Mythic Structure Theory: Proposing a New Framework for the Study of Political Issues

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This article develops the tenets of a new political theory evolved from the discovery that there are numerous frameworks to study political issues, such as abortion, but few over-arching theories. I propose and explore the tenets and hypotheses of a new “mythic structure theory.” Mythic structure theory draws from numerous examples in literature and anthropology and treats political issues as mythical stories, referencing heavily the works of James Joyce and Joseph Campbell. The essay concludes with the specific application of mythic structure theory to the issue of abortion and an argument is made as to why mythic structure theory yields insights into the abortion debate not offered by other theoretical frameworks. The application of this concept is recommended for the study of political issues such as abortion, civil rights, the environment, and education.

The idea for this work grew out of several thoughts coalescing. In recognizing the seriousness and non-ending quality of the abortion debate, for example, it appears that none of the current theoretical frameworks sufficiently explains the magnitude and complexity of the topic. In a normative sense, what is the best way to study this issue? Do the religious, legalistic, or public policy frameworks so prevalent in the literature reasonably explain the issue? What is the best way to navigate political topics in which there are numerous contested beliefs and assumptions?

A “war” metaphor is often used to describe the debates over abortion, but this is too rigid to capture the nuances of the debate. After all, there are scholars in the debate who look at issues such as morality and ethics, not in terms of two sides in a “war,” but in terms of some universal concepts beyond mere earthly battles. An additional problem with the “war” metaphor is that it becomes reductive—a sort of shorthand that allows us to sidestep deeper thinking about the issue. These problems reflect what Clifford Geertz (1973), in The Interpretation of Cultures, considers common in the analysis of complex social issues: “…one is left with a collection of anecdotes connected by insinuation, and with a feeling that though much has been touched little has been grasped” (312).
A recent review of the literature on abortion also suggests a gap relative to explaining such issues in a new and profound way. As Malcolm Goggin (1993) points out: “We are still left with the question of why there is so much conflict [over the issue of abortion], and why is there so little consensus. A second puzzle that deserves further study is the question of what abortion signifies?” (23). Goggin says his call for new research began with two major organizing questions: “First, ‘How can we best understand the politics of abortion, especially the institutional context and policy-making styles used to resolve conflict?’ Second, ‘How can that understanding help us predict what is likely to happen in the future?’” (27).

This article attempts to remedy this situation by taking a small foothold in the field with the introduction and application of the mythic structure focus. This modest proposal asks us to consider the abortion debate and others like it with a different focus than any existing in the literature. Hence, this research draws from the interdisciplinary study of myth so prevalent in the fields of anthropology, sociology, and literature, and applies the study of myth to the realm of politics.1 In other words, this is a new review and new application of some ideas that have been touched on in the field before, but which have been glossed over or ignored by very recent political science theorists. The result is a new theoretical framework and set of hypotheses for studying political issues, which I subsequently apply to the issue of abortion in this article. The theory, if applicable to abortion, should also apply to other areas of political study, such as education, civil rights, environmental studies, the 1998 presidential impeachment debate, or the 2000 presidential contest. As such, this research provides an innovative way to view political issues and the people involved in them. It is meant to be a starting point for instructors and students of political science to reinvigorate debate on complex issues and understand them in a unique way.

The Proposal: Mythic Structure Theory as a Framework

Carl Jung (1964) and Joseph Campbell (1988) have sought to bridge competing theories in anthropology, literature, and psychology by looking for the common denominators that exist in these fields.2 They and others have been responsible for showcasing the beauty and complexity of many subjects by consistently stressing the simple stories that lay at the heart of so many larger issues. Jung highlights archetypes, while Campbell explores the power of myth to describe the similarities between cultures.
What is a myth? The Greek historian Herodotus first coined the term in the fourth century B.C. to “distinguish what he saw as essentially fictional accounts of the past from factual description” (Bently 1995, 6). Centuries later, the phenomenon of myths continues to attract scholars. French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (1978) suggests that “even in a mediocre translation from the language of its original narration, the present-day reader spontaneously recognizes a myth for what it is,” and that they are usually composed of “contraposed ideas” he calls “binary oppositions” (also quoted in Bently 1995, 6). Binary oppositions are described as structures shared by all “story-forms” and are suggested by two of his better-known working titles, The Raw and the Cooked and From Honey to Ashes (Jones and Wilson 1987, 332). Adolph Bastian, a German anthropologist, distinguishes “between the particular local expression of a mythical theme, what we would now call its cultural and ethnic content, and what (he) saw as elemental ideas … believed to be a part of the biological inheritance of all [humans]” (quoted in Bently 1995, 7). This suggests there are multiple levels to mythical themes and that many myths have multiple meanings to consider.

Apart from anthropologists like Levi-Strauss and Bastian, psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung have attempted to help explain the power of myth. Freud considered myths as “universal but unconscious” stories and Jung went farther to introduce the concept of archetypes into the language. Archetypes are major figures such as the “Mother” or “Old Wise Man” that appear in numerous mythological traditions. Professor Roy Willis has suggested that all scientific attempts to account for the uniqueness of mythical stories are no more than our “culturally specific endeavor, as members of a socially and historically defined group called the Western scientific community to express what is ultimately inexpressible” (quoted in Bently 1995, 7). This suggests that we may have a tendency to see political issues through “scientific” lenses, which may not allow for an issue to be best understood. Scientific analysis of the abortion debate, for instance, clearly leaves out major conceptual issues that should be considered.

In attempting to quantify and qualify the content of myth, perhaps we are guilty of simply falling into the trap of trying to understand “scientifically” too many things this century. Joseph Campbell (1988) provides a particularly useful way of working through this conundrum in The Power of Myth. There Campbell notes the importance of continually analyzing myths and learning how mythical themes can help us to analyze ourselves. Campbell offers the example of James Joyce. In Joyce’s work, myths are metaphors. In addition,
Joyce gives us the term *monomyth* to describe the formula of most myths: separation-initiation-return. It is suggested that the prime function of myths, in this regard, is “to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back” (Campbell 1949, 11). It is in this positive vein that the mythic structure theory is proposed here, as a guide to help us make sense of the symbols and content of modern political problems.

Lastly, political scientist W. Lance Bennett (1980) writes eloquently about the nexus of myths, rituals, and politics and concludes that “myths are the truths about society that are taken for granted … [they are] basic cultural principles … [that are] the basis of political consciousness in American society” (167-68). Bennett confirms the power of myths by arguing that they “condition the public to the powerful symbols used by politicians” and they “blend fact with fantasy and confuse history with legend” (168).

**The Tenets/Traits of a Mythic Structure Theory**

For Campbell and others who have attempted to draw from his work, all complex stories have similar traits. I am modifying Campbell’s work slightly by suggesting there are five such elements in these stories, or mythic structures, including the players and participants involved in the story, the places these individuals go on their journeys, the individual or collective ideals and truths they share which lead them to champion one particular cause over another, the unique language or rhetoric the participants use, and the notion of an historical and potentially never-ending conflict.

**Tenet One: Players and Participants**

He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish. In the first forty days a boy had been with him.

— Ernest Hemingway (1952, 9)

In the week before their departure to Arrakis, when all the final scurrying about had reached a nearly unbearable frenzy, an old crone came to visit the mother of the boy, Paul.

— Frank Herbert (1965, 3)
The first tenet of mythic structure theory asks us to list and analyze the essential players and participants in our myth. The easiest way to discover how a myth develops is to examine the actors involved. Like the “old” woman visiting the young main character of Paul in Dune or the “boy” working with the “old man” in Hemingway’s masterpiece, the various characters in a myth are central to understanding the hero figure or others who play central roles. The actors in a mythic structure often have different backgrounds, but they are the characters that help frame the story and they become part of the ensuing action.

According to Joseph Campbell (1949), one of the main players in a myth is the titular Hero with A Thousand Faces. He uses the image of “a thousand faces” to note that many myths use the hero figure as a central character regardless of culture, country, or time period. This figure usually takes the form of a person in a quest for something that he or she may not even understand. Despite having many “faces,” the central hero of a myth “is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms” (Campbell 1949, 19-20). In addition to representing others, the hero “is to return to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed” (20). The hero, then, is the central character of a mythic structure. In addition to the hero, however, the mythic structure theory recognizes other key characters from myths and legends. These characters include the mentor figure for many heroes, who guides the hero through the journey; the trickster character, who tries to lead the hero astray; the threshold guardian, who may be a neutral figure opening new areas to the hero; and the fabled herald figure, who issues challenges during the myth or announces the coming of particular characters and scenes (Vogler 1992, 35-37).

Some scholars have even suggested that the other archetypal characters in a myth “are facets of the hero’s” own personality (Vogler 1992, 35). It is this concept that best applies within the mythic structure framework: the ability to see all characters as interrelated and dependent on one another. In other words, the classic categorizations of heroes, villains, and bystanders is appropriate here, but understanding how characters interact with each other is equally important to understanding the benefits of using a mythic structure framework for political analysis.

Tenet One, then, understands the key players and participants in a political issue. Determining whom these players represent is central to understanding their foibles, strengths, and attitudes, as well as the role they play in the larger story. These attitudes and ideals will be discussed further under Tenet Three.
and specific examples for each of these tenets relative to the abortion debate will be discussed in the section devoted to applying mythic structure theory to abortion. Next, we will consider the elements of the characters’ journey.

**Tenet Two: The Places They Go**

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone.

— Margaret Atwood (1986, 3)

A squat gray building of only thirty-four stories. Over the main entrance the words, Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Center, and, in a shield, the World State’s Motto, Community, Identity, Stability.

— Aldous Huxley (1932, 1)

Borrowing from the concept of Campbell’s “Hero’s Journey,” the second tenet of the mythic structure theory is to define and analyze the route of a political story. Route refers to the literal and figurative places where our actors go. In the normal analysis of myth, characters are usually on an adventure. The characters often do not even realize they are part of this journey or that the other characters they meet may also be on an adventure. These journeys can be inward or outward because even though many physical locales make up the journey, characters often discover many things about themselves along the way (Campbell 1988). In this way, a journey into space for the astronauts, for example, may be as symbolic for them as individuals as much as it may be for them as witnesses to the journey. The inward journey, then, is the journey of self-discovery that comes with any exploration.

Many locations in a myth represent larger places and concerns. We can adapt this concept to our mythic structure theory by realizing the importance of “place” to characters in the story and to the story as a whole. In the above examples, the importance of the old gymnasium and the new Hatchery and Conditioning Center are central to the works. In other cases these places might be caves; particular cities; mountaintops; battlefields; the moon; or metaphorically, the belly of a whale. These places are signposts on a larger journey and keys to understanding the action of characters.
As noted earlier in discussing the tasks of hero characters, the journey itself often appears repetitive and circular. Characters often return to places they have been before, but with renewed enlightenment or courage. The general pattern of the journey is such that heroes are introduced in their “ordinary world,” receive the “call to adventure,” receive encouragement from a mentor figure to heed the call, enter a “special world,” get tested by allies and enemies, undergo some “supreme ordeal,” receive the reward for hard work and “return” to the “ordinary world” with new insights or gifts. Applying these concepts to mythic structure theory requires us to alter these basic steps slightly. Doing so emphasizes the importance that particular places play in the myth. The symbolism of place and scenes in a myth cannot be underestimated. The deepest or richest of characters described by Tenet One of the mythic structure theory will be useless to our theory if they are not placed in compromising and unusual positions. At the same time, the players and participants in the mythic structure are capable of incredible deeds and developments if placed in certain locations. Like a stage play, the characters and scenes in a mythic structure interact to move the plot along. Unlike a stage play, the actors may have no idea what lies ahead in the next scene.

**Tenet Three: The Ideals / Truths They Champion**

It was a pleasure to burn. It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed.

— Ray Bradbury (1953, 3)

You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings. I arrived here yesterday, and my first task is to assure my dear sister of my welfare and increasing confidence in the success of my undertaking.

— Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1831, 9)

Bradbury’s main character in his 1953 novel is a firefighter of the future who sets fires instead of putting them out. The number “451” refers to the temperature at which paper burns, and the firefighters in Bradbury’s world of the future fastidiously and proudly burn books. For them, it is a “pleasure to burn.” Mary Shelley’s character, Robert Walton, also feels strongly about his “enterprise” and “undertaking”—to explore the poles—before he accidentally
gets involved in the battle between Dr. Frankenstein and his monster. In each of these works, characters are driven by principles they consider extremely important. Tenet Three of mythic structure theory calls for determining and analyzing the ideals of players and participants involved in political issues.

Understanding the ideals of individuals in a myth is vital for two reasons. First, they provide insight into why a character is behaving a certain way, that is, what is motivating that character. Second, with this analysis it is easier to compare and contrast characters and understand why they may or may not ever see eye to eye. Since no political issue evolves in a vacuum or lacks numerous political personalities, highlighting what drives particular people and providing an objective way to correlate their behavior with others is paramount. For instance, in the video interview of Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers that accompanies *The Power of Myth*, Campbell uses the example of a husband and wife to show how various preconceptions and notions about marriage can affect a relationship. Each of the partners brings certain attitudes and feelings to bear on the other and oftentimes it can be difficult for each individual to see and appreciate the other’s views. In some myths, this level of conflict can take the form of two individuals competing in a race, two cities fighting over specified principles, or two families battling over land. In each of these examples one side may not understand the values of the other, or may have some twisted notion of what motivates their adversary.

One of the guidelines for applying mythic structure theory to political issues is to classify, compare, and contrast the views of the participants involved. More importantly, and to add credibility to this kind of research, once the ideals and “truths” of the players are revealed, they should be shared and analyzed so that each player can attempt to understand the other. The motivations of political players appear to be as varied and complex as the number of players involved; mythic structure theory helps to analyze these motivations and leads to a better understanding of what drives certain behaviors. In this way, mythic structure theory relates to several existing theories of political behavior, such as rational choice theory, social psychology, social learning theory, and group theory.⁵

**Tenet Four: The Unique Language of the Myth**

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.

— George Orwell (1949, 5)
April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
*Memory and desire, stirring*
Dull roots with Spring rain.

— T.S. Eliot (1962, 29)

Mythic structure theory spells out and analyzes the language of political myths. In the same way that the author and poet above try to make sense of April through the creative use of language, our analysis of political issues will try to make sense of the particular nuances and quirks of political language. More directly, mythic structure theory requires that we break down the dialogue used in political debates and analyze the roots of particular expressions and comments. Our goal, parallel to understanding the motivations of political players as discussed in Tenet Three, is to accept that certain political issues carry unique linguistic baggage that requires our attention. The words of the debate, in this way of thinking, carry meaning well beyond the literal and no theory could be complete without understanding the connotations and potential hidden meanings behind the language players choose to use. This tenet represents a departure from the standard literature on mythology, and thus, requires more elaboration.

Certain scholars have spent a considerable amount of time looking at the relationship between language and political studies. These writers have noted that different sides in a debate often choose different language to use, as highlighted by the fact that the phrases “pro-life” or “pro-choice” are specifically chosen to evoke one reaction or another. In the analysis of mythology, this notion is not covered exclusively in the literature, but we are aware of certain phrases and language associated with particular stories. It might be the concept of “three wishes,” the idea of “passwords” and “codewords,” the peculiar lingo of soldiers in battle, or phrases that enter our vocabulary as easily as “I Have A Dream.” In each of these instances, players and participants in the story understand the meanings of these expressions and use them appropriately.

Mythic structure theory concentrates on the important words and phrases of political debate as much as on the players and their journeys. It is important to understand how these words are used and perceived. It is important for mythic structure theory to capture not only the expressions themselves, but who uses them and why. The goal is to understand that each political issue has unique words associated with it. The fourth tenet seeks to list, explore,
and interpret these unique languages.

Tenet Five: The Never-Ending Quality

It was morning, and the new sun sparkled gold across the ripples of a gentle sea.

— Richard Bach (1970, 11)

I can see by my watch, without taking my hand from the left grip of the cycle, that it is eight-thirty in the morning… I’m wondering what it’s going to be like in the afternoon.

— Robert Pirsig (1974, 3)

The fifth tenet of mythic structure theory recalls one of the classic tenets of mythology—the concept of the never-ending story. As mornings, afternoons, evenings, and the change of seasons play symbolic roles in the telling of many myths, mythic structure theory recognizes that political participants are often involved in a historical and potentially never-ending conflict. Just as the main characters in James Joyce’s *monomyth*, exclusively applied in *Finnegans Wake*, and Joseph Campbell’s hero’s journey return to the ordinary world they earlier left, many political events are cyclical in nature and often reach no particularly satisfying end. Though victories and losses may be had along the way, the goal of mythic structure theory is to catalog each of these events and recognize that many of the same battles may be fought again. This is perhaps best explained by briefly summarizing a classic myth.

The never-ending quality of Homer’s odyssey exemplifies the significance of this tenet. After the Trojan War, Odysseus and his ship wander for years, passing through the lands of the Cyclops, the island of the Sirens, through the Scylla and Charybdis, and eventually finding their way home to Ithaca. This story highlights the notion that heroes often return home, but not before going through numerous trials and tribulations. In fact, upon returning home heroes often must leave again to face a new foe or lead the journey of others. Political issues, such as the abortion debate, environmental debate, or struggles over civil rights and education have this never-ending quality. They have this quality because these topics are often debated over numerous generations and as the issues evolve, new concepts within the debate get continually re-explored by all interested parties. Mythic structure theory seeks to capture the nuances
of this quality so that we may understand the issues more clearly.

Tenet Five of the mythic structure theory categorizes and explains the timetable of a political issue, allowing for the projection of possible events that may take place. In recognizing this important aspect of political issues, we are also concerned with encouraging the key players and participants in the story to recognize and take heed of this aspect.

**Criticisms of the Mythic Structure**

Before applying mythic structure theory directly to abortion, it is important to recognize some of the weaknesses of the theory as it now stands. For instance, with the field of political science becoming increasingly empirical and quantitative, I recognize that the mythic structure theory really asks us to look in another direction. Instead of being geared toward economics, data collection, or intricate data analysis, this theory asks us to draw from a number of other disciplines to help us explain political events. The theory could be seen as outdated or not “scientific enough.” In response to these criticisms, I suggest that mythic structure theory should be judged on its own merits and not against the standards of the most recent scientific approach to politics. After all, the roots of political science come from an analysis of history, philosophy, political literature, and the kinds of academic subjects alluded to in the mythic structure theory.

The outstanding question is whether a new, interdisciplinary theory can be applied successfully to political concepts such as abortion. Such a new theory should provide us with a greater understanding of this topic as well as an over-arching methodology for its discussion. For instance, is the trait of the mythic structure theory dealing with “players and participants” a better way to frame the discussion of who is involved in the debate and how they interact? I believe it will allow us to view these participants more clearly and possibly allow them to view themselves more clearly in light of the other players involved. The development of a new political theory is a journey in itself.

**Classic Frameworks to Study Abortion**

In the studies of abortion to date, no single framework clearly articulates the intricacies and scope of the issue. Instead, a variety of authors usually interpret the abortion debate in more narrow terms using, for example, public policy, legalistic, and religious orientations.
A general theme among public policy scholars is that the abortion issue is solidly on “the public agenda” and is now a matter of “policy implementation” that the state must deal with in the same vein as “other policy issues, including civil rights and the environment” (O’Connor 1996, 181). In this way, some authors have studied the abortion debate by comparing the policies of the United States with those of other countries and by studying linkages between societal conditions, political processes, and system consequences in the United States (Simms 1985; Tatalovich and Daynes 1981; Woliver 1996).

A legalistic perspective on the abortion debate resembles the public policy outlook, but with more of a concentration on actual laws, rhetoric, and the institutions of government in the debate. Those who study the legal language are often concerned with subtle interpretations and meanings written into law (Conway and Butler 1992; Dworkin 1993; Stacy 1994; Steiner 1983; Steinhoff and Diamond 1977). Rhetoric is also important to these scholars because they attempt to find an orderly way to identify and clarify opinions on the topic (Condit 1990; Woliver 1996). Studies of this type often look at the federal government as well as state-level courts and legislatures (Steinhoff and Diamond 1977). These writers most often deal with the issue of abortion in terms of rights, justice, and legislative and judicial decisions.

A sociocultural perspective on abortion is often employed when rights such as those associated with gender, race, or class are considered. This broad category includes feminist writers and those who study the effects of abortion on minorities or lower classes (Luker 1984; MacKinnon 1989). These writers often frame the discussion in terms of whether abortion laws support or ignore individuals based on their gender or economic conditions (McDonagh 1996).

The other large category of classic abortion studies views the issue through religious, moral, or ethical lenses. These religious lenses usually cause viewers to focus on abortion in stark, black and white terms (Blanchard 1994; McKeegan 1992). These terms often include references to church doctrine and fundamentalism, implying single, or fundamental, rights that should not be challenged (Blanchard 1994). The moral and ethical perspective is less clear-cut, and suggests there are some universal concepts and guidelines that can help to frame the debate (Deflem 1998; Hursthouse 1997; Matteo 1995; Mensch and Freeman 1993; Sumner 1981).

Additional frameworks for studying the issue of abortion look at demographic or economic issues, personal testimonies, and medical approaches. While this literature is not covered extensively here, its relevance to the topic should be noted. This sample highlights just how diverse the...
lenses are for portraying this complex issue. Indeed, it appears that most authors who study the subject are unable to see the proverbial forest for the trees. This research seeks to remedy this conceptual problem, in part by suggesting an alternative lens with which to focus the debate.

**Applying Mythic Structure Theory to Abortion**

It is now time to provide more specific examples of how the tenets of the mythic structure theory can relate to the abortion debate.

Tenet One asks us to analyze the participants and players in the debate. These would include members of pro-life organizations, that is The Christian Coalition; pro-choice groups such as The National Abortion Rights Action League; the Supreme Court; Governors; members of Congress and state legislatures; abortion physicians; and, of course, the women who decide whether or not to have an abortion. Analyzing the aspect of our tenet more closely relative to the heroes and other characters often found in myth, we find an abundance of evidence that one side’s hero in this debate might be the other side’s villain. Mythic structure theory provides us with a useful guide to analyze these characters.

How does one of the classic frameworks deal with the players and participants in the abortion debate? Moreover, why is mythic structure theory a better approach? The religious framework, for example, often views the participants in the abortion debate in stark terms—examples of the kinds of “binary oppositions” noted by Levi-Strauss. Considered the best organized and most powerful group, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee for Pro-Life Activities employs a public relations firm to educate the public on the “immorality” of abortion (Blanchard 1994). For them, biblical interpretation of the issue is clear and irrefutable. The National Right to Life Committee; Operation Rescue, founded by Randall Terry; and The American Life League represent similar pro-life positions in the debate. In contrast, the National Abortion Rights Action League, now headed by Elizabeth Cavendish, and the National Organization for Women consistently represent the pro-choice position in the debate in equally stark ways. When one views the abortion conflict only through religious lenses, however, it is possible to come away with a simplified view of what these organizations represent.

Mythic structure theory asks that we take the fundamental ideas advocated by each side in the debate and put them into some meaningful perspective. The theory asks social scientists to continue to use the names of these organizations and their leaders, but to place them within the context of a
larger struggle. In other words, the importance of Operation Rescue in the debate remains, but the stark tones used by its leaders would be systematically contrasted with those of opposing positions. Mythic structure theory asks us to pose the debate in terms of the variety of players, not simply the particular message of any single player—or to make the assumption that any players’ position is irrefutable. Participants in the debate who use mythic structure as a way to analyze the details of the situation will be able to see their own organizations systematically contrasted with those of the opposing side. What they choose to do with this information is unknown, but I hope it will clarify the notion that a particularly narrow focus, like that offered by the religious framework or others, is insufficient. Mythic structure theory celebrates the diversity of players and participants involved in a political debate without downplaying their importance or power. In return, the theory asks that an objective analysis of these players be constructed and applied.

Tenet Two asks us to carefully follow the specific “places” relevant to the participants on our journey. In the case of abortion, this would certainly lead us to analyze the workings of the United States Congress and Supreme Court, a number of state legislatures, governor’s mansions, organization offices, group meeting rooms, public protest rallies, churches, synagogues, and abortion clinics themselves. The importance of doing this kind of analysis is to show that many of these locations are symbolic to the abortion debate both literally and figuratively. As well, even as battles are won and lost along the way, there seems to be a constant return to the same battlegrounds—the U.S. Supreme Court, for instance. The history of these places and their meaning to the participants should not be underestimated. What is it like to return to these places over and over again? What has it been like for participants to move the debate over the last few decades from the state level to the federal courts? It is often easy to forget that the landmark Roe v. Wade (1973) Supreme Court case actually began as a state-level case in Texas. Roe was the 21 year old woman who challenged the Texas abortion statutes in 1970; Henry Wade was the criminal district attorney for Dallas County, Texas, where the suit was originally filed (Craig and O’Brien 1993).

In contrast to the public policy framework, for instance, Tenet Two of the mythic structure theory proves to be a more realistic framework for analyzing the activities of the abortion debate. Too often public policy scholars discuss particular places associated with the debate, but give no clear indication of the symbolic importance of those locations. For example, struggles in the U.S. Supreme Court and in state capitols are described as if participants simply show up at these locations to argue their cases, with little emphasis
given to the history and importance of these places (O’Connor 1996). Mythic structure theory takes a different approach to these locales. It asks that the specific locations highlighted in the abortion debate be analyzed as thoroughly as the decisions that emanate from them. These places to which our players and participants go need to be categorized and discussed in more detail, for many of them will be revisited over the course of the debate. I suggest these places hold a kind of institutional memory with which players must contend. This holds true for abortion clinics, meeting halls, and other places so often glossed over in the public policy and institutional literature. Part of the elegance of the mythic structure theory is in understanding undiscovered areas of a political debate, like the understated significance of certain symbolic places (Meyer 2001).

Tenet Three asks us to classify, compare, and contrast the ideals of the players and participants involved with the abortion debate. This is no easy task as the lines of demarcation in this debate are not always clear. Some of the participants feel that a particular religious belief is a suitable basis for viewing the abortion debate; others emphasize the role of a woman’s right to control her own body and gender equality; others see this as a matter for the courts and law books; while others contend that they are open to the option of abortion under certain conditions. For each of the participants analyzed in Tenet One, their corresponding ideals need to be categorized and studied. Similar to how political scientists are motivated to study why people choose to vote, join a political party, or attend a city council meeting, the aspirations of the participants in the abortion debate should be gauged. Where these feelings are well documented by the participants themselves—that is, people who conscientiously label themselves pro-choice or pro-life—they can be included, but efforts should also be made to gauge the ideals of others whose motivations may not be so clear.

With this tenet, for example, mythic structure theory is a keen addition to current frameworks, such as those dealing with sociocultural ideas. Whereas most of the sociocultural literature emphasizes ideals borne from class, race, and gender settings, mythic structure theory suggests there may be commonality to these ideals and provides a strong framework for their discussion. Mythic structure helps to show players and participants in the abortion debate that they share some common ideals.

As noted in the earlier discussion of Tenet Four, understanding and interpreting the unique language of the abortion debate is critical when applying our mythic structure theory. The terms pro-life and pro-choice are filled with connotation and symbolism that must be understood. The history of these
words also needs to be analyzed. The analysis in the “classic frameworks” section of this article highlighted the various words procured in the abortion debate and the central goal here is to apply some perspective on the language used. Mythic structure theory recognizes the significance of the ongoing academic pursuit of understanding language and rhetoric.

Tenet Five of our theory may be the easiest to relate to the abortion dilemma. As noted earlier, when discussing the movement of abortion cases from the state level to the federal level and now back to the state level, it is fair to say that the abortion debate has a never-ending, mythical quality to it. The recognition of this quality allows our theory to put the abortion debate in a more accurate theoretical setting. Whereas many of the classic and contemporary theories about the abortion debate refer to specific incidences, court cases, and players, our theory argues that we should literally step back from this way of thinking momentarily and put the abortion debate into a broader time-line. This concept may not sit well with particular abortion issue participants because the current literature suggests that many of them appear to want to “win” this battle once and for all. Adapting the mythic structure theory to the abortion debate, or other political topics, requires us to have a longer time frame in mind for debating the issues at hand.

**Discussion**

Mythic structure theory can successfully vie for the attention of researchers and others who wish to better understand, interpret, and appreciate complex political phenomena. This article introduces the theory and some key hypotheses, but recognizes that more writing should be done on the topic. Future research, for instance, could look at the benefits and drawbacks for applying the theory to issues such as civil rights, education, the environment, particular elections, or comparing nations. It should be noted that if the mythic structure were applied in a similar way to the civil rights debate, for instance, an analysis of players such as President John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Governor George Wallace, Rosa Parks, and others would be both necessary and intriguing.

Mythic structure theory is not described here to vindicate or indict any existing frameworks, but more to place them into a larger context where they need not stand alone describing issues like abortion. In some areas it builds on current frameworks, as with the analysis of language and rhetoric. In other areas it complements current frameworks in its capabilities by describing events that may not be strong candidates for rational choice or causal models.
so often used in political science. Mythic structure theory is a classification system and guide to complex political issues. It is used descriptively for issues that already abound in the political arena and prescriptively to help bring order and understanding for issues yet to come. It is presented here to invite readers to look at issues with a different focus and uncommon set of lenses.

The abortion debate has all of the makings of a complex and historically powerful story. Using the guidelines I have presented, the analysis of this topic can be taken to a new level. This article began by suggesting that the current frameworks for studying political issues such as abortion are fragmented and often focused on small components of a larger debate. Mythic structure theory confronts that particular problem by proposing an alternative, big-picture approach. Returning to Geertz (1973), at times a “thick description” of a situation with certain characteristics is preferable to one of “thin description,” which may not allow for the substantial discussion of “meaningful structures” (6-7) in a complex problem. Geertz goes on to suggest that a theoretical framework “must be capable of continuing to yield defensible interpretations as new social phenomena swim into it” (27). I find this to be a particularly satisfying way to summarize the potential of a mythic structure theory, for it suggests a broad capability to deal with any number of political issues in a refreshing and intriguing manner.
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Notes

1 There is continued recent support for looking at parallels between literature, myth and politics. See Ingle (1999), Bennett (1980), Preston (1999), Cobb, Jr. (1998), and Meyer (2001).

2 This work is a collection of conversations between Campbell and Moyers at George Lucas’ Skywalker Ranch. They provide excellent insight into Campbell’s basic themes and life’s work.

3 See Vogler (1992). In this work, Vogler uses Campbell’s writings to show how mythic structures can be used for storytellers and screenwriters. See also Bently (1995, 6-7).

4 For a more in depth analysis of these ideas, see Campbell (1972 and 1986). The subtitle of The Inner Reaches of Outer Space (1986) is “Metaphor as Myth and Religion,” alluding to Campbell’s other works dating from 1949. The 1986 book is the last work he published before his death in 1987.

5 For a further analysis of the literature on individual motivations in political contexts, see Dodd and Jillson (1994).

6 Contemporary frameworks for studying abortion often attempt to blend some of the concepts of the classic works. Briefly, these include the “equal choice theory,” blending constitutional, moral, and public policy language (Graber 1996); the “philosophical and political” structuralist approach (Sheeran 1987); and the “psychosocial” perspective (Rodman, Sarvis, and Bonar 1987). The abortion debate is also discussed in some avant-garde approaches, including “gene-culture coevolutionary theory,” which views the debate as a blend between science and culture (Laland, Kumm, and Feldman 1995).
References


