

Modern Mythologies: Translating French Cultural Constructions

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Mythologies, a book written by Roland Barthes and published in 1957 presenting essays on cultural concepts that he believed reach the level of “myths” through their social relevance, was received by an enormous amount of success in the years following its release. It remains frequently discussed and cited today, even after a large portion of these myths have been replaced by new ideas and principles. Fifty years after *Mythologies*, a work that is less well known despite its cultural importance was published under the direction of Jérôme Garcin: *Nouvelles mythologies*, or *New Mythologies*. Unlike the original book, this publication incorporated the voices of 57 Francophone authors and thinkers, each contributing one essay. The book was meant to commemorate the original, but also to again capture the essence and evolution of French culture in the modern era. My research centered around understanding the concepts in the 2007 book *Nouvelles mythologies* and translating excerpts of this work into English alongside research into the context crucial to understanding France during this period.

Notably, the book frequently references several political and cultural phenomena that seemed to shape cultural conceptions during the period. France’s 2002 presidential election, in which a far-right candidate had a shockingly strong performance, the specter of which some authors feel haunted the following years. This election result was also strongly rooted in the French ideology of “le déclinisme,” or declinism, which holds the viewpoint that “things were better before,” and that the country is losing its prominence economically, politically, or culturally. In fact, this fear of “cultural loss” also traversed the pages of *Nouvelles mythologies*, both through chapters explicitly handling these subjects and those with more covert implications. There are frequent references to the artistic or media dominance of the United States of America or of the English language in general, which some believe is replacing France’s culture both within the country and on a globally influential scale.

These patterns are particularly important given their relevance in the modern political climate. Far right movements have not died out, and in 2024 France nearly saw the victory of an extremely conservative party in parliament. The key to understanding the present may lie in the past, and this book is an excellent method of investigation. Additionally, the practice of translating excerpts of this book raises interesting questions regarding the ease of expressing such culturally entrenched texts. Casual references to French celebrities or media do not carry the same comprehensibility for an English-speaking audience, and wordplay needs careful consideration to travel across a language barrier. This summer gave me an opportunity to face these challenges and enhance my research capabilities. I am very grateful to the support of Professors Dauge-Roth and Bedecarre for their assistance and to the Surdna Foundation, and I look forward to continuing to dig into this research in the future.

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