier married life, it makes for better children, it makes for confidence and security, it makes for courage to meet the battle of life, it makes for better citizenship. There can be no fear for a democracy or self-government or for liberty or freedom from homeowners no matter how humble they may be ... (Hoover 1952: 257).

The relationship between home ownership and these remarkable consequences is obscure, unless one recognizes its roots in the yeoman farmer myth.

Though the myth was increasingly to dominate the rhetoric of public policy, the single family, owner-occupied house was not to become the predominant form of housing in the US until after World War II. In the meantime, however, it was gradually established in policy as well as rhetoric that home ownership was the preferred housing option. During the period before World War II, politicians and reformers used the myth to preclude policy focus on other housing strategies. Its imagery helped put in place a broadly based set of institutions to promote home ownership.

In the 1920s, however, despite the rhetoric supporting single-family home ownership, it was not obvious what kind of housing policy the US would have. Many viable options for housing presented themselves. More apartments were actually being constructed in the 1920s in metropolitan areas than single family homes, even in the suburbs, and these rental units were popular with middle and upper income residents. They offered easier housekeeping and more modern facilities than most single family units. The rent was actually higher than the monthly cost of a typical house, suggesting that they were inhabited by higher income residents (Woodbury 1930, Grebler, Blank, and Winnick 1956).[9] Residential hotels in central cities were another popular and growing type of housing for all income groups. For the well-to-do, hotels provided services like meals, house cleaning and even child care. Accordingly, they offered a very different vision of family life. Moreover, they, too, had amenities such as electric lighting and modern plumbing that were difficult to obtain in single family homes (Groth 1983).

But these forms of housing were in conflict with the popular mythology, and policy makers subjected them to constant criticism as violations of the Jeffersonian ideal. President Hoover expressed the common view in his 1931 speech:

> Those immortal ballads 'Home Sweet Home', 'My Old Kentucky Home', and 'The Little Grey Home in the West' were not written about tenements or apartments... they never sing songs about a pile of rent receipts. To own one's own home is a physical expression of individualism, of enterprise, of independence, and of freedom of spirit (Hoover 1952: 257).

Political leaders and reformers promoted home ownership and detached housing, while simultaneously attacking both tenancy and other types of housing. Lawrence Veiller, prominent conservative housing reformer, argued in his 1919 textbook, for example, 'Under no other method than small houses with open lots can we expect American institutions to be maintained.' He argued further that the then residential Waldorf Astoria Hotel was as bad as a tenement in its 'destruction of civic spirit and the responsibilities of citizenship'. The myth was so universally accepted that, despite the fact that many hailed home ownership as an antidote for socialism, socialist author John Spargo agreed that 'a glorified Waldorf Astoria is inferior to a simple cottage with an old-fashioned garden.'[10] Two leading social reformers, writing shortly before World War I, similarly contended that

> [A]ll observers agree that measured by the old standards, the apartment dweller shows a loosening of moral fiber. It fosters lack of civic and household responsibility (Woods and Kennedy 1962: 85).

Home ownership, on the contrary,

> [H]as great utility as automatically interesting the owner in government, neighborhood, and the general community as nothing else does (Woods and Kennedy 1962: 39).

Working with a different cultural heritage, Europeans were developing programs of social housing involving urban apartment living and heterogeneous communities with rents adjusted to need or ability to pay. The effort by the illustrious members of the Regional Planning Association of America[11] to apply notions of housing and urban development to the US comparable to these European ones was to meet with failure. Although these creative and influential individuals did succeed in getting some of their specific innovations adopted, in the context of the home owner myth, these took on different meanings than their creators intended. One innovation, public housing, became, not a model for other kinds of housing, but an inferior way to live for those who were not part of the American mainstream. Another – the new town concept of small communities integrating work with home and family life – became simply the well-designed bedroom community under FDR and the post-war developers (Sussman 1976).

A legacy of the Hoover Administration was a set of institutions designed to discourage alternative forms of housing. Hoover was a major proponent of zoning, which by the 1930s had been widely adopted by cities around the nation. The Standard Zoning Enabling Act published by the US Department of Commerce in 1928, while Hoover was Secretary of Commerce, encouraged cities to adopt ordinances on this model. Zoning embodied, first and foremost, the protection of single family residential districts from the encroachment of other uses. The landmark Supreme Court decision of 1926, upholding the constitutionality of zoning[12] made very clear the special, almost sacred status of the detached home.

> ...[W]hat is really the crux of the more recent zoning legislation, namely, the creation and maintenance of residential districts, from which business and trade of every sort, including hotels and apartment houses are excluded... (as quoted in Perin 1977: 47).

The opinion goes on to label apartment houses as 'mere parasites', taking advantage of 'residential character', clearly equating the latter with single family homes.

The New Deal set in place major legislation actively promoting home ownership of the single family home. It restructured housing finance to make available long term mortgages, backed by federal loan guarantees, set up mortgage lending institutions backed by federal deposit insurance, and established the Federal National Mortgage Association as a secondary mortgage market. In combination with the deduction for mortgage interest payments, in place since the income tax was instituted, and wartime prosperity, these policies were to increase nonfarm home ownership from 41 percent to 51 percent just during the five years from 1940 to 1945. After the War federal public works programs extending utilities into the outskirts of cities and the expanding of the interstate highway network made massive amounts of inexpensive land accessible. Federally backed low-interest loans for veterans to buy single family housing, added to the other policies, produced a nonfarm home ownership level of 61 percent by 1960, close to its 1983 peak of 64 percent.

It should be noted that during this period, no comparable protections were created for other types of housing or their residents. As Hoover had said in 1931, 'We do not... attach to a transitory place that expression about a man's home being his castle, no matter what its constitutional rights may be.' No rent deduction was made available from income tax. Wartime emergency rent control, offering tenants the security or stable housing costs available to home buyers, continued after the War only in New York City. Cooperative housing, common in Europe, was a little used idea in the US, in part because federal mortgage protections were not extended to ownership of apartment housing until after 1961. Moreover, American unions and mutual aid associations were more interested in single family ownership than in the cooperatives favored by their European counterparts.

The effort to establish home ownership as the preferred housing model has succeeded, and its underlying myth persists. Anthropologist Constance Perin, in extensive interviews with planners, architects, lawyers, developers, lending officers and civic leaders in the mid 1970s, found that they believed that less responsible people lived in apartments and that the introduction of apartments into their neighborhoods would threaten their way of life. State and federal court decisions reaffirmed not only the importance of the single family home, but also of the nuclear family it symbolized. In a landmark case in 1974, The Supreme Court decided that cities could exclude more than two unrelated people from living together in a single family neighborhood.[13] So powerful is the home ownership idea that the Johnson Administration launched a major program to subsidize home ownership to the poor, while the Reagan administration plans to sell public housing units to their low-income occupants.[14]

Finally, the power of the home ownership mythology is evident in the invention and encouragement of condominium home ownership. Although a perfectly adequate and operationally equivalent model for shared ownership of multi-unit dwellings already existed in the idea of the cooperative, this concept was difficult to reconcile with the ideal of individual ownership. The condominium apartment further attenuates home ownership mythology, however, since the unit is no longer surrounded by its own private space and no longer involves separate land ownership. The public, nonetheless, is far more willing to accept this form of housing than the cooperative.

Serious problems result from this effort to create, in the condominium idea, with its shared walls, land and public space, a continuity with the myth of the independent yeoman farmer. Residents have difficulty making sense of the new balance between their property rights and their community responsibilities. The myth not only gives them little guidance, it makes understanding more difficult (Silverman and Barton 1984, 1986). Once again, however, it seems that the myth is socially useful to help attach familiar meanings to new conditions and new policies – to help ease a transition to new life styles and economic conditions, while holding to some version of the Jeffersonian ideal. Ironically, the original Jeffersonian vision, which emphasized civic responsibility between neighbors in the rural or small town community, might well be of use to condominium residents in managing their property. The myth has so far evolved from Jefferson's original concept, however, that these residents are left with only the notions of individual property rights and family autonomy.

Public private partnerships: New wine in old bottles

During the decade of the 1970s a profound change occurred in perceptions of the urban policy problem, as reflected in journals, and public statements of governmental and private organizations. Whereas in the 1960s the policy problem was primarily how to design government programs to deal with such specific tasks as providing standard housing, reducing poverty, or training the hard-to-employ, by the 1980s the problem was how to get the public and private sectors to work together. Partnerships of a kind existed in both periods, and program design was done in both, but the focus of policy attention differed.

The change affected both policy content and policy making style. The new substantive focus was on urban economic development rather than on meeting the needs of the disadvantaged. In the new problem definition government would no longer be dominant, but, at most, equal to the private sector. The policy making style would no longer be the top-down approach derived from a policy analysis tradition where programs were 'scientifically' designed in Washington to solve defined problems and meet known objectives. Instead, the style was what could be termed 'social learning', where the policy task is to establish relationships and forums for interaction between government, business, and nonprofit organizations. Within this interaction solutions are created (Friedmann (1987), de Neufville 1986), which are decentralized and presumably responsive to unique local contexts.

This redefinition of the urban problem is a reflection of political, economic and attitudinal changes that affected much public policy in the 1970s. It also reflects both academic and popular disillusionment with the rational analytic style of policy making that characterized the Great Society. The notion of applying a priori theory and academic style analysis to produce and evaluate programs was, by the 1970s, largely viewed as a failure (Aaron 1978, de Neufville 1983).

Official federal and local policy statements and reports, academic and popular journals, position papers by private and non profit organizations, and media reporting all engaged in problem redefinition through myth making. The public – private partnership was central to the new mythology. The term first began to appear in journals in the mid-1970s as a way of describing and justifying cooperative efforts that were already in place, and encouraging further use of the strategy. An early article argued that the 'multiple deterioration of the city center is too great a problem for government or business to solve' (Banner 1976: 432). As is typical of such mythmaking efforts, the article contends that cooperation between public and private sectors can achieve a remarkable array of goals – 'a sound tax program', 'a balanced budget', 'essential public services . . . increased employment and business opportunities . . . and safety and security in the street, home and place of business . . . and therefore a climate receptive to economic development, which in turn can result in economic viability for the city itself.' The partnership would synergistically combine the best of two worlds – corporate effectiveness and municipal responsibility. The stories gave no details on how this would occur, but they made it seem so desirable that it must be possible.

The Carter Administration made the public-private partnership a cornerstone of its urban policy. Its main urban program, The Urban Development Action Grant, funded joint local business and government economic development projects. The report on the first year of the Carter program sets the tone for much of the later rhetoric (US President's Interagency Coordinating Council 1978). Its title was *Urban Action*, and it opens by labeling previous urban programs focusing on services as failures because they did not stimulate the local economy and because they encouraged dependency on federal subsidies. The federal government is in future to be mainly a 'catalyst', starting a 'chain reaction'. In other words, 'urban action' involved little funding or direction from the federal government. It was simply a way of making less go further and of coordinating federal efforts. The traditional Democratic welfare-needs orientation was visibly absent. The remainder of the report provides a series of 'success' stories about particular projects.

Though Carter's policy was not popularly viewed as a great success, the term 'public – private partnership' was successful. Journals such as the *National Civic Review* and other journals directed to practicing professionals ran regular articles on the idea; private organizations, most notably the Committee for Economic Development, prepared monographs exploring and justifying the idea; analysts looked at its history, theory, and practice (Brooks et al. 1984, Fosler and Berger 1982); and the Reagan Administration contributed its own rationales (US President's Task Force on Private Sector Initiatives 1982, Rosenbaum and Kotler 1984). Much of this writing is hortatory, describing the reasons why partnerships are good, what some of the techniques are, and what the attitudes should be of each of the partners. Some writing is in the form of 'how to' manuals. Most of the rest is story telling, describing what are usually labelled innovations or successful partnerships (for example Adams 1983, Berger 1983, and *Journal of Community Action* 1982).

No particular framework or criterion of success is discernible in this literature. It focuses on each project as unique and its descriptions, for the most part, are not the product of systematic research. Rather, their purpose seems to be to describe the ideal model of partnership – the exemplar for practice. Indeed, much of this literature involves a simple relabeling of ongoing work and existing practices. Government-promoted 'self-help' among the poor, infrastructure investment in the business district – all the myriad interactions among government and private nonprofit and for-profit organizations – become examples of public-private partnership. To review these materials is to see a modern myth-making process at work.

The basic myth that emerges from a review of these materials runs approximately as follows: the problem of urban decay was not solved in great part because local government had neither the expertise nor the efficiency to do effective urban problem solving. The federal government's involvement was uncoordinated and counterproductive, creating dependency. The private sector, on the other hand, is by nature innovative, technically skilled, and capable of getting a job done efficiently, but often heedless of community values in its search for profit. Moreover, local government had often unnecessarily burdened private industry with regulations and delays that discouraged growth. The problem for the cities is for local government to harness private capabilities in the public interest. Local government and private business should join in formal partnerships in which they will jointly plan and invest in projects. Business will develop a sense of civic responsibility in this process, recognizing that their own interests coincide with having a healthy, viable city with adequate services and a satisfied population. Government will learn to be more entrepreneurial. In other words, each will become more like the other and, in the process, develop a real community of interest.

A secondary myth concerns the relationship between government and private, nonprofit organizations. Here, government is inflexible, bureaucratic, and unresponsive to individual and community needs, while nonprofit community organizations are flexible and caring, but lack the resources and authority to carry out their tasks. Again, interests coincide, and all three parties, government, business, and nonprofit organizations find harmony in a three-way partnership.

The myths stop without further specification of outcomes. Although earlier statements suggest that such partnerships could solve virtually every urban problem, later discussions are mostly silent on what exactly are the expected benefits and who are the beneficiaries. One of the effects of using this myth is that it allows participants in debate to assume that whatever is important to them will be identified and dealt with. The problem the myth defines is that a process needs to be set in motion. The myth says the task is to redefine the roles of government and the private sector, and makes the assumption that the second order result will be desirable outcomes.

Although this myth provides a rationale for a significant change in the style of action of local government, it does so by drawing on familiar themes. As one observer has most neatly stated it:

> The partnership idea implies drawing on the best strategies that have become

> associated with liberalism and conservatism in America. For example, partnerships build on the liberal practice of intervention in community life to address a social problem, while building on the conservative preference for drawing on and relating social solutions to the resources and needs of the private sector (Langton 1983).

The myths of private efficiency and public waste were readily at hand, along with the myths of the achievements of volunteerism and community cooperation. And certainly the history of urban development in the US is one of varying kinds of shared responsibility between the public and private sectors. Many US cities were originally planned and laid out by railroads and private speculators. Urban transit systems and public utilities were initially built by private entrepreneurs under grants of public authority. Moreover, the immediate predecessor to these partnerships, the Urban Renewal Program of the 1950s and 1960s, was built on similar kinds of tools and concepts, where the government assembled and cleared land and provided it at reduced cost to developers (Frieden and Sagalyn 1986). So the myth provides a rationale for a new version of long-existing public-private relationships, and for a rejection of seemingly failed programs.

This myth making process served as a way of rationalizing the de facto urban policy that was evolving in the mid-1970s, making it politically and ideologically acceptable. It did this by linking it to earlier traditions and by providing a story of how business and government were going to evolve and change their roles and objectives. It was functional to many of the actors in the policy process to accept the myth.

President Carter needed a concept that would accept the new realities of the period, while keeping together the traditional Democratic coalition. By the time he came onto the national scene, detailed categorical programs designed in Washington had largely been replaced by open-ended block grants. The backlash against government had begun, and the federal urban budget was shrinking. While these changes had substantial bipartisan support, they still conflicted with traditional objectives of Democrats to protect the disadvantaged and the working class. Carter's administration began the official process of developing the story that partnerships would somehow produce all those same outcomes, through a different mechanism. It was a way of allowing Democrats to feel comfortable joining this new bandwagon, as well as a way for Carter to keep attention away from the much reduced federal urban budget.

The advantages for local governments of accepting the myth are not hard to identify. With decreasing federal funding, and measures limiting local revenues, they had the expectation of smaller and smaller discretionary budgets. Clearly they could do little to complete old urban renewal projects, much less to modernize their city centers without private involvement. For the first time in decades in some cities, spontaneous economic revival was encouraging such private sector investment. Many entrepreneurs and city agencies had already developed cooperative relationships. In addition, with government under attack, the idea of public – private partnership helped maintain the legitimacy of public controls over development.

The idea of public – private partnerships was particularly attractive to downtown businesses, whose longstanding progrowth coalitions with local political and labor officials had been disrupted by insurgencies in minority and working class neighborhoods during the 1960s and 1970s. The renewed concern with economic development and the partnership idea relegitimated the use of government investment to make the central city competitive with its suburbs. The incorporation of nonprofit organizations into the partnership idea helped defuse community organizations' hostility to business use of government funding and powers.

The public – private partnership idea also proved attractive to previously insurgent community organizations. Neighborhood and community organizations could now redefine themselves as part of the private sector and continue to claim a legitimate place in planning urban development. In addition, with government revenues increasingly cut back, private sector support, often through exactions in development plans, offered new sources of funding. These organizations' participation in local partnerships remained somewhat tenuous, however, and community advocates warned business and government that if they were ignored it would endanger the legitimacy of the partnership idea (Speigel 1981, Cunningham 1981, Langton 1983).

A reluctant Reagan Administration finally adopted the concept as well, after trying with only partial success to subsume partnerships under their preferred idea of privatization, which implied the virtual elimination of the governmental role. Reagan documents redefined the notion of partnership, however, to justify a pullout of the federal partner altogether (Stanfield 1982). As a practical matter, without federal funds many of the original objectives, such as leveraging private investment, could not be done. Thus, in effect both the local and federal partner roles were shrinking despite the continuing rhetoric. Ironically, the response of local government was increasingly to use exactions from private developers to fund public facilities, though this form of partnership involved a greater role of government. The partnership myth is now widely accepted in public rhetoric, though confined to a narrower set of objectives than at first. The 1984 HUD report on Public Private Partnerships asserts that

> ... [P]ublic private partnerships have progressed from the realm of idiosyncratic innovation to prominent status as a mainline tool of urban and social policy (Rosenbaum and Kotler 1984).

The reality of the nature of those 'partnerships' remains to be explored.

Ultimately, the myth reconstructed the meaning of urban policy during this period. Community groups, local government, and business had fought each other to a standstill in the 1960s and early 1970s with a serious loss of legitimacy for all involved. The partnership idea provided a basis for renewed public trust by harking back to familiar ideas. It supported both government and private sectors by helping prevent each from attacking the other. It remains to be seen how successful and ultimately credible the partnership concept will be in the long run. While it protects local policies by drawing on the positive aspects of the public mythology of business and government, another view draws on the negative side of the same myths to portray the partnership as a coercive, unresponsive, greedy and wasteful conspiracy of the rich and powerful. The use of this version of the partnership story has been associated with some serious electoral defeats for proposed partnership projects (Fox 1985, Silver and Burton 1986).

The reality that there has been little systematic design or evaluation of partnerships suggests that the primary object of most discussion thus far has been to legitimize a new concept and to rationalize changes taking place. The myth makers seem to have intended to construct a new meaning for urban policy which is congruent with contemporary realities, while still carrying a connection to the past and to basic beliefs.[15] But at this point it seems that, as Langton has said, 'Popular advocacy has probably advanced the idea about as far as it can go without falling apart under the weight of its excessive baggage.' (1983: 261). It remains to be seen whether this myth provides a practical set of solutions, and becomes an enduring myth like that of the yeoman farmer.

Roles of the myths

These two cases illustrate both ways myths can shape the problem definitions that frame policy and the ways myths are themselves reformulated in the competition among actors to frame the policy problem. The nature and role of these myths are far from identical, but the common characteristics are striking. The first case offers an example of an enduring myth grounded in the founding of the nation, a myth so fundamentally linked to beliefs that its use was to contribute to the persistence of policy ideals over two centuries. This was a myth that was more important than the policies it supported. The second is a story about an effort to create a new myth to justify new policies and problem definitions. Both however, draw on familiar images, and both represent adaptations of these to changing conditions. Both cases illustrate that such images can provide powerful concepts, inspiring both policy proposals and widespread commitment to action. Both cases also show the high value that policy makers, reformers, and political leaders place on myths, as they expend such effort creating or evoking myths and the values associated with them.

It is striking, too, that in both cases the myths mediated social, economic, and even ideological change. The myths imbued new realities with familiar meanings and preserved people's sense of purpose and their support for public policies.[15] The yeoman farmer myth continued to define a basic ideal of American democracy throughout the period of urbanization. When it no longer became tenable in its pure agrarian form, policy makers and urban analysts adapted it to fit the nonagrarian land owner. The public private partnership myth, too, helped deal with changes in the economy, in the role of government, and in national priorities. It evoked familiar beliefs, which emphasized the positive side of institutions that had lost public trust. This case shows how the myths can be creative ways to piece together ideas, themes, and strategies in the culture, to develop a new model of action with enough that is familiar to be acceptable and enough that has emotional resonance to inspire wide support.

Myths thus play a simultaneously conservative and creative role in problem definition. They can provide new ways of seeing issues and point toward policy directions. But they can also blind people to alternative ways of seeing a problem and to alternative solutions. The home ownership myth helped create the motivation for legislation promoting ownership, but it also prevented systematic consideration of higher density and rental housing options. This view excluded hotels, which provide services and amenities that we now try to provide for working mothers and the elderly, but which our single family housing pattern makes difficult. The partnership concept has inspired collaborations between public and private sectors, but it has also called attention away from assuring that public goals are met and away from protection of democratic process.

The myths in both cases provided a framework which many opposing interest groups accepted. The partnership concept allowed business, nonprofit, and community organizations to be part of public discussion, and it was acceptable to members of both political parties, as well as to local and federal governments. The home ownership idea also has been acceptable to both political parties and to unions as well as corporations. The myths provided the basic assumptions and thus helped limit controversy through agreement on problem definition. Accepting many of the assumptions, however, was arguably not in the interest of all the groups. They did so presumably because the myths obscured such interests or because the myths represented such fundamental, taken-for-granted beliefs.

In both cases powerful groups were able to choose and adapt myths to some extent to suit their purposes. Yet their adaptations were limited by persistent beliefs and by myths' failures to account for all practice. In the case of public private partnerships opponents were able to draw on alternate myths to challenge the legitimacy of the partnerships, presumably because they did not perform according to the myth's expectation. The home ownership myth could not be replaced with an entirely different one that included tenants. It was so fundamental as a belief that the idea of home owners could be stretched to include even owners of apartments who owe vast sums to the banks.

This stretching of the myth to include condominium owernship may turn out in practice to have gone too far because it is dysfunctional as a guiding concept for these owners. It says nothing about how to manage collectively units with shared space, and it is itself a source of confusion and conflict. It also remains to be seen if the partnership myth will hold up as experience and understanding grows and there are new applications of the myth.

The ambiguous logic of myths

Myths have their problematic effects on policy debate and analysis because they are usually tacit or at most partially evoked. The effect is to provide a magical, rather than a logical or evidence-based explanation. For example in 1975, Secretary of HUD, Carla Hills said,

> Homeownership provides a sense of identity of roots and of security which is the stuff from which neighborhoods are made and which protect against social alienation.[16]

Her statement does not explain the mechanism by which home ownership produces these outcomes, but assumes we all understand it.

The myth behind problem definitions allows for ambiguity which complicates the policy process. Because the myth does not spell out cause and effect, the listener cannot evaluate the reasoning to see if it applies to the case in point. The evocation of the myth allows the listener to assume that ownership leads to citizenship, even though the original connection through self sufficient farming is long gone. Somehow, the old logic remains attached to the new policy because it is not explicit. Similarly, the form of the public–private partnership and the way the partners will manage to achieve this consensus is unexplained. The myth of partnership, however, has a persuasiveness which makes it seem as if all that is necessary is to get partners together for them to solve the problems of the cities. This leaving out of logic effectively makes certain relationships sacred – puts them outside the realm of debate. In this sense myths serve the same function they have throughout history. We all know that home owners are better and that cooperation between government and business is a good thing. The possibility that renters might be good citizens, or that partnerships may not incorporate citizen concerns is not part of the discussion.

In neither case has there been much systematic research to evaluate whether the assumptions, the sacred questions, in the myth are correct. The little that has been done suggests there are serious flaws in these assumptions. American survey data, for example, show that home ownership has little influence on political participation and does not predict the degree to which a person will be conservative or liberal. Home owners are indeed more likely to engage in political activity and to be more conservative than renters, but home ownership is accompanied by such important factors as greater income, age, education and length of residence. Once these factors are taken into account, empirical study shows that the effects of home ownership either vanish or are extremely small (Durning 1984, Kingston et al. 1984, Ladd 1986). This seems to suggest that home ownership may have little to do with citizenship or political stability, though the evidence remains too limited to say with confidence.

Similarly, the ambiguity of myth leads to multiple interpretations, which allow different people to ascribe different values to a myth and to apply it to different situations and to expect different outcomes. Many actors with different objectives jumped on the public private partnership bandwagon without agreeing on the details of how it would work or what it would accomplish. All hoped to bend it to their goals. This ambiguity allows many processes to go under one label, though they may not reflect the intent of the myth makers nor of those using the myths (Wolman and Ledebur 1980).

One of the few systematic efforts to evaluate public private partnerships uncovered widespread problems with implementation which allowed the extensive spread of a 'partnership' that little resembled the conceptions depicted by the myth. This study (Bradford 1982) looked at one of the nation's most visible partnership programs, Control Data's City Venture Corporation, which contracted to design and establish major planning and development programs in more than a dozen large cities. In practice, this partnership was neither publically accountable nor clearly operating in the public interest. The company tended to do public planning through private management styles. It made decisions in a closed and centralized way, and tried, in mass production style, to sell prepackaged programs, using Control Data's products, to cities with very different local situations and needs. Moreover, as the advocate of a particular plan and promoter of particular products, City Venture could not act in a mediator role among the interests and long term public concerns. As a result no one played this important role, assumed away in the myth. This prominent, and in many views, successful, partnership violated the spirit of the myth, as the corporation had substantial power and the public interest few protections.

Because the myth tacitly incorporates values, it gives priority to some without clearly saying that alternative values will be diminished. Thus, home ownership can be a positive goal for the middle class, but the myth makes it unnecessary to acknowledge that it may be a negative one for the poor, the young, or other social groups who cannot afford to own. The public–private partnership is presumably in the public interest, but it ignores traditional notions of democracy. Those very home owners have little to say about the deals that are cut in the bargaining sessions between powerful corporations and government agencies.

Though the myth is a way of seeing reality and giving it meaning, it is also potentially a self-fulling vision. Asserting its truth may well make people act out the imagery (Kautsky 1965). Using the myth thus can have a kind of circular quality. As more partnerships are created, their supporters go to more effort to justify them and to elaborate the myth. These efforts, in turn, encourage the public to believe that partnerships are socially beneficial. The more the predominant views that home ownership is the solution and tenancy the problem, the less likely policy is to be directed at alleviating the difficulties of renting and the more the disparity grows between the attractiveness of owning and renting. Experience may discredit some myth-based policies, but the mere implementation of the myth can help to reinforce public faith in it.

Myth in policy analysis

Ultimately, the problem for the policy analyst is that problem definition is not what it seems on its surface. Myths are tacit, and the values and beliefs they reflect about cause and effect are unscientific and unstated. The public – private partnership is not really about urban development, but about rationalizing new roles for urban actors. Home ownership is not really about housing, but citizenship.

A classic juxtaposition of the views of two leading housing analysts highlights the mismatch between much of policy analysis and the nature of problems defined through myth. Richard Muth argued in a 1984 issue of *Society* that our national housing policy of promoting home ownership diverts resources from other more productive investments. He effectively makes the case, moreover, that *as housing policy*, home ownership subsidies through mortgage deduction are not an efficient way to use potential tax revenues. George Sternleib, responding in the same journal, sees the issue in a different light. He is more concerned about maintaining the myth itself.

> In the heart of the economic darkness that was the Great Depression we moved, Republicans and Democrats alike, to strengthen and revitalize a concept as old as America – the ownership of real property – shifting from the rural scene to the urban and suburban. We supplemented the vision of the independent farmer, viewed by Jefferson as the backbone of the nation, with a reality of the home owner whose acreage may have been relatively minute, but whose sense of dignity and honor was equally enhanced (Sternleib and Hughes 1984: 30).

Two points are remarkable in these contrasting arguments. The first is that Muth, a respected professor of economics and former member of the President's Commission on Housing (1981–82), discounts the myth entirely. He assumes that home ownership policy is about how to house the population in the most economical way. But if he wanted to challenge home ownership policy, it would have been more to the point to show that it does not produce better citizens. Secondly, it is equally remarkable how wholeheartedly Sternlieb, also an eminent academic and founder of Rutgers Center for Urban Policy Research, embraces the myth. He seems to be saying that the important thing is to maintain the myth because it helped us out of the Depression without forcing drastic changes in our basic institutions. It will, he suggests, help us in the future with similar challenges. Supporting the myth is, according to this view, the goal of public policy, the problem that policy has to solve.

Most policy analysts fall into one of these patterns, either failing to see myths as anything but impediments to rational policy analysis, or uncritically adopting myths. They have thus far failed to take the more constructive strategy of making myths explicit and subjecting them to critical analysis. This would allow policy makers and the public to confront and improve myths and to make creative, conscious use of them rather than be subject to their hidden and often dysfunctional influences.

For policy analysts to use myths, and for students of policy processes to make sense of problem definitions, their first task is to do historical research to uncover them. A myth may be an old story remodeled for the present, but it brings with it old baggage, largely taken for granted in the present. Even new myths are created from the old symbols, images and stories, and accordingly require historical interpretation. History is essential to making sense of contemporary public problem definitions.

A second challenge for the policy analyst comes from the fact that when a myth lies behind a statement of the problem the information contains both normative and positive theories. The myth frames both problem and solution and it means that goals or criteria are not explicit. The solutions, and the criteria by which to judge them, are merged in a single image of the standard practice of policy analysis. Therefore, the analyst cannot systematically evaluate alternative ways of solving a problem. They not only cannot identify criteria, they also have difficulty identifying alternatives because the problem definition precludes them. Even if the analyst can extract criteria from a myth, they are not readily separable from one another to make tradeoffs; nor are they hierarchical to set priorities. Rather, the criteria are packaged in the myth.[17] Those who accept the myth assume that if we aim toward its imagery, we will achieve all desired ends simultaneously.

Finally, what is most striking is that once one looks at problem definition in the light of underlying myths, one can no longer assume policy making is simply about solving problems. Policy analysts cannot be effective if they define problem solving as their sole task. Myth making and myth maintaining also have to be recognized as intentional and valuable activities of both public leaders and analysts. A society needs its ways of understanding itself, its ways of making sense of actions, and its ways of maintaining continuity with the past. A leader may focus on a policy problem in order to promote a myth that seems essential to the culture and economic system. Policy makers, or the public, may never accept alternative problem definitions if doing so requires letting go of an important myth.

Those who do research on policy making need to grapple with the various roles of myth. While myths are an essential part of policy processes, they can also be a source of serious obstacles to the formulation of rational and publically accountable decisions. In the longer run such research may assist policy analysts to find a rationality that incorporates the myths that are inevitable parts of public life.[18]

Notes

1. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1977). Springfield, Mass.: G. C. Merriam Company.
2. We have found useful in this analysis Ann Swidler's (1986) idea of culture as a repertoire of tools for action.
3. The concept of myth used in this paper relies on a variety of perspectives, but is most heavily influenced by Berger and Luckmann (1967), Tudor (1972), Douglas (1975), and Cords and Gerster's (1978) collection of myths in US history. Related work on symbols such as Edelman (1977, 1964) and Elder and Cobb (1983) were also used.
4. Much of this argument parallels Sykes (1965, 1970), who looks at how myth frames attitudes toward labor-management issues and religious toleration in the UK.
5. Many of the ideas in this section are drawn from Barton (1985).
6. Durning (1984) and Muth (1984) take this view. Similar views from the 1970s are cited in Perin (1977: 77).
7. This a composite version of the myth drawing most heavily on Jefferson's writings (Ford 1894); Peterson (1960); and Hofstadter (1956).
8. Large numbers of these quotes can be found in Dean (1945); Durning (1984); Gellen (1985); Groth (1985); Wright (1981).
9. We are indebted to Martin Gellen for sharing his unpublished research on this point.
10. As quoted in Dancis (1976: 94).
11. These included urban historian Lewis Mumford; new town designers and developers, Henry Wright and Clarence Stein; and public housing advocates, Catherine Bauer and Edith Wood.
12. Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co. 272 US 365.
13. Village of Belle Terre v. Boraas 416 US 9.
14. Silver (1986) has documented that public construction of housing for sale to owners and other direct subsidies of home ownership have been tried repeatedly in state and federal programs in this century.
15. Marris (1974) develops the idea that both individuals and communities deal with loss and change by constructing new meanings which build on old ones. We see myth-making as serving this function and helping to mediate change.
16. Speech to the American Bar Association quoted in Perin (1977: 78).
17. Hill (1986), in a critique of cost benefit analysis, argues that people typically evaluate alternatives

as a whole, rather than by discrete criteria. Kaplan (1986) argues that narratives may often be used to justify policy, but that these are not compatible with a criterion-based method of evaluating alternatives.

18. One approach to such a new concept is suggested in de Neufville (1987).

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