



Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification

Bruce Lincoln

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In this bold theoretical work, Bruce Lincoln explores the ways in which myth, ritual, and classification hold human societies together--and how, in times of crisis, they can be used to take a society apart and reconstruct it. Without overlooking the role of coercive force in the maintenance (or overthrow) of social structures, Lincoln argues his thesis with compelling illustrations drawn from such diverse areas as Platonic philosophy, the Upanishads of India, African rituals of kingship, ancient Celtic banquets, English gentlemen's clubs, the Iranian Revolution, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, professional wrestling, and the Spanish Civil War. Professional wrestling, Lincoln shows, can be viewed as a drama of classification in which the American dream of opportunity is set forth, challenged, and finally firmly reestablished in good-versus-evil encounters between wrestlers categorized by their relative "Americanness." The exhumation of nuns' mummified corpses by leftist forces and their sympathizers during the Spanish Civil War, often dismissed by liberal historians as an embarrassing aberration, is more readily understandable as a ritual in which the Spanish Catholic Church, which had long played the role of "the religion of the status quo," was symbolically exposed as corrupt in both a moral and concretely physiological sense.

Discourse and the Construction of Society draws on work in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, classics, indology, and semiotics to demonstrate the multiple uses of myth, ritual, and symbolic classification in effecting ideological persuasion and evoking the sentiments that bind people to one another within distinct social groupings while separating them from others, who are thereby defined as outsiders. This wide-ranging interdisciplinary study provides challenging new insights into the complex dynamics of social cohesion and change.

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