Towards a Philosophy of Political Myth¹

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Abstract: This article argues for the need for philosophical reflection on political myth. It does so by addressing the twofold question “Why philosophy?” and “Why political myth?” The first part of the essay examines the ways that political philosophy could contribute to a better understanding of political myth. In particular, it proposes to look at political myth as a process rather than as an object, and to define it as the work of a common narrative, which grants significance to the political experience and deeds of a social group. In light of this definition, the second part addresses the subsequent question: “Why political myth and not other related concepts such as history, utopia or ideology?”

Social scientists have long emphasised the political role played by myths and other forms of a-rational discourse. Anthropologists, as external observers catapulted into foreign regions of the world, have always dealt with them, perhaps because they found themselves in the best possible position to perceive them. The presence of myth among primitive populations could easily appear as a consequence of their “primitiveness,” and the fact that politics could hardly be separated from religion.² Historians and sociologists have also devoted an important part of their work to the symbolic dimension of politics. Suffice it to think of Bloch’s The Royal Touch or Weber’s works on charisma.³

In the last few decades, interest in the symbolic and mythical dimension of politics has further increased. For a variety of reasons, different disciplines have

¹ I am grateful to the participants to the “Philosophy and the Social Sciences” Colloquium, which took place in Prague on May 10-15, 2007, for their positive feedback and helpful criticism on an earlier draft of this article.
been pointing out that we are all so to speak “primitive.” When anthropologists started to look at modern societies by applying to them their own methodological apparatus for the study of myth, the very dichotomy “primitive” versus “modern” came under attack. In particular, the recent rise of identity politics and the revival of nationalism have rendered manifest that myths are an important component of politics, even in contemporary modern societies.

Political myths not only exist, but they are also theorized about. While social scientists recognize the need for discussing them, political philosophy seems to be reluctant to do so. This article calls attention to the need for a philosophical reflection on political myth, and it does so by addressing the twofold question: “Why philosophy?” and “Why political myth?” In the first section, I will explore the potential contribution of a philosophical approach firstly by addressing the weaknesses of available theories, and secondly by advancing some suggestions as to the possible ways to overcome them (§.1). In proceeding to the question “Why political myth?” I will argue that it is by drawing insights from the previously sketched philosophical approach that we can arrive at a better understanding of the nature of political myths and the role they play in our contemporary world (§.2). By looking at political myth as a process of elaboration of a common narrative that provides significance to the political conditions and actions of a social group, we can for instance explain why a theory such as that of the clash between civilizations, which has been so strongly criticised as too simplistic and naive, has nevertheless become such a powerful lens through which people see the world, act, and feel about it (§.2). Finally, I will address the further question “Why political myth and not other related concepts such as history, ideology, or utopia?” by arguing that these three concepts refer to only partially overlapping phenomena and must therefore be kept separated (§.3).

1. The “Work on Myth”

Despite the recent increase of studies on political myth, there is not a consolidated framework on this topic yet. Indeed, while there is an ever-growing number of works dealing with specific case studies – suffice it to think of the long series of studies on myth and nationalism – there are very few theoretical works on it. Common language does not contribute towards a better understanding of these phenomena, because it predominantly depicts myth as

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a purely fictitious narrative, as is evidenced in expressions such as “the myth of welfare” or “the myth of progress.” These expressions implicitly suggest that “myths” are simply false, and it is from the point of view of their claim to truth that we must examine them. As I will argue, this widespread attitude is misleading, because it originates from a positivist view of language that looks at it as if words were always aimed at describing facts or advancing claims to truth.

Yet, the philosophy of language of the last fifty years (at least) has been pointing out rather convincingly that human beings perform through language a number of actions that are not aimed at advancing any claim to truth. As Wittgenstein clearly argued, we do a number of things with language that are not “true” or “false” in any meaningful sense, because they do not aim to advance theories about the constitution of the world. For example, are we mistaken when we invoke our absent love and kiss her picture? These are actions that cannot be said to be true or false: we know that she is not there and cannot hear us, but utter her name for other purposes. In these instances we simply want to do something different from describing what is true. As I will try to show, myths are also best analyzed as one of these “other” things that we do with language.

This attitude towards myth, which is so rooted in common language, has an impact on theories of political myth as well. Even when the few available theories, such as those put forth by Flood and Lincoln, recognize that not all political myths are “false,” they nonetheless treat political myth as an object, and, in particular, as one that advances a claim to truth. This is perhaps due to the fact that both Lincoln and Flood are political scientists who are interested more in constructing a theory that fits their single case studies than in the general philosophical framework of their theory. As a consequence, they remain linked to a view of language and truth that appears at best naive in the light of the philosophical developments of the last fifty years. Yet, what is at stake here is not simply adopting an updated philosophical conception of language and meaning, but the very understanding of the phenomena at hand.

Treating political myths as if they were advancing a claim to truth transports them to a terrain (that of science) that is not their own. Only when there is a theory can there be, properly speaking, a claim to truth that can be “falsified.” Both Flood and Lincoln fail to understand this and as a consequence they misunderstand the nature of political myth. Political myths are not theo-

ries about the constitution of the world. They do not aim to “describe” it, but rather, so to speak, to “create” their own world. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, they are self-fulfilling. Take the myth of the Aryan race from which the Nazi regime largely drew. This narrative lauded the glorious past of a purported Aryan race and insisted that this race was now in danger of disappearance as a consequence of marriages with other “inferior races.” There may not exist an Aryan race here and now and it may not even have existed in the past (I would deny that it did), but the point is that once you have created a forceful scientific and state apparatus to “select” such a race, you can easily create one – or at least the impression of its existence.

If political scientists work with an impoverished understanding of language and truth, the problem with more philosophical theories, such as Cassirer’s *The Myth of the State* or Wingo’s recent *Veil Politics*, is that they treat political myth under a category that is too general – in these cases that of the “mythical consciousness” and that of “veil politics.” But conflating myth with other forms of political symbolism can be both misleading and problematic. It is empirically misleading because it occults the fact that myths are symbols, but not all symbols are myths. Symbols are an *a priori* condition of all forms of communication, while myths are not. Even a mathematical proportion is a set of symbols, but nobody, or at least only very few (and certainly not Cassirer) would argue that it is a myth.

This is also normatively problematic, because by treating political myths together with other forms of political symbolism, one risks ending up in a generalized refusal of all forms of primitive consciousness (Cassirer) or in an equally problematic defense of all sorts of “veils” (Wingo). The first move is problematic, because this may be the case of the Nazi myth of the Aryan race upon which Cassirer constructs his theory, but does not hold for other non-totalitarian political myths. As Wingo argues, liberal democracies have their own political myths, such as that of the American founding fathers. And they may be compatible with the principle of individual autonomy. At the same time, to treat “political myth” under the general category of “veil politics,” like Wingo does, is equally problematic because, for instance, it is disputable whether the cult of national heroes, which Wingo mentions among the possible forms of veils, is compatible with the principle of individual autonomy. Even if such a cult meets the criterion of consensus from

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10 The fact that even liberal democracies have their own myths should not come as a surprise. The idea that our social world could be completely rationalised is the result of an enlightened attitude that may well turn into a myth in itself (C. Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 62-81).
all sectors of a nation, which is Wingo’s condition for admission into democratic liberal democracies, promoting the cult of heroes can still be contested depending on the way in which the consensus itself is reached.

A philosophical approach to political myth can contribute to clarifying both the concept of political myth and the more general philosophical framework that sustains such a concept. Furthermore, it can also help address the normative questions that arise with political myth. By reconstructing the more general theoretical framework for the use of the concept, a philosophy of political myth could indeed address both the questions “What are political myths?” and “How should we evaluate them?” The link between these two is the question of whether politics without myths would be possible at all. It could indeed be the case that we should not resort to mythical discourses, but cannot avoid them, because they are rooted in our nature. It is at this point, as I will try to show, that philosophy meets anthropology.

On the other hand, there seems to be something in our topic that renders it recalcitrant vis-à-vis a philosophical treatment. Perhaps it is not by chance that classical theories of political myth are mostly the result of reflection on specific examples. This holds true, for instance, for both Cassirer’s *The Myth of the State* and Sorel’s *Reflections on Violence*. The consequence is that both their theories remain too bound to their models, and consequently do not allow for generalization: are political myths a means for oppression, as Cassirer argues by analyzing the Nazi myth of the Aryan race, or for liberation, as Sorel claims for the proletarian general strike?

It seems that the same political myth can be a source of both oppression and liberation – depending on the context. For instance, Sorel’s myth of the class struggle has not always been a means for liberation. One only has to think of how this myth has been utilized by totalitarian regimes. This example points to what we can call the “particularistic” nature of political myth, to the fact that the same myth can have very different meanings according to the particular circumstances in which it operates. Political myth, as myth in general, expresses itself through variants: properly speaking, we never see a political myth at work, but always variants of it. Furthermore, what is a political myth for a certain group of people may well not be so for another, and, even for the same group, the same narrative can work as a political myth in certain circumstances but not in others.

If this particularistic nature of myth can help to explain the reluctance of political philosophy to analyze them, nevertheless, it should be emphasized that there is nothing *a priori* that prevents the development of a philosophy of political myth. On the contrary, there are good reasons to suspect that this

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topic would greatly benefit from the contribution of philosophy. By drawing inspiration from the philosophical insight that human beings perform a number of things with language, one may try to explain the particularistic nature of myth by looking at it as a process rather than as an object.

Indeed, a myth does not consist in a story that is given once and forever in a definitive form. Take the myth of Ulysses. Which of the many variants of this myth is the true one – the one that sees him happily coming back home or that which sees him swallowed up by the sea? It is intrinsic to the concept of myth that there can be variants. Properly speaking, a myth consists in the process of elaborating the possible variants of a story. This is what Hans Blumenberg tried to convey with his concept of Arbeit am Mythos, which literally means “work on myth.”

By “work on myth” I mean here a process of elaboration of a narrative core that answers a changing need for significance. This is the reason why myth necessarily expresses itself through variants and must be understood as a process: in each single context the same narrative pattern is re-appropriated by different needs and exigencies and it is to them that it has to responds. A narrative core either produces a variant that fulfils this task in the new context or it simply ceases to be a myth and becomes a mere narrative.

What is such a “need for significance?” The term “significance” denotes a space between a “simple meaning” and what we can call an “ultimate meaning.” Something can indeed have a meaning and be still completely indifferent to us – even though what is significant must also have a meaning in order to be named in the first place. Therefore, significance is more than mere meaning. There are many ways in which meaning can be generated (myth, science, religion), but what is specific of myth is that it also aims to provide significance. At the same time, what is significant need not answer the ultimate questions about the sense of life and the existence of an after life.

The need for significance is not the mere need for a meaningful world, because the world depicted by natural science is, for instance, a world that has a meaning, but, as one can easily experience, such a world of mathematical formulae may still remain completely insignificant to us.

At the same time, the need for significance is not necessarily the need for religion either, because something can be significant for a group without

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12 The first one is that described in the Odyssey, and the second is the variant endorsed by Dante in his Divine Comedy. I have analysed this myth in chapter 6 of my Philosophy of Political Myth (pp. 127–8).


14 As I have tried to argue elsewhere, Blumenberg elaborated the concept of “work on myth” mainly in reference to literary myths and did not specifically concentrate on the concept of political myth (Bottici, A Philosophy of Political Myth, p. 8).
answering the ultimate questions of life and death, like religion aspires to do.\footnote{15}{For this definition of religion as a matter of life and death, see for instance Cassirer, \textit{The Myth of the State}, p. 48, who recovers Malinowski.} Precisely because of its “ultimate” character, religion tends to produce a sacred history, and therefore crystallises into a canon, particularly in the case of monotheistic religions. The latter can certainly be interpreted, but not changed. This is the reason why there cannot be substantially differing variants of a sacred history, let us say, for example, the one that says that Jesus Christ resurrected after death and another that says the opposite. Any substantially differing narrative will immediately be stigmatized as “heresy,” so it can at best generate another faith. In other words, religion has a different attitude towards truth, which does not allow a plurality of stories to simply coexist one next to the other. It is implicit in the concept of faith that one believes in the particular story that is said to be sacred precisely because of its character as revealed truth.\footnote{16}{I have dealt with the difference between myth and religion more extensively in chapter 2 of my \textit{Philosophy of Political Myth}.} It is not by chance then that myth does not admit martyrs as religion does. The myths that have generated martyrs are precisely those myths that we define as “religious myths.” Still, a myth has something to offer to human beings, something that is qualitatively different from what both science and religion offer.

The human need for significance is ultimately derived from the peculiar position of human beings within the world in contrast to other species. By recovering a famous Nietzschean expression, Gehlen defined human beings as the “always not yet determined animals.”\footnote{17}{A. Gehlen, \textit{Man, his Nature and Place in the World}, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.} As Gehlen argues, human beings in contrast to other animals are not adapted to a specific environment and are therefore always \textit{noch nicht festgestellt}. Whereas other animals have a determinate relationship with their environment in the sense that they are adapted to it, human beings change the environment in which they live. This puts them in a very peculiar relationship with their living conditions.

In the first place, this condition generates culture. As Blumenberg also observed, when the pre-human creature was induced to avail itself of a bipedal posture and to leave the protection of a hidden way of life in the rain forest for the savannah, it exposed itself for the first time to the risks of a widened horizon of perception. This meant that the human creature was led to face the power of the unknown or “the absolutism of reality.”\footnote{18}{Blumenberg, \textit{The Work on Myth}, p. 1.} Being exposed to an always potentially different environment, human beings are subjected to a much higher number of stimulations from the outside world, from which...
they must seek relief, or Entlastung. Culture and language are means through which such relief can be obtained.

Secondly, the fact that human beings, in contrast to other animals, change their environment also means that they entertain a problematizing relationship with the conditions of their existence. Not only can they change them, but they can also raise questions about them. As a consequence, not only do human beings need meaning in order to master the unknown, but also they need significance in order to live in a world that is not indifferent to them. This is what Blumenberg meant when he wrote that “significance” is a form of defense against the indifference of the world.

Myth fights this indifference by inserting events within a narrative plot. Myth typically addresses the question “Whence?” rather than “Why?” As Kerényi has also pointed out, the function of myth is neither to provide a name for things nor to explain them, but, more specifically, to “ground” them. As he observed, the German language provides the exact word for this function: begründen. The word begründen, which can be translated into “to ground” or “to substantiate,” derives from the root Grund. “Grund” means both the English abstract noun “reason” and the concrete noun “ground.” Myths tell stories. They tell what the origins of things are and, therefore, simultaneously where they are going to. In this way, they provide a ‘ground.’

Three elements are therefore central to the concept of myth: process, narrative and significance. A myth is not simply a narrative because there are plenty of narratives that are not myths. Although an organized series of events suffices to qualify as a narrative, something more is needed so as to work as myth. A myth is a narrative that responds to a need for significance that changes over time. It is precisely because in order to be a myth it has to provide significance within changing circumstances that a myth is best understood as a process, as a “work on myth,” rather than as an object.

By drawing some provisional conclusions from the above discussion, we can already see what the potential contribution of a philosophical approach to political myth consists in. In the first place, it can help clarify the more general framework for the use of the concept of myth, addressing both the questions “What are myths?” and “Why do we need them?” By looking at myth as a process, it also enables us to highlight the particularistic nature of myths, as well as to differentiate them from mere theories about the world.

19 Gehlen, Man, his Nature and Place in the World.
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Only a theory, properly speaking, advances a claim to truth, and can therefore be falsified, but this is not so with a process. This does not mean that political myths are always good and beneficial. It simply means that truth and falsity are not the criteria according to which they should be judged.

In the second place, a philosophy of political myth can also help in facing the normative questions that arise in the use of myth. Myths stem from a need for significance that is deeply rooted in the specifically human way of relating to the world. Their production is the result of a function of the human mind, which is neutral per se. As a consequence, myths cannot be said to be a priori good or bad. As we will see, their evaluation depends upon the circumstances. The question now turns: What happens when we come to politics?

2. Political Myth

A political myth is the work on a common narrative, which grants significance to the political conditions and experiences of a social group. What makes a political myth out of a simple narrative is neither its claim to truth, nor its content, as Tudor maintains. For instance, there is nothing political per se in the fact that the world is about to disappear. Notwithstanding this, as Tudor himself recognizes, the narrative of the millennium, which stems from this idea, worked as a political myth, and as a powerful one in certain contexts.

What makes a political myth out of a narrative is 1) the fact that it coagulates and reproduces significance, 2) that a given group shares in it, and 3) that it can address the specifically political conditions in which a given group lives. A political myth must respond to a need for significance because otherwise it would be a mere narrative and not a myth, and it must be shared because it must address the specifically political conditions of a social group. A political myth is not only therefore the result of already defined social groups, but it can also be the means for their construction, provided that certain conditions are met (i.e. that a given narrative is able to provide significance to the member of that social group and that this need is shared). In other words, political myths can be both the result of an already existing identity as well as the means to create an identity yet to come.

One can define politics in the more general sense of whatever pertains to the polis, to the decision concerning the fate of a community, or, stricly...
sensu, as the specific form of power that is characterized by the threat of recourse to legitimate coercion. In both cases, politics concerns the life in common and this is ultimately the reason why in order to be political a myth must be shared.

The first consequence of this definition of political myth is that, to paraphrase Gramsci, political myths are not a “piece of paper.” The work of a political myth cannot be reduced to the stories that we read in our books and archives. These are only some of the products of the “work on myth.” In order to establish whether a narrative is a political myth or not, we must look not only at its production, but also at its reception, at the way in which it is shared. It is the whole cycle of production–reception–reproduction that constitutes the “work on myth.”

The second consequence is that political myths are not usually learned once and for all, but rather are apprehended through a cumulative exposure to them. Significance locates itself between what is consciously learnt and what is unconsciously apprehended. This also explains the condensational power of political myths, their capacity to condensate into a few images or “icons.” By means of a synecdoche, any object or gesture – a painting, an image, a song, a film, or an advertisement – can recall the whole “work on myth” that lies behind it. This is also the reason why it is often very difficult to analyze them: the work on a political myth takes place through icons that allusively refer to the given narrative, instead of explicitly conveying it.

The third consequence is that the “work on a political myth” is a process that can occur in drastically diverse settings: speeches, arts (both visual and not), rituals, social practices. The possible sites for the work on a political myth are countless: all social activities and practices can become vehicles for this work as long as they can host the work on a narrative that responds to a need for significance. This pervasiveness is exponentially augmented in contemporary societies. Due to the role of media in our life in general and of politics in particular, we are exposed to a potentially indefinite number of icons. As Barthes already observed many years ago, political myths can be conveyed through all sorts of fragmentary references, images, and watchwords.

26 This is quite a widespread view of politics. Among the most influential supporters, see for instance M. Weber, *Economy and Society*, Berkley: University of California Press, 1978, Book I, § 17, IV §1, 2.
28 Flood, *Political Myth*.
29 In Barthes’ definition, however, political myth corresponds to ideology (R. Barthes, *Mythologies*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1972). As a consequence, he reduced the “work on myth” to a phenomenon limited to bourgeois society and argued that proletarians have no myths, whereas, as we have seen, myth rather seems to stem from a universal need for significance.
All this has further increased what has been called the “primacy effect” of political myth. By slipping into our unconsciousness, political myths can deeply influence our basic and most fundamental perceptions of the world, and thus escape the possibility of critical scrutiny. If political myths have always been difficult to analyze, precisely because the work on significance can take place at a more or less conscious level, then the recent emergence of powerful new technologies has rendered the work on political myth less and less perceivable, and therefore more subtle. Indeed, political myths have become the unperceived lenses through which we experience the world and for this reason they tend to remain unquestioned.

All these features are shared by most contemporary political myths. Among them, national political myths, such as the myth of the American Founding Fathers, that of the French Revolution, or that of the Italian “Resistance” against Nazi-Fascism have been analyzed at length by social theorists. What I want to do here is to illustrate these features of political myth through the analysis of a contemporary example that is particularly relevant today, also because it is a potentially global political myth: the myth of the clash between civilizations. So then, why is the idea of a “clash between civilizations” best analyzed as a political myth?

Surely the idea of a clash between civilizations is also something else, in the first place a scientific theory. But if we limit ourselves to criticize it as if it were only a scientific theory, then we would miss the point, because we neglect where the power of this narrative actually lies. There is indeed a striking gap between the ways in which this narrative was received as a scientific theory and as a narrative through which people more or less unconsciously look at the world. When it first was proposed by Huntington in the 1990s, the idea of a clash between civilizations was strongly criticized as too simplistic, and scientifically naïve to render the complexities of world politics. Yet, particularly after September 11 and the terrorist attacks in Europe, this narrative became one of the most powerful lenses through which many people look at and feel about the world.

Various surveys of the way in which these terrorist attacks have been framed in both US and European media shows that this motif of a clash

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30 Flood, Political Myth.
31 See, for instance, A. D. Smith, Myths and Memories of the Nation, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000 and Stråth (ed.), Myth and Memory in the Construction of the Community.
between civilizations played a central role. After those tragic events, this narrative came to coagulate the emotional shock that they provoked and provided significance to the political conditions of very different people across the globe. What are the reasons of such success? How can a theory that has been so strongly criticized as too naive turn into a successful political myth?

To answer these questions we must not only focus on the production of such a myth, but also on the whole cycle of production-reception-reproduction. Only by looking at political myths as processes can we understand how it is possible to criticize the idea of the clash as a scientific theory and yet still endorse it at another level. The reason why it was easy for the media to frame the terrorist attacks as a clash between Islam and the West is that there has been a whole work on this myth that started long before 2001 – a work that took place at both the conscious and unconscious level. As a result of such a work, in the face of the terrorist attacks people were keener to perceive “civilizations” clashing with each other (no matter if they exist or not), rather than grappling to understand single individual human beings acting out of a more or less complex set of motivations.

Intellectual discourses have played a central role in this work. Even if the narrative of the clash between civilizations has strongly been criticized (although not by everybody), pieces of this narrative have been circulating unquestioned in the literature for quite a while. For instance, specialized literature on the Middle East has long since portrayed the Muslim world as a radical “Other.” The idea that Islam is a religion more fanatical than any other, or that it is fundamentally hostile to modernity, is part of a long tradition of Orientalist discourses. Orientalism is a mechanism at work in social sciences, literature, music, and visual arts, whereby the Orient becomes the mirror of what the Occident is not. Through such a mechanism, the variety of a multifaceted experience is reduced to a fixed and immutable block, the Orient, which, as its very geographical definition shows, can only exist as a negative reflex of an Occident perceived as the starting point. Discourses about a presumed “Arab mind,” depicted as violent, backward, and resistant to civic order or about Islam as being intrinsically violent are examples of such an Orientalist approach. The result is a Eurocentric and negatively biased representation of the other, through which Islam is portrayed as a fixed blueprint that determines an entire way of life of hundreds of millions of Muslims.

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all over the world. This does not mean that political myths and stereotypes are one and the same thing, but simply that stereotyped views of the other can at times be an important component of a political myth.

Intellectual discourses could never have produced a political myth without the additional work that took place at the unconscious level. The condensational capacity of a political myth is particularly evident in the power of the icons that are transmitted in the media. Images such as the Marianne voilée, which appeared in Figaro Magazine already on October 26, 1985, are much more powerful conveyers of the myth of the clash between civilizations than any overt statement: by representing the female symbol of the French Republic wearing the Muslim veil, Orientalist discourses about the incompatibility between Islam and modernity are recalled by means of a synecdoche and given a deep psychological underpinning.

Further examples of icons can be taken from the section “A Nation Challenged” that the New York Times launched immediately after 9/11. Articles appearing in this section had titles such as “Yes, this is about Islam,” “Jihad 101,” “Barbarians at the Gates,” “The Age of Muslim Wars,” “This is a Religious War;” and were accompanied by pictures of religiously tainted atrocities, hate, and fanaticism. For instance, the last of the articles mentioned above was illustrated with pictures of atrocities from Medieval Europe. “Crusades” have become another crucial icon: within a few years, they have turned from an historical event of interest only for few specialized historians into a popular object of consumption. Films, exhibitions, publications devoted to them started to proliferate. The link between the medieval crusades and the terrorist attacks was made patent by both intellectual discourses and politicians.

This work did not fail to produce its impact on politicians' discourses. Former US President George W. Bush denied on many occasions that a clash between civilizations was taking place, but he nonetheless from the very beginning associated the “war on terrorism” with a crusade. In this way, he implicitly suggested it was in fact about a clash between Islam and the West. We see here a perfect example of how it is possible to explicitly deny the paradigm of the clash between civilizations and still endorse it at a more subconscious level as political myth. The result of such a work in this case is that people act as if a clash between civilizations was taking place, and therefore make it real.

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39 See Bottici and Challand, “Rethinking Political Myth.”
40 Ibid.
If we want to understand how it is possible to criticize the paradigm of the clash as a theory and still endorse it at a more or less subconscious level, then we need to turn to the concept of political myth. All these icons are much more powerful precisely because they tend to slip into our unconsciousness without it being possible to openly perceive them. In the process of growing up in contemporary societies that are inundated by media stimuli, most people encounter an overwhelming number of myths that gradually slip into their subconscious thinking. To provide a final example, young children are exposed to a battery of more or less subconscious stimuli through comics, cartoons, films, and advertisements. A recent survey of America’s most popular children’s comics, such as Superman, Spiderman, and Capitan America has shown that the icon of the “fanatic Muslim” has become recently one of the most powerful images of the “threat.” After the end of the cold war the role of the “bad guys” of the stories ceased to be played by perfidious Eastern bloc spies, and assumed the features of Muslims, explicitly depicted as fanatic mad terrorists.41

To sum up, political myths are mapping devices through which we look at the world, come to feel about it, and also to act within it as a social group. Political myths cannot be falsified because they are not scientific hypotheses or astrological almanacs that foretell the future. The practical dimension of a political myth cannot, however, be separated from what we can call its cognitive and its aesthetic dimension. Political myths provide fundamental cognitive schemata for the mapping of a social world: by reducing the complexity of experience, they enable us to come to terms with the multifaceted character of the world we live in. And it is on the basis of such mapping devices that we also act and feel about the world. This, in turn, points to the aesthetic dimension of myth, to the fact that political myths are narratives of events cast in a dramatic form. It is from the articulation of such a drama that the pathos of a political myth stems.

It should now be clear why political myths cannot be approached from the point of view of their claim to truth. They are the expression of a determination to act that can always potentially reinforce itself. This, on the other hand, does not mean that we have no other criteria according to which they can be judged. We should judge them as ways for acting in the present – and not as descriptions of the current state of affairs.

Certainly this practical assessment is particularly difficult because political myths largely sit in the unconscious. There is therefore no single identifiable myth-maker that can be held to be accountable for them. Still, as I have tried

42 I am using “aesthetical” in the sense of the term of “what is felt.” This use of the term goes back to the Greek aesthetike, “pertaining sensation.”
to argue elsewhere, judgment is possible (and also desirable) by looking at the models of conduct that they exhibit. By following the fourth part of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, I have proposed to call them *exemplars* of human nature and suggested that we should not understand them in abstract terms, but for the way in which they are received and reinterpreted in each specific context.\(^{43}\)

In other words, we must not forget that political myths are processes rather than objects. We should look at the their production-reception-reproduction, and therefore at the role that this whole “work on myth” plays within a given social group. Political myths stem from an intrinsic feature of the human mind and cannot be said to be good or bad *per se*, but what we can (and should) do is to judge them as a means for opening up the possibility of critique within every single context. Indeed if all societies partake in one way or another in the work on political myths, they nevertheless differ in the degree to which this mythical dimension is the result of what following Castoriadis we can call the “radical imagination.”\(^{44}\) Political myths can be the terrain of a radical imagination that advances a *critique* of the existing social order by disclosing alternatives to it, but they can also be the means for closing up the work of the imagination by making people believe that things are *a certain way* and cannot be otherwise.

In other words, we must judge whether the work on political myth opens or closes the possibility of interrogating the social order. The question of how such questioning is possible is rendered even more complicated by the fact that the work on political myth is never pure, but is always interwoven with other kinds of discourses. It is not only difficult to locate the work on political myth, and individuate those who are responsible for it, but we must also distinguish it from the other kinds of discourses in which it is most often wrapped up.

For example, religious political myths are typically myths that aspire to provide an ultimate meaning and unique truth: this is true, for example, of the ancient Jewish theocracy that Spinoza analyzed,\(^{45}\) as well as for the contemporary myth of martyrdom, against which Palestinian suicide attacks can be read.\(^{46}\) Typically, these are political myths that operate a closure of interrogation and thus escape the possibility of critical discussion. To say “this is the revealed truth, this is the will of God” often amounts to saying “you cannot imagine otherwise.”

\(^{43}\) Bottici, *Philosophy of Political Myth*, ch. 8.


Scientific political myths are instead myths that present a narrative of events intermingled with chains of cause and effect relationships. For example, the myth of the Aryan race that Cassirer analyzed at length was based on a *mélange* of narrative and scientific claims, such as that of the biological superiority of such a race. Similarly, many contemporary nationalist myths of descent are intermingled with biological claims. By presenting specific claims as scientifically sanctioned “findings,” instead of simply probable and always falsifiable theories, scientific political myths can also preclude the possibility of questioning.

Finally, there are historical political myths. In this case, political myths are fused with historical narratives. Historical political myths are narratives that produce significance and that can come to affect political conditions (and, as we will see, this is the reason why even if at times they may coincide with historical narratives they must be conceptually distinguished). For instance, most national myths, such as the Italian Resistance against Nazifascism or the French Revolution, are derived from historical narratives. In these cases, narratives are given visibility since they can be put in the form of a “rationalized memo,” the set of information about and accounts of the past as contained in archives, processed in the form of written or visualized narratives that are accessible on demand. As a consequence, the “work on myth” can here be more easily located and formalized. But the possibility of an actual critical discussion depends on the awareness that historical narratives are also in principle always revisable and the degree to which their mythical elaboration allows for this awareness to emerge.

Each of the types of political myths described above brings further considerations to the fore, and therefore also calls for different tools of evaluation: the very possibility of an ultimate meaning in the face of a plurality of sacred stories, the correctness of scientific theory with regard to the current paradigms, or the accuracy of the historical reconstruction with regard to available methods of research. All of them must be taken into consideration in each specific context in order to determine the degree of openness to further elaboration and discussion. Political myths have to remain open to elaboration, because they must provide significance to changing circumstances. When they attempt a closure of meaning, then no more work is possible; and consequently, the myths in question cannot be revised, but only dismissed together with the political regimes that produced them. Well known examples include the myth of Jewish theocracy, the myth of the Aryan race, and the Italian fascist myth of the Roman Empire.

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47 Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*.  
At this point in the argument one could still object that it is the very concept of political myth that should be disregarded. Even if philosophy can contribute to a better understanding of it, one could argue that the phenomena associated with the concept of political myth are, in fact, better conceptualized through other similar concepts. The task of this last section is to spell out in what ways the concept of political myth we have discussed here differs from other related concepts with which it has been traditionally associated, such as history, ideology, and utopia. Differentiating concepts does not mean to oppose them; rather, as we will see, once we have distinguished among them, the next step consists in seeing possible connections and overlaps.

The fact that political myths are almost always intertwined with other kinds of discourse helps us understand why it has been given so little attention in philosophical debates. There cannot be a single and identifiable myth-maker, because political myths are processes that sit in the unconscious. As a consequence, political myths live of the most diverse social practices, among which are also the activities of writers, philosophers, historians and scientists. It is within them that they somehow tend to get lost from our sight.

Narratives such as the American or the French Revolution are neither pure myths nor pure historical events. They can work as both, and we must accordingly analyse them with the most appropriate tools. Even if there rarely are pure historians, what at least our modern historians do, and what we expect them to do, when they present their historical narratives, is to refer to a method. This requires them to base their narratives on documents and testimonies, i.e. on other (in principle revisable) narratives that are part of the rationalized memory. On the contrary, a myth does not rest on other evidences: its capacity to address the present conditions and to respond to the need for significance is a sufficient condition for survival. Political myths are expressions of a desire to act and not to accurately reconstruct the past. If they look at the past they do so from the perspective of a “politics of the past” that is directly aimed at producing an action in the present.

Thus, even if some historical narratives have worked in certain contexts as political myths, there are plenty of historical narratives that are not political myths – we do not even need to provide single examples: just consider all the narratives that do not provide significance, but leave us completely indifferent. This is sufficient for keeping historical and mythical narratives separate at the ideal-typical level.49

49 Bottici, A Philosophy of Political Myth, pp. 203–226.
While there is now a vast literature that discusses the relationship between political myth and historical narratives, much less attention has been devoted to its relationship with other concepts that are often assimilated to political myth. Here we will focus on two of them: utopia and ideology. These are indeed the two concepts with which political myth can be conflated. As we will see, however, notwithstanding the important interconnections between them, political myth, ideology, and utopia must be kept analytically separated and used to address only partially overlapping social phenomena.

As it has been observed by different sides, notwithstanding the multi-faceted varieties of the possible uses of the term ideology, we can distinguish two main semantic cores. The first is what we can call the “polemical” concept of ideology, which denotes a form of false consciousness or disguises of the reality of fact. This use of the term was first inaugurated by Napoleon, who used it to criticize the abstract ideal of “les idéologues” in contrast to the reality of facts, and was most influentially used in this sense by Marx and Engels. The second is a neutral one that denotes a set of ideas by which human beings posit, understand, and justify their social action.

Many authors have treated political myth as a form of ideology in the polemical sense. Two classical examples of the attempt to deal with political myths under the heading of “ideology” in this way are Raymond Aron’s *The Opium of the Intellectuals* and Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*. The problem with both these attempts is that, by counterpoising myth and ideology with the “reality” of facts, one is trapped once again in an approach to political myth in terms of its claim to truth – and, as we have seen, this is a crucially misleading.

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53 This is a slightly different version of Flood’s definition (Flood, *Political Myth*, p. 13).

If we take the second meaning of the term, the discussion of its relationship with political myth becomes more fruitful. A political myth additionally entails a set of ideas by which human beings posit and represent the ends and means of social action. Both myth and ideology are mapping devices that ultimately derive from the fact that human beings are “not yet determined” or, to put it in Geertz’ words “self-completing animals,” who need cognitive templates to orient themselves in the world. On the other hand, as I will try to show, not all such sets of templates constitute a political myth.

In order for an ideology to constitute a political myth, two further conditions must also be met. First, this set of ideas must take the form of a narrative, of a series of events cast in a dramatic form. And not all ideologies share this characteristic. For instance, ideologies can have the structure of a scientific theory, rather than a narrative form. In other words, as the etymology of the term suggest, ideologies are “ideas” cast in the form of the “logos,” of a rational argument, rather than in that of narrative. Certainly the two may at times overlap: for instance, the myth of the Aryan race was a combination of scientific and narrative elements. And, in practice, it was both a political myth and an ideology. But there are examples of ideology, such as the so-called contemporary neo-liberal ideology, which are not based on a narrative.

Furthermore, for a narrative to work as a political myth, it must also be able to coagulate and reproduce significance. Not all ideologies do so. To put it bluntly, political myths are always narratives staging a drama. It is from the sentiment of being part of such a drama that the specific pathos of a political myth stems. Even the abstract calculations of the single mind of an intellectual can provide an ideology, but this is not yet, and not necessarily, a political myth.

In a similar vein, political myth must also be kept analytically distinct from utopia. Despite the fact that, from a variety of points of view, political myths also resemble utopias and sometimes overlap with them, they must not be conflated. To assimilate them can only be misleading and impoverishing for social and political philosophy. Many authors have dealt with political myth under the heading of utopia. Most of them did so by understanding political myth as a general state of the mind that is incongruous with the reality within which it occurs. A utopia is, lato sensu, the description of an unrealizable state of things.

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56 Many contemporary theorists of political myth insist on this point: see Tudor, Political Myth and Flood, Political Myth.
57 On utopia, particularly from the point of view of the social and political utopias, see A. Maffey, “Utopia,” in Bobbio, Matteucci and Pasquino (eds.), Dizionario di Politica, pp. 1214-1220;
For instance, Mannheim and more recently Ricoeur held that the utopian mentality works in opposition to the status quo and aims at its disintegration, whereas ideology, even when it does not precisely correspond to the status quo, nevertheless tends towards its preservation, because it is congruous with it. In other words, utopias are revolutionary because they tend to burst the boundaries of the existing order, whereas ideologies are always conservative.\(^{58}\)

However, to define utopian thinking and political myth together, as an expression of a form of mentality that is altogether incongruous with the reality from which it generates, means to fall once more into the trap of approaching myth from the point of view of its claim to truth. Political myth cannot be defined in relation to its congruence or incongruence with social reality. Not all political myths are revolutionary, in as much as not all ideologies, at least as we have defined them, are conservative. Starting from such a characterization of the utopian mentality, it is impossible to grasp the differences between political myth, utopia, and ideology.

However, if by “utopia” we understand \textit{stricto sensu} the literary genus that was inaugurated by Thomas More’s \textit{Utopia}, then similarities and differences between this genus and political myth come to light. This literary genre, which extends from More to the negative utopia of Orwell’s \textit{1984} through authors such as Campanella, Fontenelle and Fourier, is precisely characterized by the narrative form in which it casts the description of the \textit{eu} or \textit{ou-topos} — “the place that is good, but also nowhere,” according to the fortunate ironical expression coined by More.\(^{59}\) Typically, the description of the perfect or ideal society is transmitted by a traveler relaying his discovery of this \textit{eu/ou-topos} (good/no-place), which is classically an island or at least a territory isolated from other societies.

It is not just the narrative form that unites political myth and utopias. Both play what we can call a regulative function, where by “regulative” I mean the capacity of ideas to serve as guiding ideals independent of their being constitutive of the world of phenomena. Utopias are a form of “secularized theodicy”\(^{60}\) that address the problem of evil in societies by counterpoising


\(^{59}\) The problem of the meaning of the neologism coined by More was a big problem for the interpreters of More from the very first years of its publication: \textit{U-topia} can mean \textit{Eu-topia} (the good place) or the \textit{Ou-topia} (the no-place). Indeed, Thomas More himself seems to allow both interpretations (Th. More, \textit{Utopia}, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

them to abstract models of societies that are no-places (*ou-topoi*), but also 
good-places (*eu-topoi*). In this sense, they can also be the result of the work of 
a radical imagination

Still, not all utopias are political myths. Even if they share a narrative struc-
ture and a regulative purpose not all utopias respond to a social group’s need 
for significance. A utopia can be the theoretical construction of a single mind 
and can remain so without acquiring the status of a political myth. Orwell’s 
1984 is a good example. In contrast, what distinguishes political myths is their 
non-individual production, the fact that they sit in the unconsciousness, with-
out it being possible to identify their authors. On the contrary, utopias have 
identifiable authors, who can be held accountable for them.

In other words, utopias are theoretical constructions that have a regulative 
function because they are the means created by a single mind for measuring 
the general good and bad contained in any society, whereas political myths 
are regulative because they are the general expression of a determination to 
act. It is from their capacity to put a collective drama on stage that their regu-
late function stems. In other words, utopias remain “no-places,” ⁶¹ whereas 
political myths are invitations to act here and now: “*hic Rhodus, hic salta.*”

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can now try to summarize the main contribution of a phi-
losophy of political myth. Why *philosophy* in the first place? Because philoso-
phy can provide a general and systematic framework for the use of the con-
cept of political myth, by addressing both the questions “What are political 
myths?” and “How should we evaluate them?” Political myths are processes 
of work on a common narrative that provides significance to the political 
conditions and actions; and, as such, they are deeply rooted in the human 
being’s specific way of relating to the world. As a consequence, they are not 
good or bad *per se*, but for the way in which they can operate towards an 
opening or closure of the possibility of critique.

Why *political myths*? Because they are an important component of every-
day politics, and – what is more relevant – a component that has been largely 
neglected by political philosophy. And we need this concept to come to grasp

⁶¹ As Forst notes, modern utopias display a double normativity, precisely because they are 
“eu-topoi” that remain at the same time “ou-topoi;” in other words, they remind us that 
we can imagine a different “good-place” which still remains (and perhaps should remain) a 
‘Nirgendwo,’” in G. Abel (ed.), *Kreativität. 20. Deutscher Kongress für Philosophie*, Hamburg: 
phenomena such as the success of the narrative of the clash between civilizations. No other related concept, such as that of ideology or utopia, could fulfill this task: the clash between civilizations is neither an utopia nor an ideology, but a political myth precisely because it is not (only) the product of the single mind of an intellectual, but the result of a work on a common narrative that largely sits in the unconsciousness.

If compared with the philosophical work done on the concept of political reason, the work done on political myth cannot but appear minimal. Yet, by focusing only on political reason, political philosophy risks elaborating models for a world that does not exist. Human beings not only act on the basis of rational motivations and calculations, but also on the basis of myths. Together with the analysis of the conditions for public reason, we therefore need a deeper understanding of those for public myths. What is at stake is not simply arriving at a more elaborated and refined philosophical theory of what politics is about, but also of achieving a better understanding of the world we live in. To paraphrase Clifford Geertz, myth has never gone out of modern politics, however much of the banal may have entered it.62

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