

MYTH: CONSTITUTION OF SOCIAL REALITY AND LEGITIMATION OF POLITICAL ACTION

DOI: 10.7413/18281567146

di Raffaella Sabra Palmisano

Università degli Studi dell'Insubria di Varese-Como

Abstract

In current language, the word “myth” is often used to indicate a primitive narrative construction that lacks realism and has no connection with the construction of social reality. There are numerous historical and sociological analyses that show how much the myth is instead a universal sociological mechanism active in all societies, from the so-called "primitive" societies to the post-modern ones. In order to better understand the link between social actors and myth and therefore between myth and social construction, or rather between myth and legitimation of power, it seems necessary to keep in mind, precisely because of the inseparability of myth from the social actor who creates and performs it, the specific anthropological context of myths. Detached from their performative context, myths would in fact be reduced to mere narratives. We believe that myth lives in the society that creates it and performs it and cannot be analyzed and detached from it, because we understand myth as a social construction but also as a constructor of society. It is therefore necessary to have an approach that also includes a more dialogical and dialectical analysis with the social actors of myth (intended as those who create and perform the myth and those who are influenced by it). Otherwise, there would be a risk of mutilating the myth of its reality. Myths in their social, political and economic contextualization prove to have precise meanings that should make any misunderstanding of interpretation improbable. This does not mean, however, that it is not possible to hermeneutically manipulate the behavioural and cognitive indications contained in the myth, manipulation that acts on social and therefore political action: the myth and its interpretation determine the political action of the narrators and listeners, being the myth an essential part of the constitutive process of social reality, and therefore of the legitimation of power.

Keywords: Verum et fieri, myth, legein.

Myth and context

Can we discuss the existence of myth without discussing the role of the social actors who perform it?

And, above all, can we discuss it without taking into account the sociological context in which the performance takes place?

The link between social actors and myth and therefore between myth and social construction, or rather between myth and political legitimacy, precisely because of the inseparability of myth from the social actor who performs it, can only be understood by taking into account the specific sociological context of myths (regardless of their “object” or their type). Detached from their performative context, myths would in fact be reduced to mere narratives.

A myth acts socially in the society in which it is born. A myth born in one society and performed in another also acts socially, albeit for different reasons and in different ways. But it acts. It acts in one way when it is performed in one society by certain performers, it acts in another when it is performed in another society by the same performers and, again and differently, in other societies by other performers and so on. One only has to think, trivially, of what happens today in the world with the ancient Greek myths. What does this mean? That myth, while remaining apparently unchanged, changes, because its meaning, representation, external and internal gaze, self-representation and hetero-representation and reception are different and depend, in fact, on the social actors who perform and participate in some way in the myth.

Since the context in which myth acts is primarily human, therefore a primarily socio-political context, and since myth is the social construction and the builder of the social *par excellence*, as it will be easy to understand continuing the reading, it is part of the essence of myth the socio-political action.

Myth certainly has some points in common with the notion of cultural memory (in the terms elaborated by Assman) as, for example, “cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity”¹ and has the capacity of concretion of the identity of a group: the manifestations of cultural memory “are defined through a kind of

¹ Jan Assman, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity”, translated by John Czaplicka, in *New German Critique*, n. 65, (Spring/Summer 1995), 125-133:130.

identificatory determination in a positive (We are this) or in a negative (That's our opposite) sense”², and myth sometimes and in some ways, also has this capacity of concretion of the identity of a group. This obviously creates connections between myth, memory and therefore psyche, which we do not think it is appropriate to analyze here, since our discourse is directed towards other different hermeneutical horizons.

Horizons that bring us to rely on a definition of myth as a normative “narration”, in the sense that myth “expresses and contributes to structuring a *brainframe* [...]. Myth, in other words, sets an order, justifies the status quo and defines behavioural limits”³.

The question of myth and social construction, and therefore of myth and political legitimacy, seems to concern first of all the performativity of myth rather than its object, the *how* of myth rather than the *what*. It acts and always acts in a different way according to the social context in which it is performed, it acts according to the actors and it is acted by the actors.

In fact, myth is never an immobile object, definable, even if it may seem to be recurring the same as itself: it is in a continuous becoming because its being is inseparable from the social actors who perform it. And in order to understand a specific myth we cannot pretend to decontextualize it. By this we do not simply mean a de-contextualization from the history of myth itself and from the society in which it was born, but we mean a de-contextualization of myth from human history tout court, we readers included. Not even the researchers on myth can pretend to decontextualize any myth by himself, because that myth will be perceived in some way by the scholar, and even this reception of the myth will be, in a certain way – as can be understood later – a way to perform the myth, reception-performance that will be contextual to the history of the myth and the scholar.

In 1923 Malinowski published “The problem of meaning in primitive languages”⁴, in which he states that the attempt to literally translate a “primitive language” denotes a misconception of how words take on their meaning and a mistake in conceiving what a “meaning” is. Through the example of

² Jan Assman, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity”, translated by John Czaplicka, in *New German Critique*, n. 65, (Spring/Summer 1995), 125-133:130.

³ Paolo Bellini, *Mitopie Tecno-politiche*, (Milano:Mimesis, 2011),45-46.

⁴ Bronislaw Malinowski, *The problem of meaning in primitive languages*, supplement to *The Meaning of Meaning. A study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards (New York: Hartcourt Brace and Co., 1923).

literal and decontextualized translation of a sentence from a “primitive language” of Melanesia, Malinowski demonstrates how the intent of understanding fails, thus attesting that one cannot know how to translate a word until one approaches the emic perspective of the society within which that language was born.

So it seems to us to be the case for the word myth, its meaning, and the myth itself.

Certainly myths are in every place and in every society, and it would be unthinkable to pretend to analyze and define here it in relation to every context of origin. We will therefore attempt to define it in relation to the constitution of social reality and the legitimation of political action by making a few abstractions.

Myth has played and still plays a fundamental and decisive role both in the expression and in the cultural and political understanding of a society, be it a so-called “primitive” or “modern” society. Etymologically, myth comes from $\mu\tilde{\mu}\theta\omicron\varsigma$, with the root $\mu\tilde{\mu}$, which in the first meaning recalls the onomatopoeia of emitting sounds and, in a second time, the act of speaking⁵.

The saying of the myth

As it is etymologically linked to saying, to the word, myth presupposes a relationship; a relationship between who says and who listens and between the saying and what is said.

But what kind of relationship is it?

For Plato the *mythologein* (by practical questions we intend here mythology – with Jesi – as a synonym of myths, while maintaining some reservations, and not – with Jolles – as a “mixture of opposites”) is a genre of *poiesis*⁶ that has as its subject tales about Gods, divine beings, heroes, etc. It is therefore, we could say, an art or at least a saying related to the transcendent.

But, if by transcendent we mean here the totally other from itself from the subject, the otherness, be it divine or human, is nevertheless a transcendence⁷.

⁵ ‘Wort, Rede, Gespräch, Überlegung, Erzählung, Sage, Märchen, Mythos’, Hjalmar Frisk, *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1954-1972).

⁶ Furio Jesi, *Mito*, (Milano: Mondadori, 1980), 16-17.

⁷ Raffaella Sabra Palmisano “Alterità e Nemico: per una definizione di guerra solipsista”, *Dada Rivista di Antropologia post-globale*, n.1, (Giugno 2016):123-144.

A relation with the transcendent that does not seem to have disappeared even in the so-called “advanced” and laical civilizations, whose political system is not based – at least apparently – on a power of divine origins.

So, what is nowadays the relationship with transcendence about in the myth?

And what about the legitimacy of power and the creation of institutions now that, as regards for example a society such as that of Europe or of the USA, it seems that there is no longer a mythical legitimacy of power, and that there is no link between the divine and the creation and management of political institutions?

We do not want to consider myth in a reductive way as the systematization and foundation of actions and speeches that concerns sacred subjects, nor as a “primitive” form of theological speculation or naive cultural or scientific research, but as a fundamental socio-political force and a primary form of legitimation of future and past institutions, as well as present, both in “primitive” and “non-primitive” societies. All the more so considering what Malinowski said on the subject:

“From my own study of living myths among savages, I should say that primitive man has to a very limited extent the purely artistic or scientific interest in nature; there is but little room for symbolism in his ideas and tales; and myth, in fact, is not an idle rhapsody, not an aimless outpouring of vain imaginings, but a hard-working, extremely important cultural force. Besides ignoring the cultural function of myth, this theory imputes to primitive man a number of imaginary interests, and it confuses several clearly distinguishable types of story, the fairy tale, the legend, the saga, and the sacred tale or myth”⁸.

Thus it seems that it is rather the “non-primitive” man, the man of the “rational” who, observing with an external gaze the “primitive”, the “non-rational” man, recklessly attributes to myth an imaginary, abstract and socio-politically inconsistent meaning. A fictional conceptual rhapsody that has very little of “rational”.

Myth is incorporated in the cultural fact: sometimes in myth lies the *ratio* that has led and leads to a certain social behavior, to a system of law, to a cult or a custom etc., all elements, these, which are an integral part of the social system.

⁸ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, (Glencoe, Illinois: The free press, 1948), 75

The existence and socio-political⁹ contribution of the myth does not “merely transcend the act of telling the narrative, not only do they draw their substance from life and its interests—they govern and control many cultural features, they form the dogmatic backbone of primitive civilization”¹⁰. And not only of the so-called primitive civilizations.

The relationship between myth and transcendence, whether this is a sacred or secular transcendence, and the constitution of social reality (and therefore of the legitimation of certain types of power within a society) can be understood starting from the relationship between myth and magic in primitive societies analyzed by Malinowski:

“Sociological myth, on the other hand especially in primitive cultures, is usually blended with legends about the sources of magical power. It can be said without exaggeration that the most typical, most highly developed, mythology in primitive societies is that of magic, and the function of myth is not to explain but to vouch for, not to satisfy curiosity but to give confidence in power, not to spin out yarns but to establish the flowing freely from present-day occurrences, frequently similar validity of belief. The deep connection between myth and cult, the pragmatic function of myth in enforcing belief, has been so persistently overlooked in favor of the etiological or explanatory theory of myth that it was necessary to dwell on this point”¹¹.

The fact that the role of the myth here defined is “not to explain but to vouch for, not to satisfy curiosity but to give confidence in power”¹², allows a parallelism between the role of the mythology of the magic in primitive societies and the role of the transcendent element, be it sacred or secular, in “non-primitive” societies. Also because, precisely,

“Myth, it may be added at once, can attach itself not only to magic but to any form of social power or social claim. It is used always to account for extraordinary privileges or duties, for great social inequalities, for severe burdens of rank, whether this be very high or very low. Also the beliefs and powers of religion are traced to their sources by mythological accounts.”¹³

⁹ About the relation between myth and politics today: Paolo Bellini, *Mitopie Tecno-politiche. Stato-nazione, impero e globalizzazione*, (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2011).

¹⁰ Bronislaw Malinowski, *ibid.*, 85.

¹¹ Bronislaw Malinowski, *ibid.*, 64-65.

¹² Bronislaw Malinowski, *ibid.*, 64-65.

¹³ Bronislaw Malinowski, *ibid.*, 64.

Power, social organization, etc., must be protected and preserved.

A saying that inspires confidence, that is in some way paradigmatic, is fundamental in the process of protection.

“As our sacred story lives in our ritual, in our morality, as it governs our faith and controls our conduct, even so does his myth for the savage”¹⁴.

Myth is a saying that has vast affective, cognitive and social action implications, since it expresses the relationship between the symbol-sign and who performs it (as an actor-listener or actor-speaker). And it is for this reason that it seems essential that the semantics, within the science of myth, should not be limited to a dogmatic vision of the archetypal-universal symbolic-signified correspondence, but should instead take into account the historical, social, ethno-political context in which the myth is performed.

“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”¹⁵.

Myth is in fact an essential part of the system of representation and auto-representation of every society, whether primitive or not.

Like the primitive, the man of contemporary society too is involved in issues of social pragmatics management.

And, as mythology for the primitive, “the sacred lore of the tribe, is, as we shall see, a powerful means of assisting primitive man, of allowing him to make the two ends of his cultural patrimony meet”¹⁶,

¹⁴ Bronislaw Malinowski, *ibid.*, 78.

¹⁵ Gerard Bouchard, *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 23.

¹⁶ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, 76.

so it is for the contemporary man in moral as well as sociological matters that do not concern religion or morality in general, since the myth allows an “entirely different mental attitude”¹⁷.

Myth allows man “to make the two ends of his cultural patrimony meet”, as it acts as a paradigm of a “primeval reality” that is still relevant (as we shall see), and it provides a range of sociopolitical order, customs and beliefs: “Myth, as a statement of primeval reality which still lives in present-day life and as a justification by precedent, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief. It is, therefore, neither a mere narrative, nor a form of science, nor a branch of art or history, nor an explanatory tale. It fulfils a function *sui generis* closely connected with the nature of tradition, and the continuity of culture, with the relation between age and youth, and with the human attitude towards the past. The function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events. Myth is, therefore, an indispensable ingredient of all culture. It is, as we have seen, constantly regenerated; every historical change creates its mythology, which is, however, but indirectly related to historical fact. Myth is a constant by-product of living faith, which is in need of miracles; of sociological status, which demands precedent; of moral rule, which requires sanction. We have perhaps made a too ambitious attempt to give a new definition of myth”¹⁸.

So, how does the myth affect the individual and community conduct?

Myth as an institution

Since myth is a saying, and a saying ontologically presupposes a relationship, myth is social, it is a narration that is born in society and creates social order and therefore institution in the sense of *instatuere*: to establish and create order; and what creates or puts order, form, and therefore educates.

Myth is social education, it is the saying created by relation, the saying that creates relation and directs and organizes relation. It is a “charter for social action”.

Myth is a paradigm of action and social organization, and represents, in every society, a point of reference, a model of correct behavior with which to measure one's own individual behavior.

¹⁷ Bronislaw Malinowski, *ibid.*, 76.

¹⁸ Bronislaw Malinowski, *ibid.*, 122.

“The actions, undertakings and dramas of the mythical actors establish a socially guaranteed model of reliable behavior for the social actors. Its function is to act as a *magna charta* for institutions and the structure of relations. But, as Pettazzoni (1950) observes, in order to act as a model or as a *magna charta*, the myth must be decisive, authoritative and binding for the narrator and the listener. It must be considered true. But what in a myth is told, can be considered true or truthful only when what in it “happened” *illo tempore* can be witnessed, i.e. verified by institutions, ways of being and various other “signs” in the present”¹⁹.

It is sufficient to remember that the *mythologein*, in the Platonic perspective, is precisely that idiom, tendentially sacred, in which social relations or other types of structural relations are expressed or reflected. An idiom through which, later on, there is also a critique of social relations²⁰. It is indeed a form of *poiesis* which, thanks to its language – a language known, albeit apparently transcendent or metaphysical, by most or all of the society in which the performance of myth takes place – models the “metaphorisation of social relations projected into an extraneous form in the supernatural world”²¹.

The present of the myth

The saying is always a saying related to something. The “something” of the myth is, however, more similar to a “how”: it expresses a way of being of the *Lebenswelt*, in its being an expression of man's relationship with the world and a paradigm of action.

A paradigm, the mythical one, that oscillates between the ahistoricity of the implicit universal of the myth and the historically mutable of the real experienced daily by the social actors performing the myth.

We mostly speak of mythical “facts”, always with reference to the *illo tempore*, specific to the myth.

¹⁹ Antonio Luigi Palmisano, *Mito e Società. Analisi della mitologia dei Lotuho del Sudan*, (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1989), 224. (Translated by me)

²⁰ Antonio Luigi Palmisano, “I due volti della parola. Un approccio antropologico alla fondazione del mito”, in *Etnostoria*, ½ (2001), Aisthesis, 147-194: 173.

²¹ Antonio Luigi Palmisano, *ibid.*, 174. (Translated by me)

And myth, of course, has its time. But myth is also capable of creating and ordering individual and community time as an expression of the culture of a given society, and of the ways of interpreting and experiencing life. It is a paradigm of interpretation and social action.

In other words, we could say that myth is an event (understood as experienced, individualized and punctual), in that it concerns us, that is, it concerns those who perform it. And it concerns as an event (experienced), because the *mythologeîn* is a performance. It presents itself to the conscience of the social actors as performing subjects in a specific context: there can only be an event at the moment and in the place where the event is experienced; it is therefore not a simple event but something that locates and temporizes an action.

And the myth, the *mythologeîn*, localizes and temporizes an action, apparently in the *illo tempore* but, *de facto*, renews from time to time, in its being performed, its being present event, here and now, in the society that performs it.

It is not, therefore, a mere thought, but an ongoing experience. The myth is actualized-actualize itself from time to time.

Its present presence, as it concerns the society in which it is performed, makes it an integral part of the *Lebenswelt*:

“The present, the current, can never take the form of a fact, of something that is only as it has become, finished. The fact, the present fact, in the naturalistic-empiristic sense, is a contradiction in itself, because it would affirm that something that has already “become” is currently being present. Certainly what is “done” can, as a “done”, appear present, but only by abstracting itself from its becoming, which is precisely its own *manifestation*”²².

Myth, inasmuch as it is the saying about something, a story, and the *legeîn* – understood in its most ancient sense as posing, putting in front of, bringing together, putting together²³ –, therefore the *mythologeîn*, is the saying of something that has already been, and therefore a fact (also an imaginary one), but in its being posed, put in front of, performed here and now, is therefore a manifestation, and is the saying of a manifestation and therefore of a becoming.

²² Ernesto Grassi, “Il problema del logos”, in *Archivio di Filosofia*, n. 2, (1936), 151-183:154. (Translated by me)

²³ Martin Heidegger, *Saggi e discorsi*, (Varese: Mursia Editore, 1976), 142.

The *mythologein* so understood is therefore a saying of what is manifesting itself, even if it is already past, which is actualized from time to time in the moment in which it is performed or in which the social life, the approach to *Lebenswelt*, allows itself to be concerned by the myth.

This seems to be true not only in the case of the social myth but, for example, also in the case of the cosmogonic myth, because in the moment in which the event is told, in revealing the relationship between the “fact” and the here and now, the “fact” is updated. Cosmogonic myths also explain in a certain sense the contemporary reality of something that is manifesting itself, on the basis of something that has already happened and that, perhaps paradoxically, finds itself in an eternal present (which is not ahistoric). Myth orders it and gives it meaning, and it is not so much a causal relationship as, rather, a modal one: an expression of man's mode of relation to his world.

But how can the myth be the saying of something in progress even if it refers to something that has already become? And how can this be said to be an act actualizing from time to time?

For Dilthey the lived experience, *Erlebnis*, is accomplished in its expression, *Ausdruck*, which is intended as a creative act.

The expression (*Ausdruck*) that completes the lived experience (*Erlebnis*) is an expression intelligible to society through the many forms of language. The myth is *Erlebnis* and *Ausdruck*, experience lived *illo tempore* and creative act here and now in its being performed, and is again *Erlebnis* its being performed from time to time here and now etc.. It finds its fulfillment, its realization (and its being an experience to be expressed...) in the performance.

It is so that *verum et fieri convertuntur* because the myth is always performance between social actors and therefore it is always performed and performing, from time to time.

The saying of myth is thus relation and construction of relation. The saying of myth is information, and the information it contains, implements and creates is a “relationship of modification and reciprocal definition, that is, of formation, within the circular process of human communication: a process, not least, of choices”²⁴.

²⁴ Antonio Luigi Palmisano, “Dal Giappone, formato fumetto”, in *I Viaggi di Erodoto*, 6, 17 (1992), 48-67: 51. (Translated by me)

Conclusion

The power of myth lies in the possibility of recalling and reinterpreting mythologies and actualising the myth itself from time to time.

The myth is thus characterized by the historical-social consciousness from which and in which it is performed and forms a process of social construction and therefore exerts a normative influence on the social action of the person, communicating, precisely, norms, expectations and models of behavior.

Of course, the myth has its own autonomy with respect to social action, but it does not have a semantic autonomy²⁵ with respect to the social context. Myth and social action are complementary, and myth must be related to social action-performance in order to be able to “carry out its effectiveness” and “assume its meaning” (*Erlebnis-Ausdruck*).

What about today's construction of social reality and political legitimacy in the society of the triumph of technology, of logic, which is apparently “demythised”?

If, on the one hand, contemporary society can be considered “... demitizing civilization *par excellence* (this was well one of the points from which the bultmannian proposal had taken its cue)”²⁶, on the other hand, it can be considered mythopoeitic *par excellence*, since it has made of “demythization” its founding myth.

From the divinization of myth and the world, we have moved on to the myth of rationality. Myth that remains the founding and fundamental structure of social construction.

And this is the difference today, in the “non-primitive” and “demythised” society: the myth exists, but it has changed its name.

²⁵ Edmund Roland Leach, “The epistemological background to Malinowski’s empiricism”, in *Man and Culture*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), 119-137.

²⁶ Marco Maria Olivetti, “Indici degli atti dei convegni sulla demitizzazione e l’ermeneutica”, in *Archivio di Filosofia*, I, (1979), VII-XXX: XIII. (Translated by me)



Sesto San Giovanni (MI)
via Monfalcone, 17/19



& Ass. AlboVersorio Edizioni
Senago (MI)
via Martiri di Belfiore, 11

© Metabasis.it, rivista semestrale di filosofia e comunicazione.
Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Varese n. 893 del 23/02/2006.
ISSN 1828-1567
ISBN 9788857577760



Quest'opera è stata rilasciata sotto la licenza Creative Commons Attribuzione-NonCommerciale-NoOpereDerivate 2.5 Italy. Per leggere una copia della licenza visita il sito web <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/it/> o spedisci una lettera a Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.