

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGES OF POLITICS AND OF POWER IN THE
BUILDING OF COLLECTIVE IMAGINARY.
FROM THE CONCEPT OF “SOCIAL MYTH” ACCORDING TO G. BOUCHARD
TO THE ITALIAN DEBATE.

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Abstract

The recent volume by Gerard Bouchard, *Social Myths e Collective Imaginaries* (University of Toronto Press, 2017; original edition: *Raison et déraison du mythe: coeur des imaginaires collectifs*, Editions du Boreal, 2015), starts with the assumption that the study of myths does not play anymore a central role in the contemporary political and philosophical-political investigation. Myths, symbols, utopian narratives, etc., constitute, nevertheless, from the dawn of human history, not only the instruments of social cohesion, but constitute the means through which the various civilizations determine their institutions. The myths, far from being simple stories, often embody the trigger of political action, producing, in the collective imaginary, those feelings (from identity to hope, from fear to hatred) that move and direct the choices of the people. In this sense, the mythological narration keeps pace with the rhetoric, as an instrument for building consent.

Therefore, it is necessary, along with the study of social myths, a research on the languages of politics and on the mechanisms of power intimately connected and intertwined with them. In this perspective, Bouchard's text represents a fruitful reflection. After having clarified the value of the myth and its social role (Chapters 1 and 2), the author faces the “mythification process”, in the Chapter that is perhaps the most original one (Chapter 3), followed by others two Chapters, respectively on “the conditions for the effectiveness of the myth” and on the hypothesis of construction of a pyramidal structure of social myths.

Therefore, the third Chapter of Bouchard's book investigates the mechanisms through which social myths emerge in a community, are preserved, are reproduced or decline. These pages deal with topics

such as the construction of the subject, the anchors, the imprints, the *ethos*, the sacralization, the history, the techniques of persuasion and the social actors.

To understand the mechanisms of production of those social myths, that are able to create and modify the collective imaginary, it is necessary to analyze the means used to shape the message as an instrument of power. The languages of politics, and in particular rhetoric, are not only instruments of power, but also the conditions that enable those mythological narratives, which concretely affect political action. Hence, therefore, we need a real phenomenology of the various mechanisms of production of social myths – like the one elaborated by Bouchard.

He writes: “My approach focuses mainly on the social aspect of myth, that of the actors, contexts, power relations, and change, as opposed to the psychological or archetypical aspect, that of constants and universalizing forms”: from the beginning he tries to make clear the connection between “social myths” and “power relations”.

If the process of constructing social myths is articulated in various phases (Bouchard identifies eight of them), those most related to the languages of politics are those of “narration” and “techniques of persuasion” (respectively, Paragraphs F and G of Chapter 2). If, according to the author, the narratives often have a commemorative value and are mainly directed to a past dimension, such as the historical memory of a people, in the techniques of persuasion, instead, the languages of politics become a performative tool, exploited to change the brainframe (*forma mentis*) of political subjects, and therefore their political action: in this sense, it is strongly highlighted the link between languages of politics and power, *id est* the relationship between “knowledge” and “power”, on which a thinker as Foucault has long focused.

Bouchard continues with an interesting phenomenology of the various persuasion techniques; in any case, the heart of the question consists in the dynamics of power connected to it, which can be examined through an equally various range of themes. Just as the languages of politics evolve in the history of humanity, in the same way power assumes different forms within the various political set-ups. If the ancient and modern world is organized according to a “pyramidal” model of power, the contemporary or post-modern world must use new strategies of power. Paolo Bellini, for example, in the footsteps of Foucault's studies, has been able to propose, in his works, a “reticular” structure of power, which fits well to describe many of the dynamics of contemporary politics. In the same way, in order to outline the new face of the languages of politics, its narratives and techniques of persuasion, we can use the image of the “grid”. This will be one of the objectives of this article, which aims not only to reconstruct the debate on social myths and the collective imaginary as presented by

Bouchard, but also to examine in depth the “performatory” value of myth as an instrument of power, precisely in the inseparable relationship, as old as man, between “power” and “knowledge”, a relationship that presents itself with faces always new, through which the different aspects of collective identity are redrawn, from time to time.

Keywords: Languages of politics, power, collective imaginary, myth.

We must talk about the reason why
we have awoken the myth
so that we can carry through
what is still left to say.
[Plato, *The Statesman*]

1. Introduction

The recent book by Gerard Bouchard, *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries*¹ (original edition: *Raison et déraison du mythe: au coeur des imaginaires collectifs*²) suggests that we go back to reflecting on the essence of myth and its social and political role.

If “Philosophy and Political Theory has, as its object of study, the analysis of the political thought, the nature of power, the political orders, systems and forms of legitimation that derive from it, as well as the political phenomena and languages that determine them”³, such a philosophical-political analysis cannot disregard a deeper examination of the symbolic forms, as indispensable instruments to legitimise power.

As Giulio Maria Chiodi maintained:

¹ G. Bouchard, *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries* (Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

² G. Bouchard, *Raison et déraison du mythe: au coeur des imaginaires collectifs* (Montréal: Editions du Boreal, 2015).

³ P. Bellini, C. Bonvecchio, *Introduzione alla filosofia e teoria politica* (Milano: Cedam Wolters Kluwer, 2017), IX.

“One gets the impression that, when pondering about politics, the after-effects of a manneristic Enlightenment are consuming the last morsels of Cartesianism. It is being replaced by technologies, scenographies and proceduralisms. [...] It is precisely ascribable to modernity, and to the Cartesianism that derived from it, the idea of proceeding in the understanding of the world by putting aside everything that, like theology itself, cannot be subjected to the control of a reasoning reason”⁴.

This distinctive trait of modernity, which puts a “reasoning reason” before every other way of relating to the world and getting to know it, has evidently led to huge benefits, above all at a scientific-technological level, gradually fulfilling that Enlightenment idea of progress and constant “tension towards the new”⁵. Nevertheless, every time progress is made in one direction, everything that all other directions – which therefore remain unexplored – could have offered gets lost. That is, “progressive ideas”⁶, by themselves, risk to overshadow both that “tradition” in which human action in general and political action in particular take root, and the social and political significance of such symbolic narratives as myth and utopia. As Claudio Bonvecchio writes:

“Modern society – or, if you will, post-modern or contemporary society – has knowingly put into action a veritable ‘mechanism’ to ensure that ‘tradition’ can only be used in a context of production and consumption, but that this usage be only an instrumental one. In doing so, this society’s desire to deny any ‘real’ relationship with the past, exalting the value and importance of the present, becomes evident. The present, in turn, by absolutely denying the past, must project itself into the future. But such a future – not having tradition behind it – is nothing but an ideological extension of the present, which, however, must constantly be denied”⁷.

⁴ G.M. Chiodi, *La coscienza liminare. Sui fondamenti della simbolica politica* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2011), 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ C. Bonvecchio, *Iniziazione e tradizione* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2018), 18-19.

Myth, as we shall see below, deals with the roots and foundations of the human and, for these reasons, is deep-seated in the history, tradition and past of human civilisations.

Our contemporary society tends to reject these symbolic approaches, favouring, precisely, that “reasoning reason” that prefers to look ahead, chasing the idea of scientific-technological progress, without, however, positioning itself within a tradition that also and above all consists of symbolic narratives, which have always played a central role in the legitimation of political power in the history of humankind. As a matter of fact, every narrative, myth and utopia contribute to building and holding in place a people’s identity, which, without these foundations, would dissolve: these aspects act as a veritable political glue – where the etymology of “politics” precisely reminds us that it concerns the ability of keeping together a multiplicity (in Greek: “*poly's*”). Hence, therefore, the importance of a symbolic approach in the studies of Philosophy and Political Theory; as Giulio Maria Chiodi writes:

“Political symbolics [...] is the expression, now well established, that identifies the field of study which uses tools [...] to be considered indispensable for the symbolic understanding of things”⁸.

Among these “tools” we can certainly include the concept of “myth”, on which we work in the pages that follow, showing how that not only is an instrument for social cohesion, but also, and above all, a preferential means through which the various civilisations were able to determine their institutions. As a matter of fact, myth does not amount to a simple story, but acts as an engine of political action, producing, in the collective⁹ imaginary¹⁰, those feelings (from identity to hope, from fear to hatred) that move and guide the choices of the people. For these reasons, it is also fundamental to investigate the relationship between the mythological narrative and its underlying rhetoric. Whereas rhetoric in

⁸ G.M. Chiodi, *La coscienza liminare*, 9.

⁹ On the concept of “collective imaginary”, cf. P. Bellini, *Mitopie tecnopolitiche. Stato-nazione, impero e globalizzazione* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2011), 20-28; cf. also G. Bouchard, *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries*, 13, which reads: “The collective imaginary includes that which, in the mental universe, belongs more to the psyche than to reason per se. And more precisely still, the collective imaginary is characterized by the link it establishes between familiar realities such as norms, traditions, narratives, and identities on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the deepest symbolic structures. Collective imaginaries conceived in this way are composed of representations that draw their authority from an empirical foundation, significant experiences of a community, and non-rational roots”.

¹⁰ On the concept of “imaginary”, cf. J.-J. Wunenburger, *L'imaginaire* (Paris: PUF, 2003).

general examines language structure, it is clear that political rhetoric, as it examines the structure of the languages of politics, plays a central role in the production of symbolic forms such as myth and utopia.

2. The political and social role of the myth

First of all, it is worthwhile to quickly retrace the meaning of the concept of “myth”. As mentioned by several authors¹¹, “myth”, from the Greek “*mythos*”, means “word” and, at the same time, also “*logos*” (a term which is usually juxtaposed to “myth”) means “word”. Not always, in writings about the “myth”, is the etymological reconstruction correct: the “word” of the “myth”, as a matter of fact, must be interpreted as a “mysterious word”, an arcane one, almost mystical, since “*mythos*” in Greek is connected with the verb “*myein*”, which means “to close one’s eyes” or “to close one’s mouth”. Namely, it is a word pronounced almost with the mouth closed (as evoked by the sound of the Greek letter *ypsilon*), hence a mystical word, not accessible to everyone. “Myth” (from a “ma”/“mi” root, connected with the meaning of “mooing”, from which also “cow” in the Italian language [“mucca”] descends) is indeed a word that presents connections not only with “mooing” [Italian: “muggire”] and “bellowing” [Italian: “mugghiare”], which often, from Dante to Leopardi, identify the “language” of nature, whether it is vegetal or animal¹², but also, probably, with “mute”/“dumb” [Italian: “muto”], id est those whose mouth are closed and tongues tied (from a “mu”/“mau” root, which means “to tie”, “to clamp”).

On the other hand, “*logos*” means (in addition to “language” “discourse”, “rational discourse”, “reason”), first and foremost, “word”. It derives, as is known, from “*leghein*”, which originally means “gather”: the word of the *logos* is therefore a non-mysterious, non-arcane, non-initiatory, non-restricted-to-a-few-people word; it is rather a word that “gathers”, through an operation that collects sounds and meanings, as happens when we speak; terms like “to read” [Italian: “leggere”] and “legion” [Italian: “legione”] have the same etymology. The operation underlying the “*leghein*”, id est “the telling that gathers”, is therefore within everyone’s reach: it is that “reasoning reason” which

¹¹ Cf. C. Bonvecchio, *Miti, simboli, politica* (Milano: Jouvence 2014), 130.

¹² Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*, V reads indeed: “Io venni in loco d’ogne luce muto, / che muggia come fa mar per tempesta”, while Leopardi’s “Il passero solitario”, in *Canti*, reads instead: “Odi greggi belar, muggire armenti”.

tries to “gather” empirical data in order to produce a theory. It is not by chance that we consider philosophy as if it were born with Thales of Miletus, who, for the first time in history, would have diverged from the narratives of the myth, by maintaining that “the principle of all things is water”: the things that he was saying, no longer arcane and mystical, were collecting a series of observations (that is, the fact that all living things are always connected to a humid principle), so that anyone can experience the same results without needing an initiatory path to interpret the mysterious word of the myth. As a matter of fact, nobody can verify that, for instance, Kronos overthrew Uranus and Zeus overthrew Kronos, while anyone, however, can gather with their own eyes evidence of the fact the principle of life is connected with humidity.

It is clear from the beginning that this new way of reasoning and relating to the world gives rise to a new humankind, modelled on an unprecedented *forma mentis*. All this, at a first glance, bears little connection with political philosophy; but those dealing with political symbolics recognise instead, between the lines of this discourse, a complex series of social and political repercussions. It should be noted, above all, that the passage from the world of the “myth” to that of the “*logos*” goes hand in hand with the genesis of the Greek democracy – which, it is worth mentioning, was a direct democracy and not a representative democracy (although it was only extended to a limited part of the population, so much so that it has often been compared to a form of “expanded oligarchy”). Only a civilisation that has developed the idea that the truth is something accessible to everyone can also develop, in a political sense, the idea that politics can be managed by all the citizens. Even in this case, one cannot help but recognise the great process achieved by the Greek civilisation, which, in this way, laid the foundations for our Western culture. Nevertheless, this approach is not without problems and fallacies, to the extent that the greatest philosophers of Ancient Greece, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, strongly criticised the democratic form of government. Let us not forget that Plato, in particular, even without denying the previous philosophical tradition (a tradition that would indeed replace the mythological narrative with the rational one), reintroduces with great vigor the myth in his dialogues. And the myth, in Plato, very often hides a value of truth that goes further than the efforts of dialogical reason (as a matter of fact, “*dia-leghesthai*” and “*dia-logos*” have the same root), whose limits can be surpassed precisely by means of the mythological narrative.

It can therefore be understood that, even without denying the merits of the rational approach, the “reasoning reason” by itself not only foregoes a broad tradition, in which essential aspects of being

human are embedded, but also faces limits that are otherwise impassable. For instance, pure theoretical reason, as Kant teaches, cannot say anything about the great questions that humans have about their origin and ultimate destination. The myth, on the other hand, through symbols, tries to evoke that ineffable that the reason (*logos*), through the language (*logos*), can neither think nor say. And all this has a series of extremely important political repercussions, since a civilisation lacking a common narrative about its origins and a final destination towards which aspire becomes an empty civilisation, without an identity, and destined to crumble.

Let us therefore talk about the primary value of the myth, connected to its social and political significance – a theme upon which, among others, Gerard Bouchard has reflected a lot.

As Claudio Bonvecchio writes:

“*Mythos* is, therefore, a particular 'word', with an extraordinary depth and of exceptional importance, since it reveals something that 'has always been' such and which, for that reason, is immutable and sacral, without having the goal (or the obligation) neither to explain nor, much less, to convince”¹³.

The word of the myth therefore possesses an intimate connection with the truth: not an unfolded truth, accessible to all, like that of the *logos*, but a truth which is evident in itself, for its ability to bring light through an obscure narrative – only in darkness, indeed, can light appear. While the *logos* “belongs both to the sphere of truth and to that of false, but, above all, to that of the verifiable”¹⁴, the myth “belongs “to the indisputable field of truth”¹⁵:

“The myth would be what gives a meta-temporal and supra-individual meaning to what happens, placing it in the eternal becoming of the cosmos. [...] It is not only the expression of a complete and coherent vision of the world, but a vision of the world

¹³ C. Bonvecchio, *Miti, simboli, politica*, 130-131.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

characterised by being an indication of a totality. [...] In this perspective, [...] the myth [...] is a *founding tale* that tells about man, the world and reality”¹⁶.

Hence the importance of the myth, especially in the social and political field. As a matter of fact, Claudio Bonvecchio adds:

“The myth – through its characteristic symbolic language – gives a particular value to the political dimension, of which it becomes one of the main components, if not the main one, according to the era or the historical moment”¹⁷.

In this sense, Bonvecchio invites us to rethink the myth as “the instrument through which the archetypal map that determines collective and individual existences can be visualised”¹⁸, understanding, in other words, that the myth is not limited to collecting human-made tales, but it rather possesses the performative strength to “shape and humanise them”¹⁹, contributing to the construction of that collective imaginary in which the identity of a people is founded. The myth, therefore, far from being comparable to a fable, embodies a founding and timeless collective narrative, which is not limited to explaining the real through the “reasoning reason” alone, but by “mobilising emotional energies and intuition”²⁰, which are strictly connected with our rationality; in it “emotion and reason [...] are not separated in the least according to rationalistic patterns”²¹:

“The myth represents, in other words, an imaginative dynamic construct which allows to organise and express a transpersonal symbolic dimension, where, through shared narratives, accepted as true, a collective brainframe (a mental and cerebral frame)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 132-138.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁸ C. Bonvecchio, *Iniziazione e tradizione*, 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁰ P. Bellini, C. Bonvecchio, *Introduzione alla filosofia e teoria politica*, 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

appears. Such a mental frame characterises the ways through which a given culture expresses its own specific identity within imaginative patterns of universal kind”²².

The myth is a narrative of the origins, of the roots and, therefore, of the identity of a people: it constitutes that set of common narratives in which the people recognise themselves. The stories of the gods and heroes of the Olympus are the glue, for a Greek man, that, *mutatis mutandis*, is comparable, for instance, to the far-west narratives upon which a good part of the founding myth of the American civilisation is built. For these reasons, “the myth, thanks to its symbolic language, [is] one of the main components of *politics*”²³, since, by narrating the origins, it tends to offer an emotional and non-rational justification of the political reality, inserted in a sacral frame.

The political significance of the myth consists in the fact that the mythological narratives serve, above all, to found and justify the nature of the sovereign authority (which, in ancient times, was connected to a sacral derivation):

“The myth projects the royalty or the imperial authority on a unifying sacral plane, in which the bodily and material essence and the horizon of values and the spiritual horizon of the human existence transcend the barriers of the *here* and *now*. For this reason it has been possible to deem inviolable the person of the sovereign”²⁴.

It is therefore possible to understand how essential it is to comprehend the value of the myth, in order to tackle key concepts of political philosophy such as “power” and its “legitimation”, “sovereignty”, “authority”, etc.

The discussion so far may perhaps give the idea that the myth mainly concerns ancient civilisations; on the other hand, it is easily noticeable that

²² *Ibid.*, 51.

²³ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

“even modern civilisation, despite its tendency to avoid explaining real phenomena by referencing supernatural elements as much as possible, uses common narratives. [...] A mass media society, in particular, shows, from this point of view, a remarkable wealth of narratives”²⁵.

As a matter of fact, the myth carries an indispensable political significance in our post-modern society as well: let us consider, for example, the translation of the “myth of the sovereign” or of the “saviour” into the myth of the “sovereign people”, of the “people *tout-court*”, of the “nation”, of “homeland”, of the “charismatic *leader*”, etc.

“The myth, in a strictly political sense, has the function of legitimising power, representing its aspect as linked to the exercise of authority. [...] The myth defines the political and cultural boundaries of every civilisation, both for the fact that it fulfills the function of power legitimation, and because it constitutes a powerful glue in terms of identity, that no political system can afford to disregard”²⁶.

In this sense, the reflections of Gerard Bouchard seem extremely poignant, precisely because they tend to underline the social significance of the myth. As a matter of fact, he begins his analysis, in *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries*, precisely by showing how social sciences and political philosophy have increasingly distanced themselves from a reflection on the notions of myth, symbol, collective imaginary, utopia, etc. By referencing authors, among others, such as Weber and Durkheim, he defines his approach in the following way:

“My approach is based on the idea that all types of myths, be they modern or premodern, proceed from a social dynamic fuelled by power strategies, divisions, conflicts, and contradictions. It also calls into question the dichotomy that has

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

developed between the myths of so-called primitive societies and those of modern societies. In short, my endeavour is limited, focusing on a single type of collective representations, but also ambitious in that it aims to examine myths in depth and in a way that deviates at various points from the paths followed until now”²⁷.

Bouchard therefore elaborates a broad phenomenology of the concept of myth, showing all the directions in which it can be laid out. Continuing his investigation, Bouchard clarifies why the myth must possess social and political significance, showing, with various examples, how far the strength of the mythological narratives can go in orienting political action. Indeed, he writes:

“Basically, a sociological perspective suggests that we consider myth as a type of collective representation (sometimes beneficial, sometimes harmful), as a vehicle of what I would call a message – that is, of values, beliefs, aspirations, goals, ideals, predispositions, or attitudes. One can refer here to the myth of racial superiority or to the myth of the superior nation, chosen by God and vested with a universal mission. Other examples are the myths that support fundamentalist ideologies (religious or not) and that can lead to violence. But one can also think of the major founding myths of humanism and modernity: equality, liberty, tolerance, human dignity, democracy, and progress. So it is important not to confuse myth as a sociological mechanism with the symbolic content (or message) it can convey. Recall here also that I am referring to beliefs and values without attributing to these concepts a (positive or negative) normative weight. Once again, myth can tilt either to the side of evil or to the side of virtue. [...] rooted in the psyche, strategically produced and used, social myth is a collective representation that is hybrid, beneficial, or harmful, imbued with the sacred, governed by emotion more than by reason, and a vehicle of meanings, values, and ideals shaped in a given social and historical environment. Among these attributes, sacredness is the most decisive, and not narrativity, contrary to what is often stated. It is sacredness that mainly distinguishes myth from all other collective representations.

²⁷ G. Bouchard, *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries*, 4-5.

As such, social myth should be considered an attribute of any society, a universal sociological mechanism. So there is no point in trying to eradicate it. We can also expect, since it affects consciousness, that myth will influence individual and collective behaviours”²⁸.

3. The social and political significance of the languages of the myth

The third chapter²⁹ of Bouchard’s book examines all those mechanisms from which social myths emerge, are preserved or reproduced, or decline; for these reasons, the author here delves into topics such as the construction of the subject, the anchors, the imprints, the *ethos*, the sacralisation, the history, the techniques of persuasion and the social actors, etc. In this regard, Bouchard highlights the importance of the language which elaborates and communicates social myths: in other words, to understand the mechanisms of production of the social myths which are capable of producing and modifying the collective imaginary, it is necessary to study the means used to shape the message intended as an instrument of power. Hence the importance of the language and of the rhetoric underlying both the mythological narratives and the political ones *stricto sensu* – even though, precisely, the distinction is subtle and liminal, since they are intertwined with one another.

Examining these aspects means re-proposing, *mutatis mutandis*, the instances and questions that rhetoric, and in particular political rhetoric, has investigated over the centuries. For example, the renowned five parts of the discourse, *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria* and *actio/pronunciatio*, already in embryo in the thought of the ancient rhetoricians (like Tisias, Corax of Syracuse and the Sophists), and then re-elaborated by Aristotle and canonised by Cicero and Quintilian, already result in an extraordinarily refined example of meta-language, id est an example of the language reflecting upon itself, in order to bring to light its own innermost mechanisms, so as to enhance its practical and political potential. All this, in ancient rhetoric, used to mainly address the three forms – judicial, deliberative (that is, political) and epideictic –, while in contemporary thought it is further differentiated, so that Bouchard underlines the need to not only examine the linguistic genesis of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23-26.

²⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 48 and ff.

social myths, but, more in general, all those processes that produce myths and cause them to enjoy broad political effectiveness.

On these issues, it is also useful to reference areas that are liminal with respect to political philosophy, quickly referring not only to the renowned works by Creuzer, Schelling, Cassirer, Lévi-Strauss or Ricoeur on myth, but also to the works of authors such as Otto, Eliade, Guénon, Kerényi, Jung, etc., as well as Francesco Moiso³⁰ and Guido Ferraro³¹. The language of myth, in this sense, becomes an indispensable object of study, both as an instrument for the production of the mythological narrative, and as a vehicle for the dissemination of such a narrative, in a mix of rhetoric and persuasion as founding elements of the language of politics. Creuzer had indeed already focused his work on this act of birth of the mythological narrative, claiming that the myth embodies the outward appearance of those original symbols in which the essence of the human resides. Schelling, instead, emphasised the “tautegorical” function of the myth: its language reveals those signs and forms in which the history of humankind happens, whose evolution can only be grasped by the mythological language. Cassirer, on his part, also on the basis of the thought of Vico³², Herder and Schelling, invites us to think of language as a path between the dimension of impressions and that of objectification; in this sense, he was able to define man as an *animal symbolicum*. The myth, together with art, religion and history, turns out to be a founding element of human experience, and thus of social life; it is a instrument capable of giving meaning to reality, and it develops in accordance with a pre-scientific, practical and social logic, aimed at structuring the human reality as such. The myth constitutes therefore a way of relating to the world and acting in it. Finally, Lévi-Strauss, starting from a structuralist approach, has shown how every myth can be represented through a matrix: the language of myth contains, therefore, some structural elements (the “mythemes”) that coincide with the structural elements of language as such. Hence the myth proves to be essential for the construction of social and cultural institutions, such as the restriction of power only to those who know the myth: the “initiates”.

³⁰ Cf. F. Moiso, *La filosofia della mitologia di F.W.J. Schelling. Dagli inizi all'introduzione storico-critica* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis 2014).

³¹ Cf. G. Ferraro, *Il linguaggio del mito. Valori simbolici e realtà sociale nelle mitologie primitive* (Milano: Meltemi, 2001); here the author examines the symbolic codes, the structure and the functioning of the mythological narratives.

³² Vico can be considered the first author to have studied the myth with a rationalistic approach, as a set of anthropological, sociological and historical materials; before him, thinkers such as Pico della Mirandola, Giannozzo Manetti and Giordano Bruno had attempted an esoteric reading of the myth, as a place full of hidden truths to be revealed.

These are just a few possible examples that show how an analysis of the languages of the myth is essential to investigate its social and political significance, which appears as a distinctive feature of every thinker who has ever approached these issues. Like rhetoric (and political rhetoric), also the language of the myth is organised in accordance with precise structures and canons; furthermore, both languages, the mythological and the rhetorical, contribute to constitute and shape those social structures which are at the basis of the collective imaginary of every civilisation.

Both the mythological narratives and the political rhetoric, including in its contemporary form as an “engine of consent”, show their intimate connection with power: with its constitution and its retention. In this sense, the languages of politics, from the mythological narratives to rhetoric, must not exclusively be thought of *a posteriori* as instruments of power, but also and above all as conditions for the possibility of the production of those narratives which concretely influence political action. This implies, therefore, the need to elaborate an actual phenomenology of the various mechanisms of production of social myths – like the one developed by Bouchard.

Our contemporary society, however, is used to making too sharp a distinction between the “language of the myth” and the “language of politics”; in this regard, Bouchard writes:

“My approach focuses mainly on the social aspect of myth, that of the actors, contexts, power relations, and change, as opposed to the psychological or archetypal aspect, that of constant and universalizing forms”³³.

Bouchard thus reveals one of the main objectives of his work: to try and make evident the connection between “social myths” and “power relations”.

4. Social myths and power relations

According to Bouchard, the construction process of social myths is organised in various phases (he identifies eight of them); among those phases, the most connected to the languages of politics are the ones of “narratives” and of “techniques of persuasion”³⁴. The narratives have, according to Bouchard,

³³ G. Bouchard, *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries*, 48.

³⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, para. F and G in chapt. 2.

a commemorative value and are mainly addressed to a past dimension, in relation to the historical memory of a people. The techniques of persuasion, on the other hand, appear as languages of politics of a performative kind, that is, aimed at modifying the *brainframe* (*forma mentis*) of the political subjects, and, therefore, their political action. These two phases of the construction process of social myths (and, in particular, the second) make the connection between the languages of politics and power evident, namely recalling the famous connection of Foucaultian memory, between “knowledge” and “power”³⁵.

As is known, Michel Foucault has introduced, in his works, a new way of understanding the concept of power, which cannot be interpreted, vertically, as a relation of submission or constraint, but, horizontally, as a dynamic of which the entire society is permeated: in this sense, it can be said that power is not a thing, but a relation, and that it is everywhere, since every type of relation can be interpreted as a relation of power. From here descends the connection between “power” and “knowledge”, in the sense that power (which therefore becomes “biopower”) does not prevent knowledge, but produces it, given that the latter is recognised as an effective means of controlling and “disciplining” society³⁶. And this aspect obviously concerns also that kind of “knowledge” which is typical of the language of the myths in general and of social myths in particular. Such a power can no longer be represented with a pyramidal structure, but, as suggested by Paolo Bellini, with a reticular structure³⁷: both the relations within society and the political relations among States can be interpreted as reticular dynamics. Bellini writes:

“As a matter of fact, if one wants to represent contemporary society, it is necessary to use the symbolism of the network and the concept of tribe. The first symbol illustrates the morphological and syntactical aspects of social connections, while the second illustrates the semiological and content-related aspects of such connections. If we

³⁵ Bouchard then goes on to present a phenomenology of the various techniques of persuasion; in any case, the central point lies in the dynamics of power connected to it.

³⁶ In addition to Foucault, on these issues it is useful to refer to the writings of Sandro Chignola and, in particular: S. Chignola, *Foucault oltre Foucault. Una politica della filosofia* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2014).

³⁷ Cf. P. Bellini, "Caos e potere: dinamica di un conflitto", in *Metabasis.it, rivista di filosofia on-line*, March 2006 year I no. 1; cf. also P. Bellini, "Cyborg, potere e ordine reticolare", in *Metabasis.it, rivista di filosofia on-line*, March 2007 year II no. 3.

consider contemporary society in the perspective of globalisation, id est a worldwide horizon, a dominant reticular aspect immediately emerges, above all in relation to premodern societies. This is due, among other things, to the propagation of a never-seen-before technological power that connects individuals and groups with one another³⁸.

The notions of “net” and “*net-work*” are certainly among the keys to understanding our globalised post-modernity: first of all, for the domain of the *inter-net*, of the *web* and of the new technologies, but also and above all for the way we see the narratives, and the way of using such narratives (through hypertexts and by surfing the net), change *in primis*; for the social dynamics *in secundis*; for the *formamentis (brainframe)* of the post-modern subjects who receive, produce and live all this *in tertiis*. The network is to be interpreted as a polyvocal structure, as a tangled fabric, composed of nodes (*hubs*) and connections; understanding this in relation to power means that every element of the structure is able to exert more power whenever it can activate more connections. Paolo Bellini adds:

“In defining global politics, tracing an empirical communication network (roads, bridges, railways, etc.) and a virtual communication network (telecommunications, internet, etc.) at the same time, power is defined by the capability of managing resources and as a structuring force of the biosphere, within which it is necessary to guarantee the survival of the species and of self-conscious life that manifests itself in the human subject. However, such a power, in turn, is subject, in the political field, to the myth of the sovereign people, and, in the technoscientific field, to the myth of infinite perfectibility and of the frontier. Now, as the foundational image of the sovereign people is obsolete, so that of infinite economic, technological and scientific growth of modern society is too”.³⁹.

³⁸ P. Bellini, "Caos e potere: dinamica di un conflitto", 10.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

This reticular order on which the politics of post-modernity is founded is full of symbols and myths: even the contemporary technological civilisation, not only the archaic ones, is based on symbolic-mythological narratives and on great archetypes of the collective imaginary indeed. Paolo Bellini writes:

“From a genealogical point of view, it can be said that, from the second half of the Twentieth century onwards, there has been a progressive worldwide expansion of a civilisation based on consumption, on the spectacularisation of reality and on technological development, and that such a process has had, as its founding characteristic, the production of a reticular order. This civilisation can effectively be interpreted through the symbolism of the Great Mother, not only because it has a similar behavior, but also because it has a morphological and structural order of reticular kind. As a matter of fact, if one considers all the symbolic meanings associated to the net, as an image of flux, of destiny and of a soft, enveloping and labyrinthine feminine, exactly a maternal picture emerges, where opposites are included in mutual indifference, in a uroboric maternity. Such a symbolism is absolutely appropriate for the reticular dimension of this kind of civilisation, since the power that animates it has those characteristics, being mainly declined in a feminine and maternal sense”⁴⁰.

This “reticular” structure of power is well suited to describe not only a lot of the dynamics of contemporary politics, but also the structuring of the languages of politics in themselves, of its narratives and techniques of persuasion. That is, society and its languages, myths and narratives change at the same pace, influencing one another. Politics, economics and technology constitute now an inseparable *unicum*, which is often, however, interpreted in a purely rationalistic way, aspiring to become independent of the theological, mythological and aesthetic aspects, as if religions, mythical or utopian narratives and the arts could be relegated to an allegedly inferior dimension of the irrational. Well, it has been shown that all these languages are influenced and influence the structure of man and his actions in the community, which will be more cohesive the stronger the narratives are

⁴⁰ P. Bellini, "Cyborg, potere e ordine reticolare", 9-10.

and the connections on which it is based. The combination of rational and irrational, that is the alternation and the inseparable coexistence of *logos* and *mythos*, constitute, as a matter of fact, that complex language upon which the lives of the individuals and the community are shaped, lives that occur in different ways, according to the various historical periods, in which the dynamics of power are structured in different ways, in analogy with the linguistic and narrative structures underlying them.

5. Conclusions

In short, the myth, being one of the languages of politics, always acts as an instrument of power, within the inseparable relationship between “power” and “knowledge”. It conveys further truths with respect to those that can be rationally and scientifically demonstrated with the intellect and represents therefore a narrative of the origins, common to a political, theological and even artistic dimension, in which the narrative purpose is not to communicate contents or to demonstrate something, but to form citizens, building or strengthening the identity of the community of which they are part.

In the technological era, however, according to Paolo Bellini, the myth, while remaining one of the privileged keys to understand reality, coexists mixed with the concept of utopia;

“After the scientific revolution [...], progressively but inexorably, the emergence of a new individual and collective *brainframe* appears [...], which alters the typical duality of alternation between myth and utopia [...]. This original way of understanding the world, which, thanks to the new technologies and to the changes brought about by mass communication systems [...] clearly emerges at a global level, can be defined with the term *mythopia*”⁴¹.

The “mythopia”, intended as a “new way of conceiving reality [...] in the technological era”⁴², is the new *brainframe* through which the Western and technological man structures not only his own thought, but, above all, his social and political life. The “mythopia” expresses therefore “the new

⁴¹ P. Bellini, *Mitopie tecnopolitiche. Stato-nazione, Impero e globalizzazione* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2011), 54.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 54.

relation between public and private, typical of the technological civilisation⁴³: hence it is structured as a form of “hybrid narrative” that “coagulates in itself the explanatory needs of the myth with the typically performative nature of the utopia⁴⁴”.

The hybrid narratives of the post-modern technological era on the one hand aspire to explain every phenomenon regardless of any connection with the dimension of the sacred⁴⁵, flattening themselves, as already shown in the texts of Bonvecchio and Chiodi, onto a merely rationalistic dimension; on the other hand, however, they carry a performative element in themselves, such that they always include the pretense of ever-increasing performing “performances”, as happens, above all, in the scientific-technological field.

“In every hybrid narrative, which assimilates the scientific methodology and proliferates upon it, every possible recourse to the divine and the supernatural, which would, in itself, make the phenomenon or the object intangible and immutable, is substantially eliminated. Every manipulation of reality, as a matter of fact, within a world considered sacred because it is an image of the divine, would always represent an illegitimate violation of a cosmic order, fixed forever by powers that overcome man and stand above him⁴⁶”.

Only the recovery of the dimension of the myth in its most original social dimension can therefore bring the contemporary man to demand that the “reasoning reason” be the only way to relate to reality, especially in its political sense.

The mythological narratives, as a matter of fact, intrinsically possess a performative value, not only in the moment in which they are transformed into “mythopias” by the post-modern technological

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁴ P. Bellini, C. Bonvecchio, *Introduzione alla filosofia e teoria politica*, 60-61.

⁴⁵ The post-modern technological era tends to attribute “the explanation of the origin of any object or phenomenon not [...] to a creative act of divine or supernatural order, but to natural processes, in principle reproducible in a laboratory, or to understandable causes in an empirical, desacralised and rational sense” (P. Bellini, C. Bonvecchio, *Introduzione alla filosofia e teoria politica*, 61): this is the narrative through which contemporary man usually reconstructs his own origin, alas losing sight of the fact that also a scientific narrative is, ultimately, but one narrative among the many possible.

⁴⁶ P. Bellini, C. Bonvecchio, *Introduzione alla filosofia e teoria politica*, 62.

civilization, but as already, ever-present, in their pedagogical and formative essence, as instruments capable of shaping the identity of the community through values based on the symbols and traditions that the myths constitute, convey and preserve.

Recovering the study of myth, in politics, means leaving space open for an education in politics: this is the merit of Bouchard's work and of the whole sphere of political philosophy that, in Italy and elsewhere, is dedicated to these concepts.



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