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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The myth of the business friendly economy: making neoliberal reforms in the worst state for business

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Abstract From 2010 to 2013, legislators in Rhode Island enacted a series of neoliberal reforms to increase "business friendliness" in the state. Where economistic, electoral, organizational, and diffusion accounts fail to explain the timing and content of these reforms, I synthesize the work of Georges Sorel and Jeffrey C. Alexander to argue they were motivated by the *myth of the business friendly economy*. More than mere narration, this myth set before lawmakers the vision and the promise that a business friendly economy would return prosperity to the state. It prompted neoliberal legislation by integrating "business unfriendliness" into collective understandings of Rhode Island's economic failure, defining policy reform as a moral imperative, and projecting a vision of the ends towards which reform should be oriented. This analysis contributes to cultural, economic, and political sociology by reclaiming myth as an alternative framework to assess the symbolic dimensions of political transitions, providing explanation for an otherwise puzzling case of neoliberalization, and suggesting opportunities for future research to problematize political actors' deployment of economics in their attempts to project possible futures and shape action in the present.

Keywords Myth · Democratic performativity · Experts · Economics · Neoliberalism

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Introduction

Between 2010 and 2013, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a series of legislative reforms designed to spur economic growth by increasing "business friendliness" in the state. Facing years of statewide economic stagnation, Democratic leaders in the Rhode Island House and Senate endeavored to remake the state's economic environment by enacting laws to meet the needs of business. In 2010 they passed the Senate's *Making It Easier to do Business in Rhode Island: Aimed at Cutting the Red Tape,* a legislative package that included an income tax reform to reduce business compliance costs, created an Office of Regulatory Reform to streamline government regulations, and introduced a property tax cap. In 2011 they restructured the state pension fund by cutting benefits and raising retirement minimums. In 2012 they began planning a single, statewide building permitting system to ease new development, and in 2013 they passed over thirty-five bills to improve business friendliness by reducing regulatory costs and increasing government efficiency.

Notably, these "business friendly" reforms demonstrate a significant shift from Rhode Island's previous economic interventions. Since the 1930s, Rhode Island has been known as one of America's most pro-labor states (Profughi 1983). Ruled by a state Democratic Party that built its strength on a working class electorate and strong ties to organized labor, Rhode Island embraced New Deal liberalism and passed some of the nation's strongest labor-protecting policies (Goodman 1967; Lotesta 2016; Profughi 1983, p. 91). These included weekly pay schedules, guarantees of the right to organize for all public employees, and the right of workers to claim unemployment while on strike.[1] The economic development reforms of the 2010s, however, demonstrate a strikingly neoliberal orientation.[2] Rather than intervening to protect the rights of workers, these reforms aimed to ease business costs and attract new enterprise to the state. Given that Rhode Island boasted the fifth-highest union membership rate in the United States at the time (Hirsch and MacPherson 2013), and given that union organizations remained among the state's top campaign contributors (McGowan 2012), the "business friendly" reforms of the 2010s pose a puzzling question: How did legislators, in one of America's most labor-friendly states, generate sufficient support to pass neoliberal reforms specifically designed to improve "business friendliness"?

Existing accounts of neoliberalization emphasize the importance of economic restructuring, electoral competition, organizational change, and policy diffusion. However, these accounts, by themselves, cannot explain the timing or content of Rhode Island's legislative reforms, and they overlook the symbolic dimensions

[1] This last provision was repealed in 1985 (Moakley and Cornwell 2001, p. 152). The requirement for weekly pay schedules was repealed in 2013 as part of the General Assembly's economic development reforms.

[2] Here I use Stephanie Lee Mudge's (2008) definition of neoliberalism as a political logic regarding the responsibilities of government, the means of government, and the interests government should serve. This logic promotes education and training over welfare protections, efficiency, decentralization and free-market orthodoxy over regulation and protectionism, and financial, professional and white-collar constituencies over the working class and trade unions.

of the policy evaluation and reform process. In contrast, I bring together the otherwise isolated work of Georges Sorel and Jeffrey C. Alexander to argue that the neoliberalization of Rhode Island economic development policy was motivated by the *myth of the business friendly economy*. The myth of the business friendly economy is a symbolic narrative that designates sacred from profane and good from bad. It is the moralizing tale of how Rhode Island's once thriving economy fell into stagnation due to neglect and mismanagement by state government. Conversely, it projects an alternative future in which a business friendly economy returns prosperity to the state.

The myth of the business friendly economy emerged following the Great Recession of 2008 as state legislators sought to make sense of Rhode Island's economic decline and how to repair it. In order to decipher a way forward, lawmakers turned to state policy experts who used economic devices to render visible the causes of Rhode Island's economic duress and desirable solutions. As local journalists publicized and editorialized these findings, a mythical narrative emerged: Rhode Island's economic troubles were caused by long-standing inaction by elected officials, which led the state to develop a regulatory, tax, and workforce environment hostile to the high-tech manufacturing and startup enterprises of the twenty-first century. Only by remaking the state into a "business friendly economy" with streamlined regulations, low taxes, and a high-skilled workforce could elected officials bring Rhode Island back to economic prosperity.

This myth did more than describe Rhode Island's economic situation. It organized political action and government policies into a system of binaries, ascribing virtue to some and profanity to others. On the one hand was swift legislative action, government efficiency, and free enterprise; on the other was inaction, bureaucratic red tape, and outdated regulations. More than a policy prescription, the idea of the business friendly economy ascribed moral value to neoliberal economic reforms and set before lawmakers a roadmap of the steps necessary to achieve economic growth. It thus prompted neoliberal legislation by integrating "business unfriendliness" into collective understandings of Rhode Island's economic failure, defining legislative reform as a moral imperative, and projecting a vision of the ends towards which reform should be oriented.

This analysis makes three contributions to cultural, economic, and political sociology. First, it provides a critical framework for cultural sociologists to assess the "non-rational" and symbolic dimensions of political transitions. Where other sociologists have explained neoliberalization by referring to institutional and field-level factors, myth draws our attention to the symbolic core of neoliberalism, assessing it as a moral and semiotic system in its own right. Second, my cultural analysis provides explanation for the otherwise anomalous case of neoliberalization in Rhode Island. Third, my findings suggest interesting opportunities for future research at the intersection of performance studies, science-and-technology studies, and the sociology of the future to problematize the deployment of economic devices and expertise in political actors' attempts to project possible futures and motivate action in the present.

Economistic, electoral, organizational and diffusion accounts

Most observers would offer one of four explanations for the neoliberalization of Rhode Island's economic development policy. In the first instance, one might argue that the adoption of "business friendly" policies is a natural response to deindustrialization and globalization. With the breakdown of Keynesian economics and dramatic "stagflation" of the 1970s, the world abandoned fixed exchange rates and protective liberalism. As markets globalized, American firms moved overseas, spearheading the United States' transition from a manufacturing to a service sector economy. Against this backdrop, policies to ease regulations, decrease tax rates, and incentivize firm creation seem a rational response to the challenges of trapping evermore mobile capital in a globalized market (Mann 1997; Sassen 1996; Strange 1998).

Though convincing and pervasive to be sure, the economistic account suffers from a periodization problem. Concerns over deindustrialization and firm relocation date as far back as the 1950s in Rhode Island, over 60 years prior to the adoption of Rhode Island's "business friendly" policies. For example, in an address to the first annual Business Management Institute at the Bryant College of Business Administration in October 1950, Vice President of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, Alfred C. Neal, posed the following rhetorical question: "How has manufacturing been doing in your state? Poorly, poorly indeed! It made less gain from prewar to postwar, 1939 through 1947, than in any other New England state" (Neal 1950, p. 2). Adding salt to the wound, Neal then added, "In 1949, your state led the nation in the proportion of unemployment to labor force" (pp. 2–3).

If neoliberalism were merely a rational response to globalization and deindustrialization, we would expect it to have occurred much earlier in Rhode Island. However, it is not until 2010 that we see the systematic adoption of neoliberal economic development reform packages in the state legislature. Indeed, the greatest weakness of the deindustrialization approach lies in its tendency towards economic reductionism, suggesting that economic trends like the globalization of manufacturing will lead to the same political response across place. Such a perspective not only takes for granted the diversity in timing and components of neoliberal transitions across the globe (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002; Garrett 2000; Garrett and Lange 1995; Mudge 2011; Prasad 2006), but also overlooks the inherently cultural work of interpreting economic conditions and designing responses, work that is infused with its own systems of meaning and values.

Alternatively, one may argue that Rhode Island's adoption of business friendly policies is the result of shifting electoral demand or competition. The extensive literature on partisan realignment demonstrates a broad decline in Democratic Party identification in the latter half of the twentieth century as the New Deal coalition of labor unions, ethnic and religious minorities, the poor, Southern whites, and liberal intellectuals disintegrated (Fraser and Gerstle 1989; Lawrence

1997; Manza and Brooks 1999; Moakley 1992).[3] Coupled with election losses in the 1970s and 1980s, it stands to reason that Democrats were motivated to pursue programmatic change in attempts to rebuild their competitiveness in this new political environment.

While electoral competition is part of Democrats' own explanation for their adoption of small government and market-oriented policies under the New Democrats in the 1990s (Form 2013; c.f. Mudge 2018), the electoral account is dubious in the case of Rhode Island (and in other hardcore 'blue' states), where Democrats have held the majority of legislative and executive offices since 1941. Even following the Reagan elections of 1980 and 1984, Democrats maintained majority control of the state legislature, as well as the lieutenant governorship and state treasury. The incentive to change based on declining electoral support or Republican competition is thus weak. Furthermore, as with the economistic account, electoral competition in itself does not explain why Rhode Island Democrats adopted the specific "business friendly" reforms they did, as opposed to other policy prescriptions. Again, this is because it misses the process of evaluation and meaning-making that led state legislators to prefer one set of solutions over others.

A third and related explanation turns less on interparty competition as such but rather on leadership succession within the Democratic Party itself. For instance, in his account of the formation of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), John F. Hale (1995) describes how this outside party organization helped organize a new vision of the Democratic Party by bringing together like-minded, moderate office holders, developing policy positions through its Progressive Policy Institute and recruiting candidates at state and local levels. The DLC also established avenues to leadership positions outside the formal party organization and access to a new class of Democratic campaign strategists and public relations professionals, all of which helped spearhead moderates to prominent national positions (Mudge 2018). With the nomination of Bill Clinton to the Democratic ticket in 1992, the DLC agenda became the national platform, and the party adopted a markedly more centrist and market-oriented approach to economic policy (ibid).

This intraparty argument holds some weight in the Rhode Island case. As I have discussed elsewhere, the Democratic Party in the Rhode Island legislature experienced a profound leadership change in 1992 (Lotesta 2016). Following a statewide banking crisis ignited by the collapse of the Rhode Island Share and Deposit Indemnity Corporation (RISDIC) in 1991, the legitimacy of senior Democratic legislators declined rapidly as investigations revealed trails of corruption and mismanagement involving prominent Democrats. Following the scandal, many incumbents vacated their seats, and a new cohort of reform-minded Democrats flooded the General Assembly, taking over leadership in 1993. The demographics of the General Assembly also changed profoundly in the latter half of the twentieth century. From 1950 to 2000, the proportion of legislators with a bachelors' degree grew from 25 to 85%, and those holding a graduate or law degree reached 53% (Moakely and Cornwell 2001, p. 80). Conversely, the representation of skilled workers, farmers, and small

[3] See de Leon (2014) for a more extensive review.

business owners declined (ibid). Given these changes, one might attribute the adoption of pragmatic, business friendly policies to the election and leadership of these new state legislators.

There are two reasons, however, that changes in Democratic leadership and legislative membership still cannot, by themselves, explain Rhode Island's passage of business friendly legislation. First, the most drastic shift in membership in the Rhode Island General Assembly occurred in 1992, following the banking crisis described above. Serious efforts to remake Rhode Island's business climate through legislative reform did not begin in earnest until late 2009, however, and they did not come to fruition until 2013. If membership turnover could explain the adoption of business friendly policies, then why the nearly two decades' lag? Furthermore, the entry of a larger proportion of lawyers and white-collar professionals into the legislature does not in itself explain the specific design of Rhode Island's business friendly reforms. In other words, why would a large cohort of lawyers and professionals—with years of electoral success under their belt—put so much effort into remaking the state's approach to economic development? And why the emphasis on building code reform and institutional restructuring as opposed to, for example, tax subsidies?

A final explanation comes from the diffusion literature. In this large body of work, sociologists and political scientists have highlighted numerous mechanisms that facilitate the spread of policies across both national and subnational units—coercion, competition, learning, and emulation chief among them (Simmons et al. 2006). From this perspective, Rhode Island's adoption of "business friendly" policies could be the result of incentives or pressures from the federal government (Daley and Garand 2005), competitive market forces (Berry and Berry 1990; Brueckner 2000; Gray 1994; Henisz et al. 2005), the spread of new information and ideas through state policy networks (Gray 1973; Haas 1992; Lutz 1987; Rogers 1995), or desires to imitate the perceived successes of other states (Dobbin 1994; Henisz et al. 2005; Meyer and Hannan 1979; Rogers 1995).

There is considerable evidence of competition, learning and emulation in the Rhode Island case, to be sure. The need to compete and attract employers in an increasingly global and knowledge-driven market was part of Democratic legislators' own reasoning for pursuing "business friendly" reforms (Legislative Press & Information Bureau 2013a, b, d). Legislative staff worked with the state's leading think tank to identify potential policy innovations from other states (Rhode Island Senate Policy Office and Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council 2013), and neighboring Massachusetts was heralded as a successful model for Rhode Island to follow (Grimaldi 2012b; Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council 2013).

However, while the diffusion framework captures the competitive pressures that motivated change and the knowledge networks through which policy options were identified, it leaves underexplored the symbolic dimensions of the policy process. Market pressures do not engender the same reaction in all places at all times (Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002; Garrett 2000). Rather, they must be interpreted and framed in ways that make them politically meaningful (de Leon et al. 2009, 2015; Laclau 1990; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Similarly, learning and emulation are not merely technocratic, but also symbolic and morally prescriptive. They involve defining desirable futures, specifying appropriate means, and designating "good" policy from “bad.” It is this symbolic dimension of the policy process that I attempt to capture in this piece.

A cultural approach: myth and the symbolic core of neoliberalism

On an unseasonably warm afternoon in March, the Senate Lounge of the Rhode Island State House is abuzz with activity. The floor-to-ceiling windows flood the otherwise dim room with light. Women and men in blue and black suits talk energetically and shake hands as they file through rows of black plastic chairs. The chairs face a large wooden podium with the Rhode Island seal affixed to the front. After several minutes, Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed—a woman with voluminous mousy-brown hair and small, rectangular glasses—approaches the podium. She clears her throat and thanks everyone for coming.

The journalists, legislators, lobbyists, and nonprofit representatives are gathered for a press conference unveiling the Senate’s new economic development package for the 2013 legislative session. “All of the bills you’re going to hear about today are about moving the state forward and improving Rhode Island’s business climate,” Paiva Weed states. Glancing occasionally at her notes, she describes the Senate’s ongoing efforts to improve the state’s economy, alluding to recent legislation that simplified state permitting processes and reformed the income tax. Now, once again, the Senate is presenting legislation to make business easier in Rhode Island, this time by addressing the state’s poor performance on national economic competitiveness rankings (Capitol Television 2013).

The Senate hopes to improve Rhode Island’s rankings by tapping into the state’s hidden areas of potential, left unrealized due to years without vision or committed leadership. One such area is the state’s workforce: “This is one that we’ve *all* once again heard,” Paiva Weed states. “There are jobs but not people that are fit to meet these jobs.” In response, the Senate is submitting legislation to build a “twenty first-century workforce well prepared for the high-wage opportunities of a knowledge-based economy” (ibid).

Lending credibility to the Democratic majority’s program, Republican Senate Minority Leader Dennis Algiere proclaims this a bipartisan effort and offers his support. He applauds the Democratic majority for their determination to tackle Rhode Island’s many, long-standing economic challenges:

> The unemployment rate remains unacceptable and very high…Regulations are burdensome… We hear repeatedly… about a lack of vision around economic development, and about the skills gap in our workforce. What we haven’t heard a lot about is solutions. But the Senate has taken a look at Rhode Island’s challenges and put forth this package of legislation to address the many issues before us. I want to commend the President and members of the Senate for keeping economic development at the top of their agenda throughout this economic downturn and for continuing to put forward sensible solutions (ibid).

In closing, Paiva Weed restates her commitment to remaking the state's ailing economy despite daunting challenges. She warns, however, that this work is not for the faint of heart. It will take courage, confidence and conviction. Conferring a heroic sentiment to the task at hand, she closes by stating:

> We need to believe in ourselves… We can move forward if we have confidence in our ability to move forward. We can move the needle but only if we dare to push. Maybe not every bill will pass. Maybe some of them will look a lot different than they started out. But ultimately we will have a committed package of reform that will change the way Rhode Island is doing business, restore the confidence of Rhode Islanders in our state, in economic development in our state, and move that needle (ibid).

The vignette above displays what I call the *myth of the business friendly economy*, the symbolic narrative that motivated and directed the neoliberalization of Rhode Island economic development policy. My turn towards myth as an explanation for neoliberal policy reform is inspired by the writings of Georges Sorel, an anarcho-Marxist whose work had profound influence on Antonio Gramsci and other Left intellectuals of the twentieth century.[4] A hallmark of Sorel's work is his emphasis on the great potential of myths both to legitimize relations of domination and to motivate political action. Sorel originally used the concept of myth to critique French parliamentary socialism, which he believed veiled the continued exploitation of the proletariat by making repeated promises of progress (Sorel 1969, p. 150). Against this *illusion of progress*, Sorel believed the radical left had to develop its own inspirational and mobilizing mythology. Just as the tales of Odysseus and Achilles instilled in Greek soldiers convictions of tragic heroism, honor through glory in battle, and belief in destiny, so the projections of Marxism could serve as an awakening force for French syndicalists (Sorel 2004).

Sorel's concept of myth is most thoroughly and famously elaborated in his *Reflections on Violence*, published in 1908. In this piece, Sorel argues that the myth of the General Strike could awaken and mobilize the proletariat by eliciting the values necessary for strike action and setting before workers a vision of the ends towards which such action should be aimed. Technically speaking, a general strike is one that encompasses an entire industry or geographic location, but within 19th century Marxism, the General Strike held a broader, more symbolic meaning. It stood for the complete revolution across industries and borders that would abolish all existing forms of capitalist production and government (Chaplin 1985[1933]). For Sorel, this

[4] When Sorel retired from the French civil service in 1892 and moved to Paris to write full-time, Marxism was little known. By 1895 only the first volume of *Capital*, *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Class Struggle in France,* and *The Civil War in France* had been translated into French. Sorel's were thus "amongst the first serious writings on Marxism in France" (Jennings 1985, p. 38). His initial interest grew from his admiration of Marxism as a scientific method to explain the value of labor and capitalist development, a position he elaborated at length in 'L'ancienne et la nouvelle métaphysique' (ibid, pp. 41–42). He became an editor of the Marxist journal *L'Ere nouvelle* [*The New Era*] and eventually founded another Marxist journal, *Le Devenir social* [*The Social Future*] (Portis 1980, pp. 9–10). By 1894 he was the leading Marxist theorist in France (Jennings 1985, pp. 37–38).

projection would throw into full relief the divisions between workers and employers, peasants and merchants, and wage earners and shop owners, leading workers to recognize the stakes of their collective struggle (Sorel 2004, pp. 122–123). Valorizing disruption would build a "stubborn, increasing and passionate resistance to the present order of things" (ibid, p. 126), and enrolling strike action into a narrative of victory would instill in workers the heroism necessary to pursue violent direct action with little certainty over what the future might hold (ibid, p. 130).

Note that, for Sorel, it does not matter whether a myth comes to fruition. Its importance, its mobilizing capacity, lies in the visions and sentiments the very idea elicits. This is what makes the General Strike and the business friendly economy myths in the Sorelean sense. They are not objects that exist in their own right. They are *projections.* As such, they have the ability to frame and present the future in ways that can motivate action in the present. As Bruce Jennings writes (1985, p. 134),

> In effect, what Sorel was saying was that human beings, if they were to act, needed in some way to 'frame' the future, to possess a 'picture' of the coming battle and their victory. It was of little importance whether this 'picture' ultimately became a reality; the by-product of belief in it was action.

In other words, in calling the business friendly economy a myth I do not mean to say that the analyses and prescriptions of Rhode Island policy professionals and legislative leaders were necessarily false or deceitful. Rather, I mean to draw attention to the symbolic and visionary nature of these claims, which I argue enabled them to motivate concerted legislative action.

But can we apply the concept of myth to something so mundane as policy experts' evaluations of the economy? If we consider more carefully the symbolic structure of myth, and if we take into account the performative nature of democratic politics, then the answer is yes. As elaborated by Claude Lévi-Strauss and his contemporaries, myths are narratives that order and make sense of the world around us.[5] Classifying physical and social phenomena into oppositional pairs, myths distinguish good from bad, sacred from profane, as well as the systems of morals and beliefs that define a collective (Lévi-Strauss 1963; Vernant 1983[1965], p. 12). Similarly, the narrative that I name "the myth of the business friendly economy" provides in concise form a convincing explanation for Rhode Island's economic duress, and it evokes the values, priorities, and steps that must be embraced to alleviate it. It is the story of how Rhode Island's once thriving economy fell into stagnation due to neglect and mismanagement by the state. As inactive politicians sat idly by, the economy crumbled under old and redundant regulations, burdensome taxes, and a workforce unfit to meet the needs of twenty-first century businesses. Only

[5] This structuralist definition of myth is often considered at odds with Marxist approaches, which critique the former for overlooking the politics inherent in cultural systems (Bourdieu 1991, 1995; Diamond 1979; Godelier 1971; Lincoln 1999, pp. 145–146). However, there have been efforts to synthesize the two approaches (Lincoln 1999). As I argue below, the structuralist definition helps us theorize why myths might help orient and motivate political action.

by building a business friendly economy with streamlined regulations, low taxes, and a high-skilled workforce could Rhode Island achieve economic prosperity and growth.[6]

As argued by Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004, 2006, 2010), such secular cosmologies are central to the performance of democratic politics.[7] The civil sphere in which candidates and political programs compete is structured by a system of binary codes that organize qualities and actions into "civil" and "uncivil" categories, or the sacred and the profane (Alexander 2006, p. 64, 2010, p. 11). Within this symbolic infrastructure, "political struggle is moral and emotional;" candidates must perform themselves and their policy programs as aligning with the civil side of the symbolic binary (Alexander 2010, p. 12). It is through this performative claims-making that candidates build solidarity with constituents and establish support for their policy programs over others (Alexander 2010, pp. 11–12).

In this regard, we should understand myths as a practice that enables the performance of everyday politics. As with candidates, democratic lawmakers and policy experts must also gain support for their proposals. In this context, the mythical narration of pasts, presents, and futures serves as a powerful tool to organize and motivate even seemingly mundane and technocratic realms of democratic policy making. For example, what would budgetary policy be without the forecasted dystopia of public default, or environmental regulation without the apocalyptic specter of rising sea levels and mounting natural disasters? To separate the technocratic development of state policy from what is at its very core a cultural process is to severely understate the performativity of modern governance.[8]

As I will show, the myth of the business friendly economy was developed by state policy experts in their evaluations of the Rhode Island economy, circulated in newspaper editorials and amplified by legislative leaders in press conferences and floor statements. This myth organized political action and government policies into a system of binaries, ascribing virtue to some and profanity to others. Swift legislative action, government efficiency, and free enterprise were counterpoised against inaction, bureaucratic red tape, and outdated regulations. More than a benign policy prescription, the idea of the business friendly economy ascribed moral value to neoliberal economic reforms and set before lawmakers a roadmap of the specific policies necessary to achieve economic growth.

[6] Note that while myths are often interpreted as a form of narrative, not all narratives are myths. That is, myths necessarily involve narratives, often of shared struggle, founding moments, or promised futures, but not all narratives contain the classificatory and moralizing characteristics of myth.

[7] See also Alexander and Smith (1993).

[8] It is here that I depart from Sorel in two significant ways. Sorel discusses myth exclusively as a critique of parliamentary socialism, which he believed allowed for a circulation of elites at the cost of proletariat liberation. My focus, however, is the circulation of myths as a practice of everyday politics. Relatedly, Sorel discusses myth only in regards to mass publics, and he sees mythical thought as lying outside the realm of modern, technocratic government. I argue, however, that the line between the technocratic and the mythical, between state practitioner and public, is not so distinct, and that we should understand legislators and policymakers as being just as susceptible to the mobilizing power of myth as the mass publics Sorel describes.

The concept of myth as I develop and use it here makes a number of contributions to cultural, economic, and political sociology. First, it offers an alternative means to assess the "non-rational" and symbolic dimensions of neoliberalism, among other political transitions. Though the symbolic is of course cultural sociology's stock-in-trade, popular narratives of neoliberalization in particular have a habit of portraying these policy transitions as rational responses to globalization and the economic transformations of the 1970s. Even where sociologists have broken with this rationalist approach, they focus on institutional and field-level factors, such as legal structures, the rise of new experts and professionals, or the diffusion of ideas through international organizations and transnational networks (Babb 2004; Brady et al. 2005; Centeno and Sliva 1998; Dezalay and Garth, 2002; Dobbin et al. 2007; Fourcade 2006, 2009; Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002; Garrett and Lange 1995; Mudge 2018; Prasad 2006; Simmons et al. 2006).[9] What these accounts miss is the symbolic core of neoliberalism—the possibility that neoliberalism's pervasiveness lies not only in the amenability of institutional arrangements or the proliferation of its professional carriers, but also in the moral orders it implies and the visions it projects. Myth, by contrast, draws our attention to this symbolic core, addressing it as a moral and semiotic system in its own right. Myth thus offers us a critical framework with which to investigate markets as "moral projects" (Fourcade and Healy 2007)[10] or to examine what Stephanie Lee Mudge (2008) has called the "political face" of neoliberalism.[11] In this sense the Sorelean myth can also help bring sociological analysis of political transitions closer to a truly "cultural sociology" that recognizes the power of cultural objects to shape political actions and institutions (Alexander and Smith 2003).

Second, my attention to the mythical aspects of Rhode Island's economic transition solves the puzzle of the timing and content of neoliberal policy formation. As mentioned above, concerns over deindustrialization date as early as the 1940s in Rhode Island, but state legislators did not begin to pursue neoliberal policy prescriptions in earnest until 2009. This makes it unlikely that neoliberalization was a direct result of economic transformations. The myth of the business friendly economy, however, emerged following the 2008 Great Recession and provided not only a convincing explanation for Rhode Island's economic decline but also projected a vision of the "business friendly economy" Rhode Island could be. It was this fundamentally cultural work that at last gave shape to, and brought legislative action to bear on, the longstanding discontents of the post-industrial economy.

[9] Exceptions include Amable (2011), Somers and Block (2005) and Mudge (2008), who have written about neoliberalism's celebration of the "moral superiority of organizing all dimensions of life according to market principles" (Somers and Block 2005, p. 261).

[10] See Amable (2011) and Fourcade and Healy (2007) for more extensive reviews.

[11] Mudge distinguishes between the intellectual, bureaucratic, and political "faces" of neoliberalism. Where the intellectual face refers to the professional dissemination of neoclassical economics, and the bureaucratic face refers to state policies that promote free market competition, the political face refers to a distinct political ideology that values "individualized, market-based competition over other modes of organization" (2008, pp. 706–707).

Lastly, my account adds a temporal dimension to the performativity of economics by identifying markets as aspirational projects. Others have demonstrated how economic devices and ways of knowing assemble the very objects they purport to describe (Callon 1998, 2007; MacKenzie 2003; MacKenzie and Millo 2003; MacKenzie et al. 2007; Mitchell 2002, 2005).[12] There are certainly parallels between this field of study and my argument about the myth of the business friendly economy. However, unlike the theories and models described by others, the myth of the business friendly economy did not have its effect by assembling the world in ways that made it true. Rather, it assembled the social by projecting a vision of the ends towards which action should be oriented. This suggests exciting avenues for the nascent sociology of the future (Mallard 2017; Mallard and Lakoff 2011; Michael 2000; Mische 2009, 2014; Mitchell 2014; Tavory and Eliasoph 2013), particularly in regards to understanding how projected futures may orient and inspire political action in the present (Mora and Rodríguez-Muñiz 2017, pp. 45–46).

Research methods

My goal is to understand the cultural practices through which the myth of the business friendly economy was produced, as well as the role this myth played in the passage of neoliberal legislation. To this end, I use a research method Michael Lynch (2013, p. 444) calls "ontography": "historical and ethnographic investigations of particular world-making and world-sustaining practices that do not begin by assuming a general picture of the world." Rather than assuming or accepting a priori that constructing a "business friendly" economy would solve Rhode Island's economic troubles, I ask how this understanding was constructed and how it shaped interpretations of Rhode Island's policy options. Ethnographic and historical methods are ideal to examine this question, because they are well suited for uncovering the mechanisms and processes that link particular practices with social phenomena (Small 2009; Tilly 2006).

Rhode Island is a strong case study, because it offers a compelling example of a national trend. Throughout the early 2000s highly unionized states have embraced the mythology of the business friendly economy in attempts to spur economic growth. Launched in 2008 by a branch of the Michigan Economic Development Corporation, the *Pure Michigan* advertising campaign marketed the state as a desirable vacation destination in hopes that increased tourism from nearby states would support small business, stimulate job growth, and increase tax revenue. Similarly, former governor Mitch Daniels created a public–private partnership titled the Indiana Economic Development Corporation (IEDC) to draw new businesses to the Hoosier state. In each of these cases, creating new business friendly environments was prescribed as the panacea for ailing post-industrial economies.

[12] An exception would be Mitchell's (2014) discussion of the economy as a means for "bringing the future into government." However, where Mitchel focuses on the techniques and materiality of economics, I focus on the social performances in which economic representations are embedded.

Examining how this mythology took hold in Rhode Island—long among the U.S.'s bluest and most unionized states—promises insights into this broader trend.

This paper draws on eight months of participant observation in the Rhode Island General Assembly. Ethnographic observations occurred from January to August 2013, covering the entire 2013 legislative session. During this time, I attended legislative committee meetings, public hearings, expert testimonies, press conferences, and floor sessions. I selected events for attendance based on their relevance to the topic of economic development and to the House and Senate economic development reform packages that were introduced and passed in 2013. From June 2013 to August 2013 I also interned with a legislative policy office as part of my research. I attended hearings and floor sessions, tracked bills, and, at the behest of my managers, drafted reports about other states' transportation, housing, and economic development programs. These experiences allowed me to follow step by step the design, evaluation, and eventual adoption of the House and Senate's 2013 economic development packages, which were intended to improve the state's business climate.

Participant and non-participant observation were supplemented with media, archive, and interview research. On a weekly basis I collected and reviewed articles from the Legislative Press Bureau regarding bills and legislative initiatives related to the issue of economic development. I also collected all articles and videos from the *Providence Journal's* 2012 "Reinvent Rhode Island" series, which elicited commentary on how to repair the state economy. Public policy reports, statements, and press releases were collected from the websites of third-party policy organizations, legislative offices, and interest groups involved in drafting and evaluating the reform bills. Finally, I conducted over thirty-five interviews with legislators, legislative staff, and policy professionals from January 2013 to August 2014, as well as one round of follow up interviews. Respondents were selected based on their involvement in the economic development reform process or their leadership position within the Democratic Party.[13] I asked respondents to discuss their activities related to the economic development reform packages, to recount the drafting, evaluation, and hearing process, and to describe the strategies they used to evaluate and promote bills.

Observations, archive research, interviews, and writing were conducted iteratively throughout the research process. Following each observation, I wrote extensive field notes recording my observations and interactions. I used these notes to write analytic memos that synthesized findings, developed concepts, and related emerging themes with existing research. I used these memos to guide future observations and revise interview guides. This iterative strategy ensured a recursive relationship between empirical observations and theoretical analysis, allowing me to refine my argument and triangulate observations with media, archival, and revise interview sources (Burawoy 1998).

[13] Involvement in the economic development reform process meant the respondent sponsored a reform bill, was a member of a committee that evaluated a reform bill, assisted in the drafting of a reform bill, or testified for or against a reform bill. Respondents selected for their Democratic Party leadership positions were current or former members of the Democratic legislative leadership in the Rhode Island General Assembly.

The myth of the business friendly economy: mapping the road to a more prosperous future

> It started happening during or right after the Great Recession, as we called it. Rhode Island really got hit bad.
>
> We lost a tremendous amount of jobs, a tremendous amount of economic development activity. A tremendous amount of gross domestic product… Again, it was just so all encompassing, this economic malaise. As if it were some kind of swamp we were in.

From February 2007 to October 2009, Rhode Island lost 39,500 jobs amidst the worst economic crisis the United States has seen since the Great Depression (Tebaldi 2010, p. 2). Over 10,600 nonfarm firms closed between 2006 and 2008. Unemployment reached 12.9% in 2009, the worst of any New England state (ibid). Foreclosures swept the state, and residents left in droves (Zezima 2008). By summer 2008, Rhode Island lawmakers faced a budget deficit mounting $434 million for fiscal year 2009 (ibid). Economists warned that if the state did nothing, its unemployment rate would reach 14.1% by the end of 2010, only worsening Rhode Island's economic distress (Tebaldi 2010, p. 3).

It was in this environment that state policy experts and local journalists began their work to make sense of Rhode Island's economic misfortune and identify solutions, creating the myth of the business friendly economy. This myth framed Rhode Island's downturn as the result of long-term inaction on the part of elected officials. Without leadership from the state, Rhode Island drifted for years without vision or direction, resulting in outdated and business-crushing regulations, uninviting tax structures, and a workforce that could not meet the needs of the high-tech manufacturers and startup firms of the twenty first century. Together, these factors combined to make business development all but untenable in Rhode Island. As a 2008 *New York Times* article summarized,

> Unlike most other states, Rhode Island's budget and economic travails were a long time in the making, economists said. Once a manufacturing center, Rhode Island has struggled to find its economic niche. The state's population has dropped for four straight years, and as residents leave, revenue from sales and income taxes have declined. Businesses have also been leaving the state, whose personal and business tax rates are among the highest in the country (Zezima 2008).

In contrast, policy experts and journalists pointed to states like Massachusetts, Texas, and Minnesota, which rolled back regulations and implemented unique institutional arrangements to create "business friendly economies" that met the needs of small and startup enterprises. Where Massachusetts had a four-year economic development plan, Rhode Island had no such leadership (Grimaldi 2012b). Where Vermont had a food venture center with equipment and space for startup food-based companies, Rhode Island unsuccessfully chased a large corporation with a loan offer that threatened to send the state into default (Grimaldi 2012c, p. Main_01). Where

Minnesota combined its departments of economic development and employment to more efficiently match the unemployed with jobs suitable for their skills, these departments remained siloed and ineffective in Rhode Island (Grimaldi 2012a). If only lawmakers would muster the courage and the commitment, they could reduce Rhode Island's zoning and business regulations, offer more enticing incentives, and rebuild the state in ways that would make it more attractive to business. As written in the *Providence Journal*, Rhode Island's newspaper of record:

> Economists say Rhode Island can make the transition from an older, postindustrial economy to a knowledge-based model in which skilled workers produce goods and services that the world needs…But more needs to be done. The state has to capitalize on its unique assets that include two ports on the Atlantic Ocean, an expanding regional airport and preeminent academic and health-care institutions where students and researchers can turn ideas into companies that create jobs. To make that happen, Rhode Island needs vision, commitment and leadership (Kostrzewa 2012a, p. A1).

More than a policy prescription, this myth transformed legislative action into a moral imperative, an urgent need that must be met swiftly despite daunting challenges. As the same editor proclaimed:

> As tough as times are, Rhode Islanders should remember that they have weathered crises in the past. They've survived, and prospered, because they have fully understood the problem, figured out the options and worked together to put in place the solutions. Now it's time to do it again (ibid).

In order to succeed—that is, in order to motivate neoliberal legislation—this myth of the business friendly economy had to do three things. First, it had to integrate business *un*friendliness into collective understandings of what was wrong with Rhode Island's economy and thereby align regulation, taxation, and low-skilled workforce with the profane side of the symbolic spectrum. Next it had to blame state inaction for this hostile climate and define economic policy reform as a moral imperative. Finally, the myth had to project a vision of the desirable, business friendly economy Rhode Island could be and outline the legislation that would get the state there. In the sections that follow, I explain how each of these elements combined to prompt the passage of neoliberal economic development legislation.

Business *un*friendliness: the problem with "Little Rhodie"

> I think they were stuck in their old ways. The community college taught certain classes and the universities taught certain classes… They weren't responding to what CVS [a major Rhode Island employer] needed, what the business community did…The workforce did not have the skills. What we did know is, there were all these jobs and we had this high unemployment rate. I guess I would say we all had to acknowledge that and then it was figuring out all the reasons why that was happening. —Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed

In order to motivate legislative action, the myth of the business friendly economy first had to establish a collective understanding of what was wrong. That is, it had to render Rhode Island's "business unfriendliness" visible. The devastation of the recession was plain, but the idea that its root cause was an inhospitable business environment was not. This was made clear through expert evaluations that not only emphasized Rhode Island's economic underperformance compared to other states, but also blamed this underperformance on taxation, excessive regulation, and poor workforce development. In tying these conditions to "business unfriendliness" and linking "business unfriendliness" to economic underperformance, the myth of the business friendly economy aligned them with the profane and thus diagnosed them as problems to be solved.

For instance, in a 2010 presentation to the Rhode Island Government Finance Officers Association, economist Edinaldo Tebaldi argued that Rhode Island continued to experience relatively high job loss, because the state "failed to provide competitive tax and regulatory systems, negatively affecting the incentives for attracting and retaining people and businesses and promoting economic growth" (2010, p. 7). He supported this statement with a chart demonstrating the divergence of Rhode Island's state-local tax burden from the U.S. average. Where the average U.S. state-local tax burden declined by about 4.8% from 1994 to 2005, Rhode Island's grew by approximately 5.4% (ibid, p. 9).

Similarly, in a 2012 study of Rhode Island's performance on five economic competitiveness rankings, the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council (RIPEC)—a leading Rhode Island policy research and advocacy organization—noted that the state "consistently received low marks for its regulatory environment, ranking 50th in the Forbes analysis, 48th in the CNBC report, and consistently low in the SBE Council's rankings" (Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council 2012a, p. 2). The report continued, "onerous regulatory requirements can hinder job creation just as adversely as high taxes," and discrepancies between municipal and state regulations may "make Rhode Island a less attractive place to start and maintain a business" (ibid, p. 4).

In an April 2012 interview with the *Providence Journal,* economist Ross Gittell noted that the state's workforce was sorely unprepared to meet employment demands. While Gittell estimated 40% of future job openings would require associates degrees, only 9% of Rhode Island's adult population held these credentials (Bramson 2012a, p. A10). Together, it was these factors that prevented economic growth. As RIPEC's 2012 report stated:

> Rhode Island's economic recovery has been sluggish and lags behind its New England counterparts and the rest of the country, in part because the state has been unable to create an attractive environment for business—especially businesses that offer high-wage, "knowledge economy" jobs (Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council 2012a, p. 5).

Coverage from the *Providence Journal* helped to both publicize expert diagnoses and propagate the narrative that Rhode Island failed to grow, because it out-taxed, out-regulated, and failed to meet the basic employment needs of business. In particular, personal anecdotes published in the *Providence Journal's* 2012 feature series, “Reinvent Rhode Island,” gave testament to the claim that Rhode Island’s business unfriendliness held back the state’s potential for economic growth. While the series sought to elicit ideas on how to repair the state’s economy, its more powerful effect was to legitimize the diagnoses of the economists and policy wonks through firsthand accounts. As one Rhode Island small business owner wrote:

> As a Rhode Island business owner since 1971, I have run into enough problems to fill a book. I started out in an old lace mill located in an old gravel bank. The town told me I would have no trouble expanding. As the years went on I had nothing but trouble with the Town of Coventry. I was forced to move to Burrillville, at a huge cost. I tried to help the vocational school by explaining what my company needed. I was treated well but only out of politeness. After a lot of my time and effort, my work went into the trash. I give a simple test to anyone I am considering as a new hire. Almost all get fewer than 3 out of 15 questions right. I asked a tour group of 15 students to place a needle at 3 5/8 inches on a steel scale. Not one could get it right (*Providence Journal* 2012a, p. A15).

Of the state’s business tax structure, another business owner similarly wrote:

> Get rid of that insulting $500 charge for being a business in Rhode Island. I have been struggling to keep my business going—never mind growing—and even if I have a losing year, I still have to pay this tax/fine/fee for the “privilege” of doing business here. I am planning on moving my home and business to Massachusetts this year where I can get reasonably priced health insurance and not be hobbled by the regressive policies of Rhode Island (*Providence Journal* 2012b, p. A1).

In these anecdotes, a clear story line emerges: a story of the ambitious entrepreneur struggling to get by. The entrepreneur has the grit, will, and desire to bring jobs and profit to Rhode Island, but is continually held back by the state’s convoluted regulations, stringent taxes, and unprepared workforce. In other words, it is the state’s profane, unfriendly business climate that is to blame for its economic stagnation.

If news coverage popularized the idea that an unfriendly business climate was to blame for Rode Island’s economic woes, third-party business rankings publicized by popular news outlets offered concise symbols to elicit this narrative. Take, for example, the number “50,” which in 2011 came to stand for Rhode Island’s ranking as the worst state in the nation for business. In 2011 CNBC ranked Rhode Island number 50 in their annual list of the best states for business, a title the state would reclaim in 2012. This ranking matched evaluations from other organizations that also placed Rhode Island near or at the bottom of economic competitiveness measures (Rhode Island Senate Policy Office and Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council 2013). Circulated in news articles, policy reports, and public statements, the number “50” became a succinct representation of Rhode Island’s economic failure as measured on a number of scales, including business costs, regulatory environment, and workforce training. One legislative staff member explained to me the rankings’ importance:

> Staff member: There’s a perception about Rhode Island because of these rankings, and because we consistently come in too low on them.

> Lotesta: So do you know what that perception might be?
>
> Staff member: [affirmatively and in a lowered, frustrated tone] That we're high tax; we're high regulation; that our road conditions are poor…So the perception out there is that we're not business friendly.

Together, expert evaluations, news coverage, and rankings integrated "business unfriendliness" into public and legislative understandings of what was wrong with the Rhode Island economy and how to fix it. In a poll of 200 attendees at a public forum sponsored by the *Providence Journal*, 72% said "the best way for the state to help unemployed workers is to reduce regulations on employers and create a better business climate" (Parker 2012). As recounted by RIPEC's executive director, Rhode Island's legislative leaders also shifted their thinking on the economy. Specifically, the Senate President and Speaker of the House moved their focus from recruiting individual firms, as the state had done unsuccessfully in the past, to changing the hostile business environment at the heart of Rhode Island's economic struggles:

> I think we were able to convince [the Senate President] that this was not about one single incident that is going to radically change Rhode Island. There's nobody, not even Amazon, that would change Rhode Island forever. That was not going to happen. They were not going to come. *We* didn't have the environment. *We* didn't have the apparatus. *We* didn't have the mechanics. And I think that [the Senate President] believed and then the House did…that this was not about a singular, one-off, that was going to change the state. That we needed to do many little things to change the environment.

The moral imperative to lead

In order to motivate legislative action, that is, in order to convince lawmakers to devote their energy and votes to the cause of economic reform, the myth of the business friendly economy needed not only to designate Rhode Island's business unfriendliness as profane, but also to explain the cause of this condition and compel legislators to act. To do this, journalists, political observers, and eventually legislative leaders turned to the state, blaming government inaction as the cause for Rhode Island's economic troubles.

This explanation was achieved through the narrative of "untapped strength," whereby the government had failed to capitalize on Rhode Island's valuable assets. While the state and its population had great potential, government sat idly by, offering neither the incentives nor resources necessary to realize it. For example, a November 2012 *Providence Journal* article reported:

> The research being done at Rhode Island's universities, hospitals, startup companies and nonprofit organizations is one of the best opportunities for the state to break out of its economic malaise… But like so many of Rhode Island's assets, the research has yet to reach its potential—for three reasons. First, the work is being done in individual silos at each research institution… Second,

> not enough partnerships have been formed among the institutions and businesses to direct the research and help commercialize the intellectual property developed in the labs. And finally, *there has been little leadership*, *especially among public officials, to encourage and structure a network of research collaborators* (Kostrzewa 2012b, p. Main_15, emphasis added).

Of Rhode Island's art community and tourist attractions, a Rhode Island native similarly stated:

> G. Wayne Miller's lead story in the Sept. 23 *Providence Sunday Journal* was packed with information about the arts resources in our state and their economic impact. Why is this missing from economic policy discussions? The other missing piece is tourism… I am rolling my eyes at R.I.'s inability or unwillingness to place arts and tourism as a cornerstone of its economic recovery. Amenities and resources in arts and tourism abound; what we lack are *vision and leadership to use them to our economic advantage*" *(Providence Journal* 2012c, p. PJConsumer_1, emphasis added).

Put less delicately, one resident wrote, "Blah, blah, blah, the same old rhetoric. No leadership" (ibid).

Thus, it was the unwillingness of government to act that accounted for Rhode Island's outdated regulations and stifling business climate. Even in the cases where government did offer incentives or assistance, these efforts were narrated as unfitting and misguided. For example, the *Providence Journal* reported on a company, Blount Fine Foods, that had gained national recognition for harvesting Narragansett Bay shellfish. When Blount wished to expand its factory operations beyond Warren, Rhode Island, the company turned to the state's Economic Development Corporation (EDC) in search of financing and site selection assistance.[14] The conversations fell flat. Rhode Island's EDC had programs, but they did not fit Blount's needs, and they could not provide an expansion loan with a better rate than a commercial bank. Fall River, Massachusetts, by contrast, aggressively recruited the company with a 10-year tax deal. Blount relocated and brought 400 jobs to the old manufacturing center (Grimaldi 2012d).

Stories similar to Blount's filled the pages of the *Providence Journal*, emphasizing the defunct economic development policies of Rhode Island. The greatest symbol of this dysfunction came in the form of the state's $75 million loan guarantee to former Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Shilling to relocate his startup videogame company to Providence. Named 38 Studios, the company went bankrupt only eighteen months after announcing its relocation plans, leaving the state liable for the unpaid debt. Not only did the deal fail to provide the promised jobs and stimulus, it threatened to worsen the state's economic instability. It served as another symbol of Rhode Island's incapacity to develop effective economic incentives, and it became a catalyst for legislative change. As one Rhode Island resident stated:

[14] EDC was Rhode Island's quasi-public agency reponsible for firm recruitment and expansion at the time.

> We just saw a baseball celebrity get $70 million from the state for a video game company. That money would have spurred greater innovation and job creation had it been divided to fuel more start-ups, say $1 million each for 70 companies or a half million each to start 140 companies (*Providence Journal* 2012b, p. A1).

As journalists, market actors, and eventually legislative leaders defined government inaction and mismanagement as the cause for Rhode Island's economic distress, so economic reform became laden with moral value. If elected officials had for years neglected to make Rhode Island's regulatory, tax, and institutional environment one in which businesses could thrive, and if such inaction was to blame for the state's protracted economic stagnation, then action to remake the economy became not only necessary but imperative, a heroic duty that must be fulfilled. In the words of Jeffrey C. Alexander (2006, 2010), to strive towards economic reform became aligned with the virtuous side of the civil society dichotomy, while to maintain the status quo was to contravene civic virtue.

Consider the comments made by Senator Erin Lynch at the unveiling of the Rhode Island Senate's 2013 economic development package—a collection of bills introduced in response to RIPEC's evaluation that an unfriendly business climate was the root cause of Rhode Island's stagnation. Standing before a crowded room of journalists, nonprofit representatives, business professionals, and legislators, Lynch recalled her early years in the Senate chairing the Small Business Task Force. Though some told Lynch she would never get anything done in the Senate, she built a task force that met with individuals "who were actually affected by the economy" and tried to decipher what could be done to fix their problems. Recalling a package of legislation that resulted from that task force, Lynch emphasized the camaraderie and shared sense of purpose at the time. "Everybody helped to try and make it easier to do business—was listening, and was trying to do things to actually help," she stated. "And I remember when we had that press conference looking at the stack of bills that was on the table and saying, 'this is just the beginning, this isn't the end.'" Lynch concluded her statements by drawing a parallel between the small business task force and the Senate's 2013 economic development package: "As we stand here today we have another package of legislation. Again, we can't say we've solved all the problems in this state or all the problems in the world. But we are helping. We are moving things forward. And we are listening" (Capitol Television 2013).

With this story, Senator Lynch delineates two types of politics—the corrupt, "do nothing" politics so many had come to expect of Rhode Island politicians and the virtuous, nose-to-the-grindstone politics of her and her colleagues. Even though they could not fix "all the problems in [the] state," they pressed on, doing what they could. It was this politics of heroic service, of hard work despite grave challenges, that was called upon to address Rhode Island's business unfriendliness. As state Treasurer Gina Raimondo declared in a *Providence Journal* interview, "Marginal improvement is not going to get us anywhere…It's *go* time. It is *big* change time…This is our moment to *get in the boat,* and come together and make some big changes" (*Providence Journal* 2012d).

Indeed, the task of reform set before Rhode Island lawmakers was narrated as part of a heroic fight within a long history of economic struggle. As Sorel's myth of the General Strike narrated strike action as the ultimate battle in workers' struggle for liberation, so the myth of the business friendly economy presented reform as the war that must be waged to realize a "brighter future." As House Speaker Gordon D. Fox proclaimed in his opening speech to the 2013 legislative session:

> Imagine what Abraham Lincoln faced in 1861, with the nation terribly divided. But despite a nation torn apart, he looked toward making the right decisions that would impact the future. In his message to Congress, he ended with words that are still as relevant to us today as they were more than 150 years ago. Lincoln said: "The struggle of today is not altogether for today. It is for a vast future also. With a reliance on Providence all the more firm and earnest, let us proceed in the great task which events have devolved upon us." This was his first address to Congress. He was elected in 1860, and he was quite literally trying to keep a country preserved. We don't have such a daunting task ahead of us on New Year's Day in 2013. But much like Congress in 1861, what we do today is for the long term. We have a long, festering problem that was triggered by the Great Recession of 2008, and we've had a slow-moving economy ever since. We must make the right decisions in this session to pave the way for a brighter future. We have to believe it—and we have to fight for it (qtd. in Legislative Press & Information Bureau 2013a).

Invoking President Lincoln's leadership in the Civil War, Speaker Fox's words transformed the mundane work of policy making into an exhortation to fight. To take it on meant to embrace civic duty. To turn a blind eye was to abdicate in the state's hour of need.

The business friendly economy: forecasting a brighter future

In order to encourage the *neoliberal* reforms described at the beginning of this article, the myth also had to define the specific type of economy Rhode Island should build. As recounted by one state policy professional, "Everyone believed that something should occur. What it was that was necessary, I think people had differences of opinion." Thus, Rhode Island's policy wonks and reform advocates had to set before legislators a goal towards which to strive and a roadmap to get there. This was again achieved through myth—by projecting a vision of the business friendly economy Rhode Island should be—an economy where state regulations, tax structures, and institutions all worked to support entrepreneurs and small businesses.

The image of the business friendly economy was constructed by referencing the success of other states, and no state loomed larger in the Rhode Island imagination than neighboring Massachusetts. As noted by multiple economic development experts and journalists, Massachusetts had done much more than Rhode Island to support firm creation and spur economic growth, particularly in technology and knowledge-based industries. When a deep recession hit the then manufacturing-dependent state in the 1980s, Massachusetts leaders capitalized on its college and university system to diversify its industries and stimulate growth in computer science, technology, and medical research. The result was one of the nation's largest and most prosperous technology and research hubs, a turnaround that came to be known as the "Massachusetts Miracle" (Bramson 2012b). Compared to Rhode Island, Massachusetts had a lower corporate tax rate (Rhode Island Senate Policy Office and Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council 2013, p. 21), a friendlier regulatory environment (ibid, p. 12), and a more strategic approach to economic development (Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council 2012b). In the words of one Rhode Island resident, "All you needed to do was drive up [Interstate] 93 or 95 through Massachusetts and you could see economic activity along 128 or 93, that wasn't happening here." For the elected officials trying to terminate years of economic stagnation, Massachusetts offered a vision of the type of economy Rhode Island could be.

The fact that Massachusetts consistently outperformed Rhode Island on key economic indicators fed the belief that creating a business friendly economy would bring prosperity back to the Ocean State. For example, after describing Massachusetts' transformation from a manufacturing to a tech-based economy, a *Providence Journal* contributor wrote the following:

> Massachusetts' economy has performed well and weathered downturns better than Rhode Island's. And while Rhode Island's unemployment rate has been stuck in double digits for nearly three years, the Massachusetts rate in January was 6.9%, while the U.S. rate was 8.3% (Bramson 2012b, p. A1).

Herein lies the heart of the myth: if only Rhode Island could construct a business friendly economy, like that of Massachusetts, its long period of stagnation would end and prosperity would return to the Ocean State. Just as the state's business unfriendliness explained its high rate of unemployment and firm closure, so the business friendly economy held the key to a promising economic future.

Beyond projecting a vision of the business friendly economy, the myth also needed to define the steps—the specific legislation—that would lead Rhode Island to this promised, more prosperous future. This was achieved through state-commissioned expert analyses intended to identify economic solutions for the Ocean State. In addition to highlighting the superior performance of "business friendly states" in terms of personal income, education attainment, job placement, and gross domestic product, these studies outlined specific legislation Rhode Island lawmakers could adopt to replicate the more successful economies of states like Massachusetts. In so doing, they identified the principles and policies that would be necessary to build the business friendly economy and realize the state's full economic potential. In other words, they identified the sacred counterpoint to the state's otherwise profane climate.

For example, in May 2012 RIPEC was asked by Governor Lincoln D. Chafee to conduct an analysis of the Rhode Island EDC. The purpose of the report was to evaluate how Rhode Island's EDC compared to the economic development agencies of other states, as well as how the state should approach economic development in the future (Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council 2012b, p. 1). After charting EDC's structure and calculating its performance, RIPEC concluded that Rhode Island's economic development structure "lacks a systematic, regular data-driven approach for evaluating our economy's past and present," and that this "prevents the state from developing a common vision of the economy going forward" (ibid, p. 5). RIPEC then outlined a detailed agenda of actionable steps that the Governor and the General Assembly could take to improve Rhode Island's approach to economic development. These steps included the creation of a new Executive Office of Commerce tasked with coordinating economic development efforts (ibid, p. 6–7), legislation to require a strategic economic development plan with long-term goals and measurable benchmarks (ibid, p. 9), and the creation of a Business Development Center to assist enterprises interested in locating or expanding in Rhode Island (ibid, p. 8). At the end of their report, RIPEC assured that this legislation was necessary to put Rhode Island on the "path to prosperity":

> While the path toward reform presents a number of challenges, the state has a window of opportunity to anchor its economic development structure in best practices and data-driven metrics. These efforts will require considerable political will and change will not happen overnight. However, it is imperative that the state address these issues to avoid once again retreating to the economic development drawing board. Rhode Island has a strong history of innovation, entrepreneurship and productivity and can use these traits to revitalize its economy. Capitalizing on Rhode Island's unique resources in the context of this more aligned and functional structure will put Rhode Island on the path to prosperity (ibid, p. 10).

Later in 2012, RIPEC was asked by the Senate President to assist with another analysis, this time to outline legislation the Senate could pass to improve Rhode Island's business environment. Titled *Moving the Needle*, the report assessed Rhode Island's performance compared to other states across five categories: economy, workforce and education, transportation and infrastructure, cost of doing business, and quality of life. At the end of each category, RIPEC made concrete policy recommendations based on the state's performance. For example, the report found Rhode Island to be one of the most heavily regulated states. Explaining that such regulation "raises the cost and administrative burden on businesses," RIPEC recommended the legislature convene a commission to streamline state elevator, fire, and building codes and that it allocate funding to create an online building permitting system (Rhode Island Senate Policy Office and Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council 2013, p. 13). Other recommendations included the creation of a statewide, tax-free arts district to stimulate the growth of art-based businesses and nonprofits, the appointment of business representatives to statewide planning boards, and the use of federal healthcare reform to reduce overall health care system costs.

The findings and recommendations from the *Moving the Needle* and EDC reports were shared in meetings with legislative leadership and presented at TV-broadcast committee hearings in the Senate and the House of Representatives. As recounted by RIPEC's executive director, the power of these reports and their presentations was to throw in full relief what Rhode Island lawmakers needed to do to improve Rhode Island's economic performance. Through systematic comparison and the presentation of visuals, they made clear where Rhode Island differed from other, more prosperous states, as well as the legislative changes that needed to be made to move the state forward:

> The visual thing sometimes is extraordinarily important to see what you have vs. what others have and it then highlights the issues that you need to address. I think that's what we're looking at when we make those presentations. The graphs, what it looks like, what others look like; I think people could see the issue that was prevailing in front of them. And then it became easier to say, for instance, for the Speaker in particular, he could say, well wait a minute, now I see it. Now I see what we're not doing; I can see what you're suggesting that we do; let's go do that.

In connecting deregulation, government efficiency, and tax incentives to business friendliness, and associating business friendliness with economic growth, RIPEC's reports and presentations filled the sacred side of the symbolic spectrum. By identifying the "nitty gritty details" of the legislation that would improve the business climate, they made clear the work legislators needed to do (State Senator Ryan Pearson, qtd. in Legislative Press & Information Bureau 2013c). Where Rhode Island had once been "a state without a plan," in the words of Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed, the legislature would now streamline government agencies and permitting processes, reduce energy costs and environmental regulations, improve workforce training programs, and thereby build an economy that will "bring prosperity and jobs to Rhode Island" (Former House Speaker Gordon Fox, qtd. in Legislative Press & Information Bureau 2013e).

Absent alternatives

Against the myth of the business friendly economy, there appeared to be no viable alternative. With the support of *Providence Journal* contributors and influential advocacy groups such as RIPEC and the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, the myth of business friendly economy became the hegemonic narrative in public and legislative debate. Even Rhode Island organized labor—famous for its support of New Deal liberalism—failed to offer a competing narrative. At times members of organized labor even participated in the myth's performance. For instance, when the Senate held its annual economic summit in 2013 to evaluate how Rhode Island might improve its business competitiveness rankings, the president of the Rhode Island Building and Construction Trades Council participated as a panelist. Sitting next to the President of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, the labor leader expressed his ideas for improving the Rhode Island economy, many of which reiterated components of the myth. Apprenticeship programs will "leverage private industry to train the workforce of tomorrow." Constructing a health sciences facility, building a pedestrian bridge, and encouraging development in a "knowledge district" will give Providence a "unique" asset that will "stir interest for companies to want to come and invest." Accelerating and streamlining state permitting processes will decrease the number of delayed or stopped projects due to "red tape" issues (Rhode Island Senate 2013b).

Beyond affirming the idea that creating a business friendly economy will help address Rhode Island's economic struggles, the Trades president also called for cooperation across the business-labor divide, highlighting the achievements that can be made when the two constituencies work together. "I think history has shown us when labor and business come along with the state, things happen. We built the convention center, the mall, a lot of the buildings around the city and none of those things would have happened without that collaboration," he said (Rhode Island Senate 2013a). Senate President Paiva Weed also celebrated the Trades' participation as emblematic of the solidarity required to move the state forward: "Since we released the *Moving the Needle* report, I've spoken about the need for common goals. I've spoken about the need for cooperative partnerships. And this panel, I believe, is an example of the vision we can build upon" (ibid).

Even the Rhode Island affiliate of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), a more progressive federation than the Trades, failed to present an alternative narrative. Indeed, the Rhode Island AFL-CIO was a vocal proponent of increased jobs training and workforce preparedness, a policy prescription recommended by RIPEC and other business representatives. As the state AFL-CIO President told the *Providence Journal*, "The state should be funding job-training programs with general-revenue funds. If we're going to dig our way out of this mess, we need to do it" (qtd. in Smith 2012, pp. Main_14). Thus, rather than presenting an alternative to the myth of the business friendly economy, labor was enrolled into its production. The solutions put forth by the Trades president reaffirmed the idea that economic prosperity would be achieved by transforming Rhode Island into a place that businesses would want to be and in which they could thrive. His participation on the panel and previous collaboration with the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce became emblematic of the virtuous service and cooperation that would be necessary to move the state forward.

Political progressives, for their part, did present an alternative account of the core cause underlying Rhode Island's economic dysfunction. At the same time that the *Providence Journal* was running their Reinvent RI series, the progressive news blog *RI Future* (which is often at odds with organized labor in the state) published a week-long series on what went wrong with the Rhode Island economy. Over the course of six days, Progressive Democrats State Coordinator Sam Bell argued that Rhode Island's post-2007 economic decline was caused by former Republican Governor Donald Carcieri's public sector layoffs and income tax cuts. Bell argued that all this combined to increase unemployment, decrease disposable income, and dampen the housing market, leading Rhode Island to enter the Great Recession earlier and fair far worse than its New England counterparts (Bell 2012b). As Bell wrote of the Carcieri layoffs, "If public employment in Rhode Island had followed the same trajectory as it did in the nation since 2000, we would have almost 9,000 more jobs in the public sector than we do now, and the unemployment rate would be 1.6% points lower" (Bell 2012a).

However, when it came to legislative proposals to fix the economy, *RI Future* contributors tended to affirm those proposed by RIPEC and the legislative leaders who embraced the myth of the business friendly economy. In an article titled "Will Moving the Needle Help Rhode Island" RI Future contributing author Brian Hull (2013) considered whether the Senate's package of "business friendly" legislation—developed in response to RIPEC's 2013 report—would in fact improve the economy. While noting that most of the legislation would "likely only be marginally beneficial," Hull offers little critique and no alternatives. Of the Senate's proposal for an enhanced jobs match program, Hull's most scathing criticism is that the "tech folk in Providence" could likely design a better system "while they sleep." While arguing that the Senate's proposed solution is insufficient, he does not question the assumption that full workforce participation should be pursued, nor does he question the overarching logic for widespread unemployment (workers do not have the necessary skills). In the end, Hull concludes by endorsing the Senate's package, however sarcastically:

> Much of what came out yesterday is non-controversial and fairly common sense. To quote a colleague: "Congratulations to the Rhode Island Senate for formulating a plan to get us out of the recession, 4 years after it officially ended. I knew you could do it." The unfortunate reality is that it will take a while for the state to grow out of the recession. This is just the first step (ibd).

Hulls' commentary was not dissimilar from that of others who criticized the Senate's 2013 economic development reforms as "too little too late," but who did not challenge their underlying logic or offer alternative solutions. Economist Len Lardaro told the online news source *GoLocalProv* that the Senate's efforts were too vague and poorly integrated but, at the same time, described them as "a good step forward" (Spetrini 2013). In short, few provided direct critiques to the belief that the Rhode Island economy had failed because it was unfriendly to business or to the promise that remaking the state's regulatory, tax, and institutional environment would generate economic growth. Those who did gained little traction for their ideas. As a result, the neoliberal policy prescriptions advanced by RIPEC and publicized by *Providence Journal* columnists appeared to be the only viable option. When asked what an alternative approach would have been, a House representative gave a direct response: "The alternative is always to do nothing. You always have an alternative to do nothing and just say, you know, we're going to pave the roads, we're going to do our thing and if you want to come here, come here and if you don't, you don't."

Rhode Island's economic reforms: from myth to action

Following the promises of policy experts, lawmakers enacted a series of neoliberal legislation in attempts to build the business friendly economy that would bring prosperity to the state. During the 2010 legislative session, Rhode Island lawmakers passed a package of legislation specifically designed to make it easier to do business. This legislation was developed in response to diagnoses like that of Edinaldo Tebaldi, who blamed Rhode Island's especially severe downturn following the Great

Recession to the state's unfriendly business environment (Tebaldi 2010). Bills that passed included an income tax reform package that reduced most rates, the creation of an Office of Regulatory Reform to streamline state fire and building codes, and a web-based business application program through the Secretary of State's office. As a result, one Providence Chamber of Commerce representative described 2010 as "probably the most significant [legislative] year in the last decade in terms of helping small business" (qtd. in Rhode Island Senate Policy Office and Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council 2013, p. 3). In 2011 state legislators restructured the state pension system by cutting benefits and raising retirement rates, and in 2012 they began work on a statewide building permitting system to streamline government regulations.

But in the end of 2012 Rhode Island was still ranking at the bottom of national economic competitiveness scores. Despite the efforts undertaken by the legislature, the treasurer, and the governor, the proverbial needle did not move. This gave further impetus for the RIPEC analyses conducted of the EDC and the state's business competitiveness in 2012. With reforms passing, but numbers staying the same, lawmakers wanted to know what else could be done. As one Senate staffer recounted, "We were in the middle of a recession and the Senate President had passed a lot of legislation to try to fix it and to try to improve the business climate and still nothing changed. We did things and they didn't move."

Thus, the Senate staff began an investigation into Rhode Island's performance on economic competitiveness rankings. When they learned RIPEC was conducting a similar report, they joined forces. The result was the 2013 *Moving the Needle Report,* in which RIPEC and the Senate Policy Office assessed the performance of the Rhode Island economy compared to other states and recommended concrete policies for improvement. As discussed earlier, this report, released in January 2013, crystalized in concise form the argument that Rhode Island's economic underperformance was caused by a hostile business climate and identified specific pieces of legislation that would improve it. By the end of the legislative session, over thirty-five bills passed both the House and the Senate to implement the report's recommendations. These included the establishment of an economic development planning council to write a strategic, long-term economic development policy, a restructuring of the state's EDC to be more responsive to the needs of business, the creation of an Executive Office of Commerce, the creation of Back to Work RI to pair unemployment benefit recipients with job training opportunities, and a health care cost containment bill. As stated by Senate President Paiva Weed in a March 2013 press conference, all these bills were "about moving the state forward and improving Rhode Island's business climate" (Capitol Television 2013). They were designed and enacted with the explicit purpose of creating a business friendly economy in the Ocean State.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, I have used the concept of myth to explain the adoption of neoliberal economic development reforms in Rhode Island between 2010 and 2013. Where others would attribute Rhode Island's neoliberalization to economic transformations, electoral competition, organizational change, or policy diffusion, I demonstrate how the *myth of the business friendly economy* motivated neoliberal policy reforms following the 2008 recession by integrating "business unfriendliness" into collective understandings of Rhode Island's economic failure, transforming policy reform into a moral imperative, and projecting a vision of the more prosperous, business friendly economy towards which Rhode Island should strive.

This analysis makes important contributions to cultural, economic, and political sociology. It introduces myth as a critical framework to assess the symbolic, moral, and aspirational dimensions of neoliberalism and other political transitions. In particular, this paper demonstrates that the content of cultural objects like myths may have real consequences for the timing and design of state policies, even for presumably technocratic issues. Additionally, it highlights intriguing opportunities for future dialogue between performance studies, science and technology studies, and the sociology of the future. As I argue above, the myth of the business friendly economy had its effect not by assembling the world in ways that made it true—as theories on the performativity of economics might suggest—but rather by projecting a vision of the ends to which legislative action should be oriented, a vision that was steeped in its own moral order. Given recent emphasis on the social impact of projected futures, scholars ought to investigate the deployment of economics in the performance of possible futures, as well as its enrollment in political actors' efforts to shape action in the present.

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