

SYMPOSIUM
SOCIAL MYTHS AND COLLECTIVE IMAGINARIES



MYTHOLOGIES OF POLITICS,
HISTORY AND CURRENT EVENTS

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Mythologies of Politics, History and Current Events

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Political institutions and actions seem to have few imaginary and mythical dimensions. The intellectual work done in Europe since the Renaissance to rationalize them argues that politics was the social field most exposed to demythologization even since the ancient Greeks. Yet the denial of the survival of myth in the sphere of politics is perhaps a decoy, which may lead to mystifications or even unsuspected manipulations. Would it not be better to recognize that the mythical component of politics offers a strong contribution to rational intelligence, or even participates in the conditions of possibility and exercise of socio-political institutions, as it was illustrated in Gérard Bouchard's work (Bouchard 2003, 2007, 2017)?

Without being able to approach the question in its foundations (see Wunenburger 2001), we wish to recall some data on the origin of the problem in the framework of a historical anthropology of politics before taking into account the most recent shifts in the contemporary discourses, which did not fail to give the mythical dimension of politics a re-founding value. We therefore propose to recall the importance of myth in the past history of societies, which allows an operational redefinition of the myth that distances it from "literary fictions" or "religious ones". Then, we will ask

ourselves whether the myth still accompanies modern democratic societies. If this were the case, it would be necessary to better explain the forms of intellectual resistance of sociology and contemporary political science studies towards it. Should not the theory of myth as deployed by Gérard Bouchard be further developed rather than limited to a weak and minimal version, as it has already been done in other political anthropology works of the twentieth century, such as those by Gilbert Durand (Durand 1996)?

I

History of political mythologies

If the question of the political myth is a problem in our contemporary societies, which have since the Enlightenment built a very rational theoretical and practical representation of politics (e.g. rational sovereignty, contract paradigm of authority, dialogic proceeding of government decision, legal framework of institutions, its omnipresence and effectiveness are nevertheless well accepted in many old and extra-European societies. The close relations between political and religious thoughts and theologico-political concepts (see Schmitt 2007), and later the rise of great empires,¹ testify to the importance of an imaginary of power, people and their destiny. One of the most recent expressions of a political, post-revolutionary imagination is Napoleon's adventure, whose genius not only overturned previous social orders by means of his wars and reforms, but also forged a total mythology (rituals,

¹ We showed in *Imaginaires du politique* that myth is present in the symbolic constructions of power (kingdom, empire) and in collective representations which are held through rites (feasts, commemorations, "power on stage" for Georges Balandier), for set goals (utopias, communism), or in scenarios of resistance and confrontation against the powers that be.

texts, iconography) that is still alive today on the entire planet (cf. Poli 2016).

1.1. *The mythologization of Napoleon*

The historical figure of Napoleon Bonaparte rests on three symbolic functions, skillfully exploited and superimposed:

a) First, the Napoleonic adventure is inseparable from the ‘imperial’ myth itself, which episodically constitutes a symbolic structure of transnational absolute power (cf. Duverger 1980, 10-1), since the Empire is not primarily a domination over a large territory, but fundamentally a principle or an idea. In fact, the political order is not determined by material factors or geographically extended possessions, but by a spiritual or politico-lawful idea. “As *Dominus Mundi*, he (the Emperor) is the sovereign of princes as well as kings, that is to say, he reigns over sovereigns not over territories; he represents a power transcending the federated communities of which he has assumed control ... the Empire should not be confused with one of the kingdoms and nations that compose it, because it is something in principle qualitatively different, anterior and superior to everyone of them” (de Benoist 1995, 118). Thus Charlemagne, for example, is on the one hand emperor, on the other hand king of the Lombards and the Franks (*ibid.*). It is therefore important to distinguish between the authority proper to the Empire and the *potestas* it exerts on each particular folk. The Empire therefore represents a complex political form, which allows access to original configurations, both efficient and heavily charged with imaginations.

b) Napoleon also activates the royal myth and his coronation portrays the fundamental *mythemes*. The royal myth is based on the relationship between the temporal power and a spiritual power of religious essence. This symbolic construction makes it possible to

connect the head - the chief - of the social body with a trans-personal and trans-historical sovereignty. The monarch does not really become king (rex and only *dux*, *basileus*, not *tyrannos*) if his sovereignty is referred not to his own personal will but to a transcendent and sacred source. In other words, the king is not supposed to draw his *auctoritas* from his personal being, his empirical individuality, but from an invisible supernatural overlord, the primordial will that gives life and strength to all things, namely God (see Kantorowicz 2016). Royalty, then, rests on a myth according to which power escapes the human will, so that a king, as chief, is only on behalf of (or “lieutenant”) the King of the World (Wunenburger 2002b, 94ff.).

c) Finally, Napoleon also recovers the myth of the ‘savior’, a figure of charismatic being which partly crosses the myth of the hero without being assimilated into it (Girardet 1990). The savior providentially assumes the destiny of a people under extraordinary circumstances. His imagination is partly fueled by the predominantly prophetic Messianic, Jewish and Christian figure (Reszler 1981, 196-7). It should be added that Napoleon has self-produced this mythological complex since the beginning of his political commitment. He makes sure to guarantee a symbolic staging. Napoleon reveals himself to be quite an exceptional genius of mythologization, as if he were playing a part in a story of which he is both the author and the subject. Thus, at the beginning of the nineteenth century the Napoleonic Empire captures, transports, hybridizes, transforms many symbolic and mythical images of power, which partly explains its success and durability in the collective memory despite the warlike violence and destructive conquests of the old order.² The power of its political imagination comes from the reinforcement of different imaginary levels: the use of an abundant imagery (propaganda, cult of personality), the

² See more extensively Wunenburger 2002.

reinforcement of the appearance of omnipotence at the basis of the activation of conscious and unconscious charismatic images (around both the benevolent and the authoritarian paternal archetype), the over-determination of the values of space, etc.

1.2. *The myth as a transcendental matrix of politics*

This example and many others indicate that the myth by its consistency, complexity, power of meaning and valorization, and its pragmatic resources cannot be reduced to a mere fanciful superstructure, a supernumerary fiction, a dreamlike setting of political life. By means of its textual and visual *mythemes* and its symbolic economy, it intimately participates in the recognition and intervention of politics in society.

That is why we agree to call the sociopolitical myth an analogical and symbolic narrative construction, which enables us to give meaning to real events by providing them with an origin, a model, an orientation, an emotional intensity; such information is not reducible to empirical data by means of dramatization, heroism or cosmologization. The myth can be explicitly conjugated (a mythology), or remain implicit. It can operate in its entirety or by fragments disassociated in the form of *mythemes*. Through its imaginary and narrativity, the myth thus becomes a distinct category from cognitive fictions, which are the founders, for example, of the law, that of Rousseau's social contract based on an experience of thought, a simulated supposition, which allows to establish institutional practices. Imagination then becomes a tool by which a rational exercise of political representation is posited as a paradigm independently of its empirical conditions of realization.³ The myth is closer to a narrative conduct, which stages

³ In Pierre Janet's sense, and later on in that of Ricoeur 1984-1988.

(*mimesis*), theatricalizes through images, symbols and emotions, the power to give it flesh and blood, a transcendence, cohesive forces in a collective story.⁴

II

New democratic mythologies

For a long time it has been accepted that the invention of democracy allowed the emancipation from the mythical bedrock and the liberation from any original or spectacular imaginary, as it transferred sovereignty to all citizens. It is true that the advent of democratic societies ever since the 18th century went hand in hand with a virulent criticism of traditions and especially of the theological-political dimension of the royal authority. Yet, democratic societies keep asking questions about their origin, identity and purposes. One therefore expects that these societies do not comfortably do away with producing stories.⁵ Indeed, can we say that the democratic regime has expelled the imagination and imposed a rational transparency? As long as the duality between the rulers and the ruled remains, as long as a democratic society needs a past and a future, it is very likely that it will continue to produce mythical narrativity, at least resorting to schemas of symbolization under the mythical logos. One of the characteristics of the democratic regime's discourse is to put an end to an

⁴ This is what nowadays political sciences call "storytelling", a narration that provides a man, a party, a regime with an origin, an apogee and an end. Its political use has been extended to marketing. See Salmon 2008.

⁵ Everybody knows how much the image of French democracy owes to a founding mythology of 1789 revolution (La Bastille), that the USA have built their democratic society on the myth of the conquest of the West (cinema has widely shown its mythic background), and that XIX century democratic societies have developed in Europe a powerful myth of Progress (see Reszler 1981 and Girardet 1990).

authoritarian figure, like the traditional father of a family, by transferring power to all equal citizens who only delegate their power by contract. In this sense, the democratic symbolism has developed the value of fraternity, which, according to the parental symbolism, means the end of the authority of the father (assimilated to the King, father of the subjects and their nation). This family symbolism unveils a great latent narrative according to which democracy is based on the murder of the father (the French revolutionaries killed King Louis XVI), and a psychoanalytic commentary after Freud's studies can pertinently reveal its mythical roots.⁶

Does not the contractualist rationality effective during the French Revolution indicate that the political contract aims first and foremost to establish a free assembly of sons (the daughters remain long excluded from the social contract), emancipated of the authority of the Father? It is logical, therefore, that the sons will have the assurance of acting on their own only after accomplishing the murder of the Father, in this case the King. In this respect, the murder of Louis XVI cannot be reduced to a simple regicide, since it accomplishes a symbolic act of abolition of the very principle of royalty, as noted by Albert Camus, which brings it closer to the mythical scenario of the primal horde described by Freud, namely the murder of the Father (Camus 2000 and Freud 2001). Is not this a sign that political rationalism cannot easily escape from a thought of filiation, whose hierarchy overthrows more than abolishes the symbolic?

But the founding myth remains incomplete and still seeks to replace the image of the Father with new, variable tutelary images. The comparative history of the United States and France thus

⁶ For a psycho-analytical and legal approach to "Au nom de" see Legendre 1992.

illustrates two political mythologies of Western democracy, stemming from this imaginary of a denied filiation.

Paradoxically, the American political history begins with a founding act of emancipation from the English mother country, which is equivalent to the rebellion of a grown child against his parents. Indeed, the moral justification of the Declaration of Independence rests on the rupture with the possessive (colonial) Mother, even though without presenting itself as a murder of the Father. Benjamin Franklin goes so far as to ridicule any comparison between the new homeland and biological motherhood. Moreover, many contemporary texts exalt the creation of a new family, which succeeds to a degenerate natural kinship (Marienstras 1992, 151). Thus Oliver Cobb evokes the state of “childhood (of America) when it had to fight its denatured parents” and Jonas Clark calls Americans “the sons, free from birth, of America, [because] the blood that unites them is not the one of passed down over generations, but it is the blood sacrificed in the fight for independence” (*ibid.*).

Nonetheless, the new federal state is simultaneously seeking the reconstruction of an identity around the Idea of Nation legitimated by founding fathers, similarly to what many decolonized states do to date. Washington, celebrated as ‘Father’ of the Nation, “played the role of a charismatic leader in the sense meant by Max Weber, and his function is to give the state authority based on the divine will” (*ibid.*, 148). In other words, instead of assuming full autonomy and sovereignty which follows Independence, the United States are only passing from denied maternal parentage to the almost sacred exhortation of a new Father represented by the Founding Fathers of the Nation, who transmit to them a legacy, a memory, a corps of values, a common ideal. The American State, far from affirming the preeminence of an autonomous will, represents itself through its constitutional texts as the expression of a historically constituted

nation in charge of implementing the charismatic mission of the Founding Fathers. Is there a risk, as Tocqueville saw it, to see in the general will only an addition of particular wills, which ends in a dictatorship of majorities conceived as pressure groups in service of particular interests? (see Tocqueville 2002) It is difficult for the state to rise above civil society and its historical interests.

On the contrary, the French Revolution develops around the founding act of the murder of the king and the sovereign people become *ipso facto* the corps of the State. As the identity and continuity of the State are no longer insured by the person of the King, the Republic can only reinvest the Nation as subject of the general will. But the ideology of the revolutionary nation is only possible at the price of a conceptual unification that represses the historical substance, the power of legacy. The French Nation is no longer the lineage of the Ancestors, whose will is the substratum of the old regime, but the people that has become “One” through the present general will. In short, the Nation of conservative matrix becomes the support of a voluntaristic constructivism, of a self-constitution of self in the form of a People hypostatized as a mythical entity (Monneyron 2000 and Id. – Mouchtouris 2010). The Nation thus gradually becomes a motivational image-Idea intermediate between society and the State.⁷

Thus, by following opposite paths, the comparative history of the United States and France attests to the difficulty of separating and linking together the flesh (in German, *Leib*) and the body (*Körper*) of political society. If the United States has, in a certain way, let the State dissolve into the Nation and the will into

⁷ Romantic nationalisms that sometimes survive can be read as surdeterminations of the myth of the nation. This is paradoxically a savage mythology and an idolatrous imaginary, a sort of de-symbolisation of political representations, because symbols are thought as something that unite and keep separated.

tradition, the post-revolutionary France tends to absorb the Nation in the State and the empirical unit of lineage in the current desire to forge a new history (see Cohen-Tanugi 1985; Dumont 1977). But can the political society thus deny its own history, and turn the past into a blank page? Is not the repression of genealogical memory the source of a never healed wound of the political reason, which needs to reconstruct narratives of legitimization?

III

Transcendental and operative value of the myth

Despite these data and interpretations, which could be multiplied, it remains that this hermeneutics of socio-politics continues to be a source of resistance or even of stubborn rebuttals. What are the ideological and epistemological obstacles to this anti-mythological bias? We can distinguish at least two, the fear that the myth carries a dangerous irrationality and the belief that the mythical frame of reference was definitely deconstructed by post-modern political thought.⁸

3.1. The risk of pathogenic imaginary

The first complaint concerns the risk of pathological drifts of the imagination. In fact, myths sometimes experience a morbid evolution,⁹ just as there is a morbid rationalism.¹⁰

⁸ We explained this difficulty in thinking according to the myth in Wunenburger *et al.* 1993.

⁹ Carl Gustav Jung, a theorist of the omnipotence of myth, analyzed and denounced himself this pathology when talking about Nazism. Cf. Jung 1947.

¹⁰ This point has been explained by Lukács and Gabel 1969. See Wunenburger 2001, III part.

It is true that one of the major risks of the collective use of images is to push its agents to forget its imaginary nature and to reify them in their contents. The best-known example, common to religious and political life, is the idolatrous drift, at its peak in fetishism. When the image of a ruler, like that of a deity, is no longer treated as a sign of representation but as an apparition in person, as a real presence, it loses its function of referral and substitution. When a king (or an emperor) is supposed to be representative of God on earth, he ends up thinking of himself as a reincarnation of God, and may in turn demand that his public image be worshiped as if he were God – as various cults of the personality and the inflation of the effigies of the supreme leader attest. When a skillful and charismatic ruler succumbs to delusions of grandeur because he has managed to subjugate his people through his image, with great reinforcement of ruses, lies, and grand gestures, he confuses his person with his character, his private being with the public actor. When exalted revolutionaries act as if the new order they imposed by means of violence were the definitive realization of the model of the Ideal or Holy City, the result is a confusion of the word and of the thing, and a collision between an ideal model and reality. It is indeed important that any broadcast, published or played image be preserved as an image, in order to include signs of its line of descent, maintain a gap and survive precisely as an image. It must certainly lead to a certain belief in his appearance, to make us play its game, but without ever fascinating or stun us to the point that we distance ourselves and realize that it is only a game (see Wunenburger 1977) as the hermeneutical philosophy has emphasized, whatever the configuration of an image, its semiotic and symbolic function always depends on the person who perceives it, interprets it, adheres to it, draws information from it, or enjoys it. From this point of view, the reception of the image oscillates between a literal reading and an analogical interpretation. In the first case, the image

is treated as a univocal representation which enunciates an immanent truth. To believe naively to a myth of foundation, to take literally the image of sacredness of a territory, lead precisely to reduce the image to the thing, to confuse the identity and the analogy, to empty the image of its symbolic function. The mythical account of its origins can give meaning to the history of a people without being the object of a literal belief, the attachment to a territory can be metaphorized through the sacred without being considered an exclusive and immutable possession, without the sacrilege of modifying its borders or of welcoming foreigners; the symbolism of the sacred gives only an analogical image of a historical factual connection with a homeland.

If the imaginary wants to escape superstitious beliefs and obscurantist dogmatisms, it should therefore entirely favor a symbolic approach, a figurative treatment (just as one opposes the figurative or spiritual meaning of a text to its literal sense), which always engages an interpretation of its levels of meaning. Thus, the sacred foundation of kingship by no means justifies a theocracy, but can contribute to not subjugating power to a mere instrumentalization, endowing it with seriousness, respect, majesty. This obliges the representatives of power not to play unpunished with it, to preserve it from selfishness, meanness, cynicism, which might encourage his impressive prerogatives. The power is not sacred in itself, but by acting as if it participated of the sacred, we make sure to protect it, to save it from personal ambitions, not to abuse of it. Similarly, by projecting itself into a nation, a people cannot claim a pure, accomplished identity, an indissoluble and never established unity, but can give itself an analogical image of a symbolic unity which acts as an obligation to improve and not as an acquired right that allows one to think they are endowed with a justified superiority. Such is the meaning of social and political rites and celebrations which allow a community to live the time of a gathering as a common experience, where one acts as if all were in

unison, before the dispersion brings each individual and each group back to their particular and antagonistic interests (*ibid.*).

3.2. The post-modern demythologization

A postmodern philosophy has developed that demythologizes politics and deconstructs the categories responsible for mythologization: for example, the nation would be a breeding ground for identity-based “us”, fantasies leading to totalitarian perversions (cf. Neyrat 2012 and 2013). By observing, sometimes announcing the “end of the great narratives” and thus historical myths, some postmodern authors (Lyotard, Foucault) were led to demystify the philosophical illusion that the logic of popular sovereignty and the logic of the contract had definitely cut the ties between politics and imagination. In many versions, J. L. Nancy, for example, has worked to demythologize the image of the political community, which in his eyes has never broken with the fiction of the general will of the One, kept alive by a mythical imagination. Indeed, politics remains in search of a political One, fusional and thus totalitarian, which finds its base in a fiction, which works on the mode of a poetics more than of a policy, giving a pseudo consistency, in particular, to the empty idea of sovereignty. “The myth necessarily communicates itself as a myth proper to the community, and it communicates a myth of the community: communion, ... the absolute community” (Nancy 2004, 144). For J. L. Nancy, the only way to free oneself from this imposture would be to look for a new form of community, desubstantialized, without subject, totally immanent to itself, and therefore without an overarching organization and in perpetual becoming.

Can this emancipatory step of post-modern authors be anything other than a return to utopia? Is this post-mythical society set to

come about not the same project as the utopias of the past? Actually it intentionally corrects the socio-political order by drawing the outline of an alternative sociality but conjugated in the mode of minimal neutrality, itself dependent on a writing game that poses it outside any anthropological dimension.¹¹

3.2. Towards a general political mythology

Given the antiquity and recurrence of the phenomenon of political myths, while aware of the methodological and ethical caution to be taken in view of the sometimes radical criticism, we want to confirm the interest for the mytho-genetic approach as it was followed by G. Bouchard. G. Bouchard pleaded with precision and rigor for the strength of the nations (neonationalism), one of the efficient pillars of the imaginary (we have also privileged the empire), and acknowledged the irreducible functionality of the collective myth in many examples including Quebec and, more recently, Europe (Bouchard 2017b).

But can we not go further than developing the identities and functionality of the myth? Many other works of political anthropology have systematized this paradigm by lending it the heuristic, inaugural value of a new political science. Thus Gilbert Durand has constructed a vast synthesis bringing together the genetic and the structural points of view, whose applications to politics derive directly from the general model which he himself has applied especially to social myths and aesthetic styles.

His program of an analysis of a collective imagination obeys at first the same objectives as any mytho-critic of the work of a creator (G. Bachelard, Ch. Mauron, etc.). It is a question of bringing to light the dominant images (archetypes), the recurring

¹¹ About utopian thought cf. Wunenburger 2013.

configurations which make it possible to situate the whole of the productions with respect to regimes (diurnal and nocturnal) and structures: intimacy mystics (to bind, to melt), diairetic or schizomorphic (to cut, to oppose) or cyclic (a narrative succession of the previous two) – see Durand 2016 and 1996. G. Durand was able to cut cultural history in Europe into seven archetypal poles, which coincide less with states than with cultural areas. A set of primordial archetypes is thus declined and conjugated differently according to the semantic basin towards which they are oriented. The history of Europe is thus crossed by a struggle between a rather naturalistic imagination and another haunted by millenarianism, which feeds on images of the diurnal regime (Joachimism). The demonstration of anthropological structures must be completed with diachronic monitoring. Myth-analysis aims to establish the profile of the dominant and recessive myths of an era in order to study their temporal evolution. It allows us to follow decade after decade - on cycles of about one hundred and twenty years - the rise and fall of myths, which are replaced by new ones. These dominant myths (Prometheus, Dionysus, Hermes) determine patterns of logic, action, ways of feeling and creating. The knowledge of these dynamic configurations makes it possible to unify the interpretation of the pluralistic facts of a society, to better understand the contemporary imaginary and even to anticipate the probabilities of emergence of a new one (see Sironneau 2000). Political myths even follow semantic basins and rhythms which can be compared to the course of a river, as illustrated by the Franciscan myth.¹² With these modelizations, G Durand inscribes the specificities and political evolutions of a country in a logic of images, symbols and myths endowed with regularities stemming from the life of the imaginary, understood as

¹² We didn't develop the problem of myth under the perspective of collective emotions and collective passions (hate, enthusiasm).

a transpersonal dynamic of image organization and not of rational relations.

Conclusion

To take into account and support the political imagination does not necessarily mean to promote the irrational, but to extend the rationality onto the infra-conceptual. Just as economic agents are not just rational calculating subjects, political subjects are also men (more than citizens) with their dreams, beliefs, passions, structured by collective entities, transmitted and shared. Political mythology still has a long way to go in order to enrich and renew political science.

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