

SOCIAL MYTHS



THE REALITY OF MYTH
AND
THE MYTH OF REALITY

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I

Introduction

The importance of myth in human and especially political life is well established in the literature. Gérard Bouchard's recent volume, *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries* (Bouchard 2017) enriches an already conspicuous literature currently undergoing a noticeable development, with careful analyses of all characteristics of political myths. However, this attention to myths is nothing new. Many scholars have already analysed the relationship between politics and myths, mainly in relation to Nazism, developing reflections around several myths (the myth of blood, the myth of race etc.). The Nazis themselves, beginning with Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the 20th century*, intended to create a mythology inspired by the Germanic world, characterised by esotericism (see Jesi 2018). It was known that myths could have huge potential for the mobilisation of energies belonging to the sphere of the sacred (and of the demonic) already before Nazism showed what destructive power these myths could have (Voegelin 1986). Myth mobilises emotional energies that are indispensable for every political order,

because of its ability to impregnate the collective imagination on a deep level, reaching the cognitive substrate of stable forms such as Jung's archetypes. As Bouchard rightly points out, a myth is sacred and does not therefore pertain to rationality. He writes: "The full-fledged myth draws its authority mainly from the fact that IT participates in a form of sacredness and thus exists beyond the realm of rationality. This characteristic, which largely exempts IT from being called into question and from being "attacked" by reality, accounts for its predominance, resilience, and longevity" (Bouchard 2017, 25). This definition revisits Émile Durkheim's famous claim of the sacred being the highest form of power: "the effectiveness of a command is given not by material coercion or by the perspective of something of this sort, but the simple radiation of the mental energy which it contains" (Durkheim 1967, originally 1912, 237). So, power is not understood as coercion in a physical sense, but rather develops from "mental energy (*ibid.*, 238). The efficiency of society comes from its psychic properties: social pressure is applied mentally, which leads men to think that "outside themselves there exist one or several powers, both moral and, at the same time, efficacious, upon which they depend" (*ibid.*, 131). In this respect, society has not only a repressive function but also a revitalising one. It is clear that the experience Durkheim had in mind was that of the mass, discovered and analysed by Gabriel Tarde and in the same years by Gustave Le Bon (Le Bon 1974, originally 1895).

II

Following the thread that connects myth to its mobilising energy in the mass, we find the most classic formulation of the relationship between myth and power: Evidently, if we adopt the perspective of Le Bon, who describes the "meneurs" of the crowd, the figure of a politician who uses myth to his personal advantage

arises. The idea of a social actor who manipulates the crowd has as long a history as sociology itself—perhaps even longer if we consider the role of demagogues in the ancient world – but in any case, it is a widely represented point of view in social and political science. Even Bouchard shares this approach, claiming that social myths can be distinguished from others because they can be misused. “I believe rather that myth is most of the time the product of a social actor or a coalition of actors. It is only at the end of a long process of promotion that it can extend its influence to an entire society” (Bouchard 2017, 35). More explicitly, the author declares: “Myths are strategically produced by social authors involved in power relations, social myths can be characterised as utilitarian constructs” (*ibid.*, 105).

The idea that a social actor can use and even produce a myth for the purpose of imposing his own interests is the central thesis of Edelman’s famous book on the symbolic uses of politics, (Edelman 1985), parts of which we need to analyse more deeply. Edelman makes a distinction between reference symbols and condensation symbols. It originates from the symbolism in Edward Sapir’s *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, where symbols that evoke emotions associated with a situation are called condensation symbols. Such symbols are the only means by which groups can be adapted to complex situations, if they are unable to analyse the situations in a rational manner. Edelman writes: “Where condensation symbols are involved, the constant check of the immediate environment is lacking” (Edelman 1985, 6). Condensation symbols require stereotypes, hyper-simplifications and psychological reassurances. Reference symbols, on the other hand, are defined as “economical ways of referring to the objective elements in objects or situations: elements identified in the same way by different people” (*ibid.*). Therefore, reference symbols are closer to the objective truth. Here we find the idea of the mass in need of hyper-simplifications as well as an élite aware of its own

interests: “The interests of organised groups in tangible resources or in substantive power are less easily satiable than are interests in symbolic reassurance” (*ibid.*, 22). Only these “minimal groups” have concrete objectives for the acquisition of resources and can participate in political activities, thus producing real effects. According to Edelman the individual job gives gratifications that come from the planned modification of reality. Reference symbols therefore have a cognitive function, while condensation symbols have only a psycho-social function, and the majority of the public tends to use the psycho-social function rather than the cognitive one. The support role and symbolic reassurance of myth become necessary in periods of crisis, when economic conditions threaten the security of a larger group, or when an organisation which can promote the common interest of such a group is completely lacking. Then, organised groups manipulate the mass using condensation symbols. This perspective is shared by authors like Mancur Olson, who finds the basis of groups not in myths but in the logic of interest based on the principle of convenience as the main, if not the only motivation for action (Olson 1971). Groups form if every member satisfies their own interests by participation in the group. In short, politics leads back to the logic of individual interests, following the opinion of Harold Laski (Laski 1925) and others. On the basis of these premises myth can only have an instrumental function; myth is opposed to reality, understood as a whole range of available and limited goods which are acquired following a struggle. This point of view can also include myth and symbol interpreted as available goods (Pizzorno 1993, 142).

III

The cognitive superiority of Edelman’s referential symbols and all approaches that interpret the dynamics of social and political life as based on “interests” rest on a concept of objective reality in

opposition to symbol and myth. This idea is not new, either. Reality, as the domain of facts and experiences as opposed to the imaginary, the symbol and the myth, is the centrepiece of science, according to classic sociology, beginning with August Comte (Comte 1908). As Jürgen Habermas has highlighted, positive science was founded on the investigation of objective elements in order to dominate society. And in fact, we find the very criteria of scientificity in certainty, exactness and usefulness of knowledge (Habermas 1972), which locates its cognitive superiority in the scientific method. It is only data, facts and objective connections that science wants to demonstrate with logical instruments. On the basis of that narrow conception of reality, myth can only be interpreted as an object, subject to instrumental use by social actors who pursue their own interests.

Many scholars have illuminated the “mythical” background of this idea of reality, beginning with the philosophy of history, the indispensable *pendant* of Comte’s positivist conception – traces of which can be found today in the shared conviction that we live in a secular (not mythical) world. These traces are “shared representations” – in other words general unquestioned premises that are tacitly accepted – and they thus have a mythical substance.¹ Here, myth is interpreted in a radical and foundational sense far beyond the classical opposition with logos, at the root of Western thinking following another narrative parallel to secularisation.

The idea of “objective” reality is revealed as a naïve construction which hides the communicative and linguistic nature of reality interpreted as a social construction (Berger – Luckmann

¹ Mary Douglas writes: “When we also believe that we are the first generation uncontrolled by the idea of the sacred, and the first to come face to face with one another as real individuals, and that in consequence we are the first to achieve full self-consciousness, there is incontestably a collective representation.” Douglas 1987, 99.

1966). The relationship between myth and reality acquires a different dimension. Edgar Morin shows how the demarcation between scientific theories and myths does not mean that scientific theories are “objective” (Morin 1995). Rather, the same scientific theories can be mythologized (*ibid.*, and Bouchard 2017, 43). “With the exception of the traditional myth, the modern myth” – he asserts – “is invisible under the ideal abstraction and logic of the system. It becomes all the more invisible since it wears the mask of ‘demystifying’ science” (Morin 1995, 143 – my translation from now on).

Invisibility characterises the zone of the collective conceptions that enclose the tacit foundations of the symbolic and political order: “The high triumph of constitutional thinking is to make institutions completely invisible” (Douglas 1987, 98). Here we find the “sacred” heart of the myth in what Morin, revisiting Thomas Kuhn’s reflections (Kuhn 1996), defines as the “Paradigm” or also the “underground monarch”. The “Paradigm” not only controls theories and reasoning, but also the cognitive intellectual and cultural field from which theories and reasoning stem. Adopting an “archaeological” method, Foucault has shown how semantic fields in which scientific discourse takes form are created and modified, bringing to light the hidden foundations of all forms of knowledge. Morin employs the same “archaeological” approach: the “underground monarch” has an unconscious nature, which he defines as “*arche*”, namely “the Front one, the Founder, the Foundation and the Sovereign, the Sub-conscious and the Super-conscious” (Morin 1995, 216). The Paradigm creates evidence while hiding itself. There is no objectivity outside the Paradigm, because being has no logical existence and existence has no logical being; on the contrary, reality is generated by the Paradigm: “the conceptual and logical organisation of that which is perceived as real, derives from a paradigmatic determination” (*ibid.*, 217). Being

an invisible foundation it is sovereign because it is “invulnerable” (*ibid.*, 219).

Nevertheless, the Paradigm can change and transform itself. Thought can undermine the Paradigm producing its transformation. Evidently, not only is the category of “sovereign” thought questioned and new semantic fields opened, but institutional forms and political orders are shaken. The subjects that undermine the Paradigm are, in fact, deviant and antinomic, they live on the margins of rules and society. The anthropologist Mary Douglas has brought to light how marginal categories and the moments of transition when the rules are suspended are dangerous, because momentarily, these categories and transition moments are completely deprived of rules. The marginality is connected to danger but also to power.² The marginal subject, which is located on the margins of the potential for transformation can create a new Sovereign. This is why the adventure in the chaotic regions of the mind is one beyond the confines of society (Douglas 1966, 158).

“Radicality” is the expression used by Morin in order to describe this adventure. There is an epistemological and a philosophical “radicality”. Epistemological radicality is defined by Morin as follows: “thought that examines and critiques its own foundations, principles and structures”, while philosophical radicality is “an inquiry concerning the problem of being, into the possibility of understanding and knowing itself, on the relations between ideas and the real, the spirit and the world, and on the nature of the social tie” (Morin 1995, 84). These questions become radical only when original minds, recognised then as “great thinkers”, go as far as to examine the foundations of order. Radical thinking reactivates the sources. Morin describes it thus:

² “To have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power.” Douglas 1966, 120.

“Radicality renews the ties with the *arche*, the anthropo-biological tuff of knowledge, where mythical thought and rational thought have not yet become dissociated” (*ibid.*). Because of this tie with *arche*, mythical and rational thought can express deviances from cognitive norms, as it is peripheral with respect to the dominant culture. Morin does not attribute the determination of radicality itself to sociology, but rather to the ability to analyse the conditions under which a society can develop radical thought, by perceiving the “fluid, uncertain, evasive aura surrounding an independent mind that, resisting imprinting, reflects on its own condition and creates an original thought” (*ibid.*, 85). These marginal ideas can epidemically propagate in conditions of crisis: “similarly to biological evolution, a slight or deep mutation can happen in the myth and in the idea and can alter or transform them” (*ibid.*, 126). A horizon of metamorphoses, breaches, symbioses and transformations opens up here. Turning against the *arche*, the original mind, capable of radical thinking, gives rise to the “new” which spreads up to the point of replacing the dominant Paradigm. It should be stressed, that the revolutions of Paradigms cannot be interpreted in any sense of progress or evolution. A trans-paradigmatological science has yet to be developed. Evidently, any possibility of formulating normative orders, distinguishing good paradigms from bad paradigms, is excluded: there is no Archimedean point from which the paradigms can be compared. The archetypical and mythical substance has no moral judgment.

IV

Nevertheless, a distinction between “pseudo myths” and authentic myths is required. Bouchard invokes a greater knowledge of myth, an essential component of human and social life, in order to introduce a virtuous use of the symbols (Bouchard 2017, 108). Károly Kerényi, who also sees Morin’s archetypical and primordial

element in myth, though giving it an atemporal quality, has introduced the idea of genuine myth, as distinct from technical myth: The former is spontaneous and disinterested, while the latter is actively produced with a purpose. Evidently, Nazism falls within this latter category. The matter is, as we see, complex. How can we find a distinction between genuine and technical myths, and which criteria allow us to speak about a virtuous usage of them, if we remain tied to the archetypal and founding conception of myth? Can we introduce a normative element that enables us to distinguish between genuine and technicalised myths without falling into a mythical conception of reality itself? Morin does not succeed in answering these questions. In this matter, Eric Voegelin's thinking can provide some interesting and still fecund stimuli to be clarified.

It should be premised, that Eric Voegelin had the problem of the "technical" myth in mind. Voegelin interprets the "Nazi myth", analysing the symbolic apparatus activated by Nazis as a "pneumopathology", a spiritual disease. In particular, we find this term in the cycle of lectures he held at the University of Munich in the summer semester of 1964, published with the title *Hitler and the Germans*. Voegelin points out the cultural and spiritual premises which made national-socialism possible. In reality, the concept is not only employed in relation to Nazism: in the last chapter of the *New Science of Politics* Eric Voegelin defines contemporary society as a society suffering from a serious and complex form of "pneumopathology" (Voegelin 2000, 225). This "pneumopathology" is one of the most important analytical concepts of Eric Voegelin's philosophy. In his opinion, it is a "pathological" spiritual situation that can become socially dominant to the point of compromising the spiritual health of the individual and, under certain conditions, the very survival of society: it is "the mood of late, disintegrating societies that no

longer are willing to fight for their existence” (*ibid.*). What are we talking about here?

First of all, pneumopathology is a *morbus animi*, a disease that must not be confused with a psychopathology: what is sick is not the mind (*Verstand*) but rather the spirit. Individuals are psychologically healthy but spiritually sick. The pneumopathological situation is a “state of alienation”, or “deformation” that culminates in the “loss of the sense of reality”. Voegelin describes the consequences of suffering from this disease as follows: “The man, thus, no longer lives in reality, but in a false image of reality, which claims however to be the genuine reality”. (Voegelin 1999, 108). Replacing authentic reality with that second reality, man starts living in conformity with it and becomes “resistant” to the demands and stimuli of the former. The escape from reality or the production of a fictitious reality is achieved through language as its principal instrument. Language is the main expression and also the main carrier of spiritual pathology –it is, thus, at the same time the main “seismograph” of it. This explains why the witnesses and interpreters of pneumopathological situations are literary men like Musil, Doderer, Flaubert, and Karl Kraus. They have all described the manifestations of pathological consciousness in a greater way. Voegelin attributes the invention of the expression “second reality” to Heimito von Doderer (*ibid.*, 108).

“Second reality” is a product of an ideology which, in Voegelin’s opinion, is a dogmatic system which claims to totally comprise reality. Any reality that does not fit the system, or, in other words, cannot possibly be included in its ideological patterns, is simply denied. The destruction of language is therefore the main characteristic of ideology, a pneumopathological form par excellence: “If anything is characteristic of ideologies and ideological thinkers, it is the destruction of language, sometimes at

the level of intellectual jargon of a high level of complication, sometimes on a vulgar level” (Voegelin 2006, 75). Through language, pneumopathological forms become dominant in a society to such an extent that the substitution of reality happens integrally and with “good conscience”.

Voegelin is here describing the stupid – in the “technical” sense he attributes to the term (Voegelin 1999, 97) – who are, of course, at the same time criminal: When the second reality produced by the deformation of language “pretends to become true” the “bloody grotesque” takes over, as National Socialism has demonstrated in a paradigmatic way. (Voegelin 1990, 162). Pneumopathology is the construction of a “second reality” that replaces reality completely. Evidently, there are no actors who can strategically use myth, since those who promote it are also plagued by the same pneumopathology.

Apart from the impossibility of a strategic use of myth, Voegelin’s interpretation seems to be aligned with that of Edelmann, Bouchard and classic political science: myths are opposed to reality and reality is the yardstick for language, myth and ideology. Pneumopathology and mystification of reality are two aspects of the same phenomenon. However, according to Voegelin, “reality” does not coincide with the world of interests and of the struggle for the allocation of assets and goods.

What, then, is political reality? In his lecture, *What is Political Reality?* (*ibid.*, 143 ff.) at the annual convention of the Deutsche Vereinigung für Politische Wissenschaft in 1965, Voegelin addresses the problem starting from the connection between reality and science, thus from the cognitive claims that political science makes regarding reality.

The “Sciences” that claim to give objective knowledge are many: Positivism, Marxism, German Historicism, American

behaviourism, “scientific” communism – they all claim to create a “science”. In fact: “In the ideological climate of our time, the term science has become a *topos* designed to lend prestige to a variety of non-noetic interpretations of social order” (*ibid.*, 146). The dominant social model of “science” is found in the natural sciences that separate the subject of consciousness from its object which is known. “Political science” cannot adopt the model of natural sciences. In the political field, the relationship between science and reality is very specific, because political reality is structured by the knowledge addressed to the same object (*ibid.*, 144). In other words: there is no Archimedean point from which reality can be observed; the consciousness of the observer is itself part of reality. Bearing this in mind, Voegelin deals with the problem of the conditions under which we can speak about “reality”. Here, we again find Morin’s “radicality” being philosophically articulated by Voegelin.

According to Voegelin, “reality” in its objective structure was discovered by noetic knowledge, starting from the critical review of the categories on which the order of thought and society too are founded. Noetic knowledge is knowledge developed by the “great thinkers”, who radicalise philosophical inquiry to the point of competing with the dominant conceptions of the order.

In fact, noetic knowledge deals with a field that is not free: it is already occupied by the symbols of conceptual and political order. Morin would say that the field of the noosphere, psychosphere and sociosphere is always occupied.

For Voegelin, however, noetic knowledge creates a field of objectivity. He writes: “The earliest known case of a noetic interpretation, the case to which all later ones are linked, occurs in the context of Hellenic philosophy. There, noetic interpretation received the name of political science, the *episteme politike*” (*ibid.*, 145). *Episteme politike*, however, does not mean that reality is

“objective”. Specific knowledge comes from a state of consciousness, called noetic – it creates a field of objectivisation. This specific type of consciousness is associated with the philosophical experience of the Greek philosophers.

It is a historically and qualitatively new experience. It is the experience described by Plato and Aristotle, who radicalise the question of being in search of its foundation, of *arche* (*ibid.*, 148). Here, Morin’s radicality fills with content.

Aristotle describes the experience of noetic consciousness: “man finds himself in a condition of ignorance (*agnoia, amathia*) with regard to the ground of order (*aition, arche*) of his existence (...) From questioning restlessness there arises man’s desire to know (*ton eidenai oregontai*). The restless search (*zetesis*) for the ground of all being is divided in two components: the desire of grasping (*oregesthai*) for the goal and knowledge (*noein*)” (*ibid.*).

The description of this philosophical experience – which we can also find in Plato (*ibid.*, 154) – shows an objective structure which, however, cannot be objectified³. In this experience consciousness, interpreted as tension towards the ground and the foundation, discovers itself. Consciousness perceives itself as a reality that lives in this tension and is itself part of the foundation. The symbols of noesis refer to the experience that they interpret⁴. Voegelin writes: “The endeavor of consciousness to interpret its own logos shall be called noetic exegesis” (*ibid.*, 148). Discovering itself, noetic

³ “Let us, therefore, repeat once again: The tension toward the ground is the material structure of consciousness but not an object for propositions; rather it is a process of consciousness having degrees of transparency for itself.” *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴ “The symbols of the noetic exegesis) are developed as terms in the process of meditation, in which the noetic experience interprets itself. The symbols of *noesis* relate, objective-wise, to the experience which they are interpreting.” *Ibid.*, 152.

consciousness restructures the image of reality.⁵ “Human consciousness comes to light as the reality of experience and the source of the images of reality” (*ibid.*, 173). The reality which is brought to light by noetic consciousness cannot, therefore, be objectified. Voegelin asserts: “Reality is not a thing that man confronts but the encompassing reality in which he himself is real as he participates”. Further: “Real is the participation of things in each other within the encompassing reality” (*ibid.*, 163). In short, reality must remain tied to the experience of noetic participation between man and the foundations. “If propositions (...) are detached from the perspective of reality of the noetic experience, they come out not only as false propositions about the pole but also destroy the existential tension of consciousness and thus the center of human order” (*ibid.*, 173). The reality of noetic consciousness is an experience that has been lived and described and that everyone is called upon to repeat. It is an individual experience that may or may not become socially dominant.

Thus, reality as field of objectification produced by consciousness is given in relation to the degree of truth that consciousness achieves. Reality then is not constant: there are images of reality, drafts of reality, and also surrogates of reality (*ibid.*, 165).

What relationship does noetic consciousness have with myth? Doesn't Voegelin reproduce the classic opposition between myth and logos? The answer is no. Noetic experience cannot be entirely detached from myth: “Our knowledge of order remains primarily mythical even after the noetic exegesis has made its logos explicit” (*ibid.*, 150). What changes is the level of consciousness: radical thought knows that it is just that: “As we contrast the philosophical image of being [with] the mythical one of reality, we obviously do

⁵ “Aristotle was fully aware of this restructuring of reality, from the image of a cosmos to that of a world, as a result of the noetic experience.” *Ibid.*, 159.

not wish to say that it is reality that has changed, but rather only our image of reality” (*ibid.*, 165). The constant data of reality are better understood by the philosopher than by the mythologist. This does not mean that myth is not necessary: There are no societies with only a noetic self-understanding; nevertheless, only the noetic experience enables us to distinguish various degrees of truth, to exercise, in short, a critical function. The same radicality, which according to Morin simply induced the transition from one Paradigm to the next, in Voegelin is crystallised in critical thought, pushing the limits where paradigms take form (without being able to emancipate itself from them). Here, it becomes possible to distinguish myths from the distortions and the forms of disintegration of reality. The different content of truth enables us to formulate judgments on myths without exiting the sphere of myth.

V

Conclusion

From the analysis we can see that the myth gives rise to complex problems regarding reality. Even though the idea that myths play an important role in political reality is widely shared, the theoretical approaches differ substantially: According to the scientific model initiated by Comte and subsequently articulated in elaborate methodologies of political sciences, no cognitive value can be attributed to the myth. The function that can be attributed to it is psycho-social, as Edelman teaches. It is evident that the purpose of the myth is exclusively confined to the instrumental use of it made by actors characterised by superior cognitive understanding, and thus the ability to produce real effects. Reality is the solid basis upon which the efficiency of its action is proven.

On the other hand, the constructivist approach accentuated in the most radical theses of so-called post-modernism we mentioned, has challenged exactly this concept of reality, thus repositioning the role of the myth. The lines blur between rationality and myth, which increasingly takes the form of Paradigm, of hidden sovereign, of a premise tacitly (and not consciously) shared by all knowledge, or of a “naturalised” social category. The idea of a reality independent from epistemology is, in fact, denied. Science is, as a consequence, itself a myth, as Bouchard confirms. It becomes difficult to distinguish between reality and “pseudo-reality”, virtual reality, and (bad) political myth.

It is at this point that Voegelin’s realism acquires particular theoretical interest. Political Reality, according to Voegelin, is not a product of dominating social categories or common sense, nor is it the object of scientific investigation aimed at identifying causal links and allowing effective actions. This concept of science is the product of a substantial reduction of reality and lies upon tacit premises of ethos and anthropology. Political Reality is unravelled by challenging social categories, by the dominant culture and the current political order: It shows itself in the philosophical challenge and the experience the challenge represents. According to Voegelin, experience can only be individual. The reality of Voegelin unfolds in a knowledge horizon only the philosopher can give, revitalising the sources of thinking. This is a task of critical knowledge that constructs continuity, reconnecting current experiences to those of the past in an age where reality seems to dissolve into the hyper-reality of mass communication.

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