

# The Intersection of Economic Signals and Mythic Symbols

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## Abstract

Mythic symbols and economic signals represent more than what they are. Symbols represent universal ideas and themes and evoke feelings and emotions while economic signals are simple, efficient signs that stand for a more complex set of costly to learn characteristics and information. Symbols deal with the irrational and economic signals deal with the rational. Many of the signals cited in the economic literature work well because they have a symbolic element that speaks to people's emotions. By evoking emotions, a signal makes the receiver feel more confident about the truthfulness of the information it represents. The intersection of symbols and signals illustrates the relationship between the rational world of facts and irrational world of emotions and values, a relationship which needs to be explored as part of the development of the ideal type of homosocioeconomicus, the selfish yet value and community driven person.

"Contemporary therapy is almost entirely concerned, when all is surveyed, with the problems of the individual's search for myths."-Psychoanalyst Rollo May

"Signs and symbols rule the world, not rules or laws."-Confucius

## Introduction

In the economic theory of market signaling, objects or actions impart information about important but unobservable characteristics of persons or firms because they are believed to be correlated with these characteristics. For example, a job applicant with a college diploma is more likely to be mature, dedicated and intelligent, traits the firm wants in its new employees but cannot easily measure or verify. So the diploma signals that the graduate has these characteristics. Theoretically, every signal transmits purely rational information. They do not indicate the emotions or emotional disposition of the sender. But in an uncertain world, emotions and irrationality come into play, as Keynes said of "animal spirits." As workers, consumers<sup>1</sup>, voters, and employers, we often need more than rational information about

the intentions or abilities of others. So a good signal will also convey emotional content. Often emotions are a clearer indicator as to how someone might behave in the future than purely rational information (Robert Frank, 1988). What are commonly called signals in economics work well because they are both rational and irrational. When "economic signals" communicate emotions, they are actually mythic symbols.

Signals are also signs and the usual distinction made between signs and symbols is that "a sign is denotative, in that it represents an object or direction, while a symbol is connotative, in that it arouses emotional responses" (Gibson, 7). Symbols also represent myths, stories that often teach us how to understand our emotions and emotional makeup. Myths touch us on an archetypal level. "Archetypes can be said to symbolize universal primordial experiences,

including life and death, and psychic forces such as the emotions and moral values that are common to us all" (Ibid, 11). This paper shows how some phenomena are both signals and symbols while some examples of signals used in the economics literature are often also symbolic. This is another way in which human beings do not constantly conform to the ideal type of homo-economicus, the completely rational, calculating and selfish creature. In fact, this is not surprising because the economy itself is a field of persuasion due to uncertainty. Twenty-five percent of the productive value of labor time is devoted to persuasion (McCloskey and Klammer, 1993). The emotional power of symbols persuades.

## **Symbols**

As mentioned earlier, symbols speak to the emotions and the irrational unconscious part of the psyche. For Eliade "The symbol reveals a pre-systematic ontology to us, which is to say an expression of thought from a period when conceptual vocabularies had not yet been constituted" (Eliade, 3). Symbols also connect us to a reality deeper than any rational everyday reality. "At the level of archaic societies, all symbolism is, or at least was, a religious symbolism. Symbols reveal a modality of the real or a deep structure of the World, and in the spiritual horizon of primitive man, the real mingles with the Sacred and the World is considered the creation of the Gods" (Ibid).

The emotional and irrational aspects of symbols are also seen by Jung. "What we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us" (Jung, 3). In discussing the difference between signs and symbol, he goes even further with:

"The sign is always less than the concept it represents, while a symbol always stands for something more than its obvious and immediate meaning. Symbols, moreover, are natural and spontaneous products. No genius has ever sat down with a pen or a brush in his hand and said: 'Now I am going to invent a symbol.' No one can take a more or less rational thought, reached as a logical conclusion or by deliberate intent, and then give it 'symbolic' form" (Jung, 41).

Yet Jung also sees that symbols are dualistic, in that they can be irrational and rational (Firth, 157). Firth also sees symbols as being related to the unconscious (p. 212) while Pillstone linked symbols with uncertainty (p. 7).

For Cassirer, man lives in a symbolic universe (Dillistone, 120). It is a universe in which we are constantly conversing with ourselves and the meaning of our symbols. Symbols help us to deal with the duality of order and change which is fundamental to human life.

Lonergan saw symbols as necessary for understanding ourselves (Dillistone, 137). It is ironic that the great economist Frank Knight said "Life is at bottom an exploration in the field of values, an attempt to discover values, rather than on the basis of knowledge of them to produce and enjoy them to the greatest possible extent. We strive to 'know ourselves,' to find our real wants, more than to get what we want" (Knight, 24). By recognizing the symbolic aspect of economic signals, we can learn about ourselves.

## **The theory of market signaling**

The theory of market signaling goes back to A. Michael Spence's work in the 1970's. The following is his definition: "Market signals are activities or attributes of individuals in a market which, by design or accident, alter the beliefs of, or convey information to, other individuals in the market" (Spence, 1). Signals communicate

otherwise un-measurable and unverifiable traits. For market signals to work, that is, for the receiver of information to have some confidence in its validity, it must be communicated by a true holder of the desired trait at a relatively low cost and by others at a high cost. This makes it unlikely that those who do not possess a certain characteristic or trait will be able to purchase or produce its signal. Therefore, the signal is more believable. So, as in the example mentioned in the introduction, it would be very costly for an unintelligent person to finish college. The sender and the receiver both benefit from the signal. The college graduate can find a job and the employer hires a productive worker.

### Emotions as signals

In his book *Passions Within Reasons*, Robert Franks demonstrates how emotions communicate ability and intentions more effectively than rational signals. In one example from a novel, he explains why a private investigator (PI), would smash the window on the car of gangster boss. The PI wanted the gangster's help in finding his girlfriend's murderer. The gangster needs a reason to help. The PI's only option is to make the gangster think he is crazy enough to try to hurt the gangster. The PI cannot simply say "I am crazy." He must communicate that his emotional state is at least somewhat unbalanced or abnormal. A crazy person is much more likely to smash the window than a normal person. This action successfully demonstrates the PI's possible emotional state better than any normal, rational signal. It works partly because emotions are costly to fake and therefore emotional demonstrations are more believable (Robert Frank, 99-101).

In a real life example, Frank explains why young Mormon women are sought after by rich New Yorkers to be governesses. Parents looking for a governess believe that these women are much more trustworthy than

average New Yorkers because of the strong moral values taught in this faith. It would be very difficult and costly for someone to pretend to be a Mormon just to land a job as a governess. The emotional commitment made by Mormons is believable and it signals a trustworthiness in a young woman that would make her a good governess (Robert Frank, 111-112).

### Archetypes and Symbols

Archetypes and symbols are directly related to the emotions in that " ... they help people to cope with and, in a sense that is meaningful to them, to relate to the intense fears, frustrations, hopes humiliations, and joys that humans, because they are human, experience" (Mitroff, 388). These archetypes are symbolic images. Their universal nature is attributed to the similarity of the psyche at the unconscious level (Mitroff, 390). That is, all humans need symbolic images to deal with the uncertainty of life, including life in business. What is significant is that these coping mechanisms reside in the unconscious, the irrational part of the psyche. As Keynes said with his theory of "animal spirits," the spontaneous urge to action over inaction (which is necessary in the face of uncertainty) comes out of the irrational unconscious part of the mind (Koppl, 205).

Mitroff goes on to show that in very uncertain business situations, there is great use made of archetypal symbols and images on the part of the participants. For example, during mergers, such terms as ambush, shoot out, marriage, love affair, sieges, barricades, flak, soldierly honor, raiders, safe harbor, black and white knights and even sleeping beauty are used by those involved (Mitroff, 394). These are emotionally laden terms that symbolize the feelings of the participants. They are not wholly rational terms in the sense of conveying simple information. They act as more than just signals.

In a certain sense, corporations are myths in that they are legal fictions. It is not surprising to see symbolic language used in the course of their operations. Experimental studies suggest that organizational structure generates uncertainty (Meyer, 491). They also change too quickly to be described rationally (Ibid, 493). People get more emotional in times of uncertainty (Isabella, 33). Myths are an important part of corporate culture in that they help employees make sense out of an uncertain environment and help create and maintain spirit (Trice and Beyer, 79).

Even economists occasionally use symbolic language. One example is the theory of "the winners curse." In this theory, a person who wins an item at an auction may be disappointed with its value because everyone else at the auction thought that it was not worth so much. Why not just call this theory "disappointment theory?" The use of the word curse makes it a more attractive literature to read. It is unlikely that economists actually believe in curses. Another example is the generally fine book by Robert Higgs called *Crisis and Leviathan: Critical Episodes in the Growth of Government*. Why not just title the book with the subtitle? That would certainly convey, in a wholly rational sense, the subject matter of the book. The main title makes the book sound more interesting.

### **Everyday intersections of signals and symbols**

News stories often provide examples of intersections of signals and symbols.

In December 1996, the residents of North Tarrytown, New York voted to change their name to "Sleepy Hollow," which is the setting of stories by Washington Irving. This name is much more likely to evoke emotions and conjure up images of mystery and the supernatural than the former name. The town

changed its name in order to capitalize on the myth. They are hoping for more tourists to come and spend money. A mythic image is clearly being used to signal to consumers and tourists that this is a place to experience a little mystery and fantasy (*San Antonio Express-News*, 17A).

In a larger context, the federal budget deficit emerged in 1997 as a symbol. The rational and business oriented *Wall Street Journal* had this to say about the fiscal situation then in Washington:

"The deficit has become a *symbol* (emphasis added) of a lack of discipline in government. Its rise has contributed to the general decline in public faith in political leaders. Getting it into balance is essential to restoring the public's faith in Washington, which in turn is essential to a strong nation" (Murray, A1)

Although many economists oppose a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution, believing that it would cause more harm than good, the symbolism of fiscal responsibility is seen as important, if not essential, to the nation.

In late 1996 and early 1997, an interesting controversy emerged in South Carolina. The governor, David Beasley, wanted to discontinue the flying of the Confederate flag over the state capitol building. This flag is very much a symbol. For many descendants of soldiers who fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War, it symbolizes their struggle for freedom against Northern aggression. But for others, including descendants of former slaves, the flag symbolizes oppression.

There is more, however, to this matter. Beasley was worried about the adverse economic impact of continuing to fly the flag. Incidents at this time focused attention on race relations in South Carolina. A Ku Klux Klan museum opened. South Carolina had several black churches burned in late 1996. Clansmen in October 1996 shot and wounded three teenagers in a nightclub.

These incidents, along with the continued flying of the flag, brought the wrong kind of attention to South Carolina in the news media. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* even did a story. This is important because the state needs foreign investment, yet it has been down recently. The president of the state's Chamber of Commerce said "The flag gives the world the impression that we condone these episodes" mentioned above (Pedersen, 36). So the Chamber backed the plan to remove the flag.

Here is a clear cut case of something that evokes strong emotions, yet is also functioning as an economic signal. Investors around the world see the flag and think it means that South Carolina may not be a good place to do business, that it has a backward and repressed social environment.<sup>2</sup>

The intersection of signals and symbols is not confined to current events. Santa Claus, the symbol of giving at Christmas, is also an economic signal.<sup>3</sup> In colonial America, Christmas was a rowdy, if not violent holiday. Members of the lower class would go "wassailing" and demand food and drink from the rich. Religious leaders tried to get citizens to attend church on Christmas, but failed. In fact, "[the] 'misrule' of Christmas mobs had become so widespread that it threatened civic life" (Woodward, 71). What made Christmas into the peaceful holiday of giving that we know today were the stories of "traditional" Dutch family Christmas gatherings by Washington Irving and others and the popularizing of the Santa Claus symbol in Clement Moore's poem, "A Visit From St. Nicholas." This non-threatening symbol was acceptable to all classes. His pipe was short, like those of the working class. Soon Christmas evolved, with the help of newspaper editorials, into a home and children centered holiday. This, of course, meant buying gifts, bringing in the economic side of Santa. His image soon became used in stores and advertisements.

"In the benign figure of Santa Claus, the commercialization of Christmas was hidden behind the most tender of parental emotions" (Ibid). Although he symbolizes giving, any store or ad or commercial using Santa was clearly trying to signal to parents that they should shop here or buy this toy because it was one their children would like.

## **Symbolic aspects of some well know economic signals**

### *Advertising*

Advertising, in addition to simply providing information about a product, is often seen by economists as a signal. For example, why would a corporation pay a celebrity a large sum of money to be the commercial spokesperson for their product? The celebrity has no particular expertise or knowledge about such products, yet they get paid to say they use or that we should use the product. The firm pays the celebrity a large fee because they want consumers to know about its product quality. Only a firm that makes a quality product can sell enough, and stay in business long enough, to pay for the costly advertising. So when the celebrity advertises or endorses the product, the consumers receive a message about its quality and therefore, the desirability of purchasing it (Landsburg, 14).

But advertising also employs mythic and symbolic strategies. Some examples from print media are given below.

An ad for "Absolut Vodka" which ran in the May 19, 1997 (p. 22-3) issue of *Newsweek* magazine showed a bottle of the product next to the armor of a medieval knight. Below the bottle were written the words, in white boldface, "ABSOLUT GRAIL." No rational information is being communicated by use of the armor. It will not come with the product. The customer will certainly not find the Holy Grail by drinking

this vodka. The armor and the Grail symbolize perhaps some kind of heroic emotions that the buyer may wish to experience. The Grail may also symbolize purity, which the producer would like the customer to see in the product. The Holy Grail also represents the ultimate source of happiness and bliss. It is what the knights gave their lives for in their quest. The Jungian psychologist, Robert A. Johnson, said "Much of advertising plays upon this hunger (for happiness and bliss). You can sell a man anything if you indirectly call it the Grail" (Johnson, 54-55, 1989a).

Ads of a symbolic nature often run even in the *Wall Street Journal*. This is significant because readers of that publication are intent on doing well in business and may come closer to being homo economicus than the average person. The ads discussed below are all from this publication.

The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania ran an ad in the May 5, 1997 (p. A5) issue for their Aresty Institute of Executive Education. This ad featured a picture of a knight holding a briefcase. The text of the ad says that new training is needed now that the age of chivalry has passed. But it also says "While we can't take you to the Grail, we can lead you to some of the latest wisdom about leadership ... " that will prepare you for the "competitive contests that lie ahead" by "suiting you up to win." This implies that knights are still battling each other, but now it is with different weapons, ones that Wharton will give you. Why don't they just show some figures about the higher salaries, benefits and job security that graduates of this institute get? They cannot because the future of the business world is so uncertain. But by couching their training in highly emotional terms, they are showing the prospective executive that they (Wharton) understand the essence of the challenges faced by today's business leaders. The emotional, symbolic

approach was favored in an ad aimed at supposedly very rational, profit oriented executives.

A full-page Price Waterhouse ad (p. A5, April 16, 1997), asks "Does your consultant quote the 'Art of War,' but shy away from battle?" They say, of course, that they will do a much better job of "taking ideas from conception to completion." The very bottom of the ad has the phrase "Mind & Muscle" written underneath the company name. In the ad is a page-length picture of a sword partly out of its sheath. Since there is no literal sword play in the modern business world, using a picture of a sword symbolizes their "mind & muscle" approach to consulting. It is in no way a rational, informational signal only. It is there to evoke emotions. This ad has run several times in the *Wall Street Journal*.

Even more startling than graduate schools of business and consulting firms using symbols to evoke emotions in their ads, is an ad run by the *Wall Street Journal* advertising itself. It showed a picture of a young Buddhist monk, actually only a boy, with a caption that reads "For centuries, people have journeyed thousands of miles in search of insight. (Pity they didn't think to have it delivered)" (p. B 11, May 20, 1997). The ad discussed the meaning of life, the path to eternal wisdom, yin and yang, and the mountains of Tibet. It says reading the *Journal* will change your life, make it richer and more meaningful and help you balance your personal life and career. Why not just offer testimonials from readers who feel that this is true? Maybe the ad was not intended to evoke emotions, but to simply get attention by being different as some economists would say. But how does it get attention? Perhaps when readers see the picture of the young Buddhist, it evokes emotions of meaning, inner peace, etc. which is what makes people read further. Either way, it is the emotions,

not the rational information, which makes the ad succeed.

Finally, **American Express Co.** announced and launched an advertising campaign featuring golfer Tiger Woods in 1997. Why would such a young man (age 21 at that time) be considered for endorsing financial services? According to company President Kenneth I. Chenault, "It's natural for people see an affinity between the values that Tiger represents and the values that American Express represents. We are both very focused on earned success, discipline, hard work, achievement and integrity" (Stephen E. Frank, B 1). Now it still may be true that the company is simply using Tiger Woods as a signal of quality and longevity, as economic theory predicts. But other celebrities could fit the bill in this way. They have clearly picked him because he symbolizes values. A former company executive also said that other ads, heavily laden with text and images of "homogenized" Americans, were not as exciting as images of Tiger Woods. This too, indicates the emotional nature of the ad campaign (Ibid, B8). The company may also want to associate itself with his transcendence of race and ethnicity.

## Clothing

Proper business attire is another economic signal. For men, suits and ties are usually a must for job interviews. Women may have a little more latitude. But why would it matter whether or not a job applicant wears a suit and tie? An applicant could wear a sport coat and a turtle neck sweater. Would that make the person less able? Does a tie somehow improve a worker's productivity? Signaling theory says, no, this is not the reason why an applicant is expected to wear a tie. A person who has an eye for detail and can understand how fashions are changing will certainly know how to dress well. But

their eye for detail and ability to understand how society changes indicate that they have some intelligence and maybe even some business ability. So a firm will see a well dressed applicant in a favorable light. If well dressed means wearing a suit and tie, then the ambitious applicant will wear them (Lansburg, 17).

Since many companies have "casual Fridays" when suits and ties are not expected and **Microsoft** has certainly done well without ties, there may be some symbolic aspect to business dress. The social psychology literature says that people often respond unconsciously to clothing (Kaiser, 8) and that clothing is a means of unconscious communication (Ibid, 21). Even an economist, Paul Nystrom, said that fashions change based on psychological factors like boredom or rebellion (Ibid, 14).

The suit has a long evolution. Although men's clothing was quite fancy and colorful just before 1800, with the election of Thomas Jefferson, clothing styles became more plain. "With the emphasis on democracy and the glorification of the common man, clothing became less ornate, less ostentatious" (Flusser-a.). This period also " ... saw the important introduction of the sack suit, a style characterized by any shapeless coat without a waist seam, the body and skirt having been cut in one piece ... "(Ibid). Contini expresses a similar sentiment, that clothes became simpler to reflect Republican ideals (p. 22). Clothes and style were evolving to fit the myth of American democracy, that no one was better than anyone else. In fact, Nikita Khrushchev once observed how Nelson Rockefeller, despite his wealth and position, was dressed just like other Americans (Batterberry, 387). Clearly he could have dressed in something more unique and status signaling than a business suit. The business suit also symbolizes seriousness (Storm, 136).

The tie evolved from something called a cravat. This is shown in dozens of drawings in Hill's *Evolution of Fashion*. The origin of the cravat is quite interesting:

"In 1660, in celebration of its hard fought victory over Turkey, a crack regiment from Croatia (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), visited Paris. There, the soldiers were presented as glorious heroes to Louis XIV, a monarch well known for his eye toward personal adornment. It so happened that the officers of this regiment were wearing brightly colored handkerchiefs fashioned of silk around their necks. These neck cloths, which probably descended from the Roman fascial worn by orators to warm the vocal chords, struck the fancy of the king, and he soon made them an insignia of royalty as he created a regiment of Royal Cravattes" (Flusser-b).

So the precursor of the tie was a symbol of heroism. A tie also emphasizes the " ... verticality of a man's body (in much the same way that the buttons on a military uniform do) ... " (Ibid).

A mythic and symbolic view is provided by a Jungian:

"When Western society chose to follow the erratic footsteps of the degraded Bacchus instead of the joyful dance of Dionysus, it began to confuse materialism with sensation. As a result we citizens of the late twentieth century can truly be said to have lost our senses-or at least to have lost contact with them. Even the clothes we wear tell us something is amiss. Both men and women today "dress for success" by wearing ties-in effect separating their heads, the thinking processes, from the rest of their bodies and thus symbolically cutting off sensation below their necks. When they take their ties off at the end of the day they go wild. All that bottled-up sensation comes rushing out looking for somewhere to go" (Johnson, 1989b, 22).

So although there are certainly rational reasons for job applicants and employees to wear suits and ties and for employers to view

business dress as a signal, the form that this takes is often symbolic. The "rational organization" is a myth in that the most efficient or effective production techniques are not always used or even known (Trice and Beyer, 105-7). The tie symbolizes the rational image the corporation wants to project. The tie tells the world that its sentiments are with rationality.

## Ideology

Public Choice, the branch of economics which analyzes politics, views ideology as a signal. It sees politicians as selfish, rational, utility maximizers, like everyone else. A politician's main objective is to get elected and re-elected. One way to do that is to vote on bills in a way which pleases one's constituents. A senator from Michigan is very likely to vote to restrict the imports of foreign cars. So politicians will promise the voters that they will vote for or against certain types of bills. Why should the voters believe them? It is possible that the politician will lie and vote differently for other political reasons or to get campaign contributions. Here is where ideology comes in. According to Public Choice theory, Senators and Representatives who are strongly ideological make more credible promises. It is easier to believe a staunch conservative when he or she promises to vote for free market oriented policies. What establishes the conservative credentials is the past voting record. This is a reputation that they can then sell to the voters with some credibility. So it is rational for a politician to be ideologically clear and consistent in order to be believed by the voters and therefore win elections (Doughan and Munger).

What the Public Choice view misses is that much of ideology is based on symbolism and mythology. This additional dimension shows the emotional side of



ideology. Several writers have commented on this.

For Halpern, myth and ideology are at opposite poles. Myth is irrational and ideology is rational. But all ideologies are based on some mythology. Myths are about the origins of beliefs while ideology is about molding beliefs. That is, the source of the beliefs comes from the irrational unconscious but is made concrete and logical by the rational conscious. So, for example, the ideological belief in the free market might be based on the Horatio Alger "rags to riches" mythology but is made concrete and rational by modern economic theory and appealing to statistical evidence.

For Feuer, ideology is always based on an invariant myth. One often invoked myth is the Mosaic myth of an intellectual leader who redeems and liberates an oppressed people (Feuer, 2). Revolutionary intellectual leaders who *themselves* saw their cause in these terms (in their own writings) include Marx, German socialist leaders of the nineteenth century Ferdinand Lasalle and Wilhelm Liebknecht, abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson, French Socialist Georges Sorel, and American Communist Lincoln Steffens. The nationalist Joseph Mazzinni, too, saw his movement as one which would lead and save an oppressed people (Ibid, 11-13). Hegel, who influenced Marx, said ideas had to be expressed "aesthetically, that is, mythologically" in order to have "interest for the people" (Eagleton, 151).

Eagleton sees myth and ideology working together because the rational side of any movement, ideology, is not enough to stimulate political action on the part of members of some group. "Oppressed groups tell themselves epic narratives of their history, elaborate their solidarity in song and ritual, fashion collective symbols of their common endeavor" (Eagleton, 191-2). This is not "mental befuddlement." It is all

designed to "foster solidarity and self-affirmation" (Ibid, 192). This will make it possible for the group to achieve some political ideal.

Edelman looked at the symbolic uses of politics. He saw that the power of myths and symbols in politics bind people together. Elections are a ritual act which did not necessarily decide policies and in which voters based their decisions not mainly on issues but on symbolism. The election ritual binds the polity together and sustains it. As a ritual it is the acting out of the myth that "the people rule" even though much of the time special interests and bureaucrats rule (Edelman, 3).

Myths and symbols are also important because of the uncertainty between policies and their impact. Since the world is so complex, it is often difficult to link a social condition to a specific policy. Voters necessarily have to take comfort in the myths and symbols offered to them by the politicians in the hopes that they accurately represent what the politicians actually stand for and that what the politicians stand for is close to the beliefs of the voters (Edelman, 7).<sup>4</sup>

Political language and rhetoric are also symbolic and mythic. Geis saw political language as evoking mythic themes (p. 37). Politicians use such language in order to simplify problems and solutions (Ibid). Examples of some political myths are "The Conspiratorial Enemy," "The Valiant Leader," "United We Stand," and "Man is a Rational Animal." As an example of the Valiant Leader myth, Geis offers President Kennedy and his injunction "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." Grandiloquence is used to evoke this myth. During the Viet Nam war, President Johnson tried to evoke the myth of the Conspiratorial Enemy by saying that "failure to meet aggression means war not peace" (Geis, 29). This fulfilled the dual

function of a political myth because it provided an explanation of an event as well as a justification for a certain course of action. Johnson's view could not be verified objectively and rationally.

Mythic themes are also used in political advertising. Jamieson examined presidential campaign advertising. Her conclusion is that although ads have to deal with issues, "Ads also have to fit within a general set of cultural norms and values" (Jamieson, xxii). This is why we see ads like Reagan's 1984 commercial proclaiming "It's morning in America." This is a mythic image of rebirth and a return to former glory after the malaise of which Jimmy Carter spoke. The ads included scenes of weddings and parades, as if none took place during Carter's Presidency. They created an image of a Rockwellian America.

But campaign ads cannot simply put thoughts into the minds of the voters. "Duplicitous ads are also minimized by the need of campaigners to synchronize the images they present in ads, news, and debates. The advertised image must be a credible extension, not a contravention, of the image of the candidate captured elsewhere" (Jamieson, xx). Furthermore, ads reinforce what is known about the candidate from other sources, including their voting record (Jamieson, 452). So a candidate can run a commercial claiming to "be of the people" after voting for an increase in the minimum wage.

Ads often work because they are irrational and "solicit a visceral and not intellectual response" (Jamieson, 450). But remember that on a strictly selfish cost-benefit basis, the act of voting in an election is not rational. So it should not be surprising that "irrational myths" can sway the voters.

One of the conclusions usually reached in the Public Choice literature is that when variables measuring ideology are statistically significant, the politician has

voted based on ideology to provide the voter with a label which they can identify. Voters may want a liberal senator, so the senator will be sure to have a liberal voting record. The senator makes sure that the advertised image has some factual basis. It shows a myth, which communicates symbolically on an emotional level. It is these emotions which provide a more convincing signal to the voters as to what the candidate will do while in office. The Public Choice view, by concentrating only on the rationality of signals, misses this.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusions

Humans often act for rational reasons. But we often also act for emotional reasons. Some of our actions are a little of both. This is the case with signals. Many express both rational information while communicating emotional states. This latter strategy often succeeds greatly because we are in fact more than just homo economicus. We are more convinced sometimes by emotions than rationality. When a signal contains emotions, it is a symbol, connecting us to the myths and archetypes that reside deep in our psyches. The mythic and symbolic are with us everyday, even in our economic affairs.

## Notes

1. Lash and Urry show that much of what we consume is consumed to help us live our own personal myth or narrative. Some of the goods and services we purchase help us think about and reflect upon who we are and what our values are. This reflexivity is a self-monitoring process. For example, we may travel somewhere not to be a tourist, but to be a pilgrim. We might own a VCR not so we can watch movies alone, but to do so with friends, to share myths and stories in a communal setting.

2. South Carolina was not the only place experiencing this type of problem. In Maryland, some African Americans complained about special license plates issued to the Sons of Confederate Veterans that displayed the Confederate flag (Perry, A20). In Franklin, Tenn., a lawsuit was filed to remove a confederate statue from the town square (Ibid). And "Four years ago (1993), Georgia's Democratic Gov. Zell Miller tried without success to remove the battle flag from its prominent position as part of the official state flag" (Ibid).
3. The historical evolution of Santa is chronicled in a recent book by Stephen Nissenbaum called *The Battle for Christmas*. It was reviewed in *Newsweek* magazine. My comments here are based on that review.
4. Much of what Edelman says is echoed by other writers. These include Sears, Huddy, and Schaffer; Roseman, Abelson, and Ewing; Conover and Feldman; and Sebba.
5. An exception to this is Moehring. He discusses legislators who vote to cut illegal immigration while reducing the budget of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. This could only happen if symbols were important.

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