Political myth: the political uses of history, tradition and memory

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Introduction
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Reflecting on the violent collapse of Yugoslavia, the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugresic makes the perceptive observation that, “in all the former Yugoslav territories people are now living a postmodern chaos. Past, present and future are all lived simultaneously.” For Ugresic, the Balkan Wars of the 1990’s were fought for control over the ‘territory’ of memory. “In the name of the present, a war was waged for the past; in the name of the future, a war against the present.” The Czech writer, Milan Kundera makes a similar observation about the politics of memory in his satirical novel The Book of Laughter and Forgetting. “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” Kundera rather cynically characterizes politics as the struggle for control over the past.

They shout that they want to shape a better future, but it’s not true. The future is only an indifferent void no one cares about, but the past is filled with life, and its countenance is irritating, repellent, wounding, to the point that we want to destroy or repaint it. We want to be masters of the future only for the power to change the past.”

What both Kundera and Ugresic highlight is that control over the past is a political prize that is literally worth fighting for. How, why and in what circumstances the past becomes a significant source of political legitimation is the subject of my study.

2 ibid, p.6.
4 ibid, pp.30-31. The ‘they’ Kundera refers to are not just the Communist Party, but all political parties.
My starting point is Ugresic’s depiction of Yugoslavia in the last decade of the twentieth century as a ‘postmodern chaos’ where past, present and future exist contemporaneously. I will argue that the phenomenon described by Ugresic is modern political myth. Political myth is essentially the ritualized presentation of the collective memories and traditions of a society in terms of a political present. In political myth the boundaries between past, present and future are broken down. In ‘mythic time’ the past becomes an essential component of present social reality. From Kundera’s point of view, the struggle of memory against forgetting is about political control over the way the past is represented in the present. The focus of my study is the way the past is represented and communicated through political myth.

Political myth communicates a community’s symbolically significant ‘sacred’ past and gives this past political meaning in the present. In giving the past symbolic meaning, political myth also structures and gives coherence to the collective memories and traditions of a community. However, the set of beliefs about the past embodied in a political myth are not necessarily logical or coherent. Vladimir Tismaneanu characterizes political myth as “intrinsically elusive” because, “political myths are not systems of thought but rather sets of beliefs whose foundations transcend logic; no empirical evidence can shatter their pseudo-cognitive immunity.”^5 For Tismaneanu it is the characteristic ‘immunity’ of political myth to rational

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refutation that gives it its strength. "The value of myth is that it mobilizes and energises the infrarational segments of political behaviour. Its propositions do not make sense because of rational coherence, but in spite of it." Tismaneanu argues therefore that political myth’s "power comes precisely from its lack of conceptual timidity." The apparent immunity political myth has to rigorous analysis is a source of both its persistence and its strength. The apparent immunity of political myth also poses a problem for any theoretical analysis of political myth. The Enlightenment assumption that myths would be swept away by secular, scientific rationality has not come to pass. Science and reason have not replaced myth. I argue therefore that it is not enough to dismiss the emergence of political myth in the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century, or in Serbia at the end of the century as an "incomprehensible reversion." I will argue with Henry Tudor that "political myths are ... a feature of advanced societies." I will also extend Tudor's statement to assert that "political myth is ... part of modernity."

Political myth is elusive because it offers communities a sense of coherence and meaning in a fragmented and meaningless world. George Steiner suggests that, the image we carry of a lost coherence, of a center that held, has authority greater than historical truth. Facts can refute but not remove it. It matches some profound psychological need. It gives us poise, a dialectical counterweight with which to situate our own condition.  

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8 ibid, p.15.
9 ibid, p.9.
10 Tismaneanu, V. op cit, p.10.
Tismaneanu makes a similar observation in his study of the re-emergence of political myth in post-communist Europe. "When societies tend to lose their centre and polarize along belligerent lines, myths not only try to explain reality but also act upon it and even supplant it." The image of a lost coherence, of 'a centre which will not hold', is important to understanding the psychological attraction of a political myth that explains the present and offers a compensatory sense of community identity and common meanings. For Charles Taylor, common meanings refer to what is significant for a society and what makes up a community's common reference world. Taylor argues that the sharing of a common reference world is the basis for a community, for "being shared is a collective act, it is a consciousness which is communally sustained."

In traditional societies, part of the common reference world was a common past, commonly known. However, as Kundera observes, the acceleration of history through mediated-media images means that "there is not a single historic event we can count on being commonly known." Without a common reference world there can be no communally sustained community consciousness. For Kundera, the power inherent in forgetting is political. A forgotten past is a void waiting to be filled by political myth. As the conservative and politically active German historian Michael Sturmer wrote,

12 Tismaneanu, V. op cit, p.27.
14 Kundera, M. op cit, p.10.


in a country without memory anything is possible .... In a land without history, the future is
controlled by those who determine the content of memory, who coin concepts and interpret
the past .... The search for a lost past is not an abstract striving for culture and education. It is
morally legitimate and politically necessary.\textsuperscript{15}

Sturmer’s statement opens up a dilemma to be addressed in my thesis. On the one
hand I acknowledge that the past, especially the image of the past communicated by
political myth, is a powerful source of legitimating authority. On the other hand, I
question Sturmer’s assertion that it is morally legitimate to appropriate the past to
control the present. Political myth can provide a community with a source of common
meanings around which it can forge its common identity. However, political myth is
more commonly used to mobilise a disaffected population around images of ethnic,
religious and social exclusivity.

My concern stems from the manipulative ease with which a mythic
consciousness can be created. The immediate context for my concern is the disastrous
impact political myth has had for the peoples of Yugoslavia during the 1990’s. The
broader context for my concern is that political myth is latent in all modern societies
and can emerge in response to globalisation, modernity or just the complexities of
modern society. In his study of André Malraux’s fiction, Gino Raymond makes a
comment about the interrelationship between politics and myth that is worth

\textsuperscript{15} Sturmer, M. ‘History in a Land Without History,’ in Knowlton, J & Cates, T (Trans.) Forever in the Shadow of
Hitler?: Original Documents of the Historikerstreit, the Controversy Concerning the Singularity of the Holocaust,
Humanities Press, New Jersey, 1993, pp. 16-17. The reaction to Sturmer’s instrumental use of history to seek to
control current German politics is well discussed by Holub, R.C. Jurgen Habermas : Critic in the Public Sphere,
162-189. A detailed and wide-ranging account of the 1980’s debate about the German past can be found in
Knowlton, J. & Cates, T. op cit, and in Maier, C.S. The Unmasterable Past : History, Holocaust, and German
reflecting on. Raymond approaches Malraux’s fiction by analysing “the interlocking relationship between politics and myth, where it is the latter which provides the coherence and continuity underlying the contradictions that are apparent in the former.”16 I will take up Raymond’s suggestion that myth may provide the coherence and continuity that is missing in modern societies and can no longer be provided by politics. That myth may be used to provide a sense of coherence out of the chaos of war is starkly expressed by Gur Duijzings in the following comment on Serbian uses of the Kosovo Myth.

Since the mid-1980s Serbian nationalist propaganda has interpreted events according to the narratives provided by folk epics. Serbian nationalist politicians constructed a ‘story’ from these epic narratives which was constantly repeated and rehearsed before the war broke out, and then, as soon as the violence started used to create order out of the chaotic reality of war, imbuing it with higher national or transcendental meaning .... Reality was simplified, messages were sharpened and nuances pruned away; content was polarised and contrasts were emphasised.17

On another level, John Girling also comments that “myths ... emerge as a reaction to the sterile ‘rationality’ of modern politics, economics, and law.”18 Modern political myths therefore may emerge in less dramatic circumstances than the Yugoslav crisis of the 1990’s. My concern in this context is that the legitimating potential of political myth is little understood. As Christopher Flood comments, “the relative lack of theoretical work on political myth is especially striking when it is compared with the

enormous body of material devoted to the general theory of myth." What my thesis will address is the 'relative lack of theoretical work.'

While there is a relative lack of theoretical work on political myth, the foundations for conceptualising political myth have been securely laid in works by Cassirer, Tudor, Cuthbertson, Girling, Flood and Tismaneanu. Except for Ernst Cassirer, I do not intend to paraphrase or discuss the arguments of these works except where they contribute towards my own argument. Instead, I intend to extend the existing literature on political myth to include recent writing on collective memory, heritage, nostalgia, tradition and commemoration. I argue that much recent writing on the way images of the past are represented in the present touches on political myth. By encompassing writing on collective memory, tradition and commemoration within the theoretical framework of political myth I will not only give these diffuse works a sense of common unity, but I will re-focus attention on political myth as a neglected component of political theory.

The characteristic that I will focus on throughout this study is that political myth is essentially narrative in form. As Christopher Flood explains, "sequences of events are endowed with significance by the ways in which description of people, 

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settings, and scenes is combined with narration." This is shown clearly in Kevin Foster's analysis of the way the Falklands War was reported and written about in, Fighting Fictions: War, Narrative and National Identity. Foster's analysis is a revealing study of how narrative frames historical understanding. Foster's study sets out to "arrest the mythopoetic inertia and restore some connective complexity, to move back from myth ... to the historical quality of things, to recover the memory of how and why these myths about the Falklands War were forged." Foster convincingly argues that these myths were constructed within a predetermined narrative that promoted a 'specific political agenda' for "so many of the facts about the Falklands War are selected and shaped by the determining political narrative of national redemption and so renewal." I will argue in chapter 6 on commemoration that the 'predetermined narrative' identified by Foster is the master commemorative narrative into which the political myths of a community are embedded.

Political myth is not only embedded in a master narrative, but is essentially a narrative itself; "a narrative that is able to inspire collective loyalties, affinities, passions, and actions." For most theorists narrative is the defining characteristic of a political myth. For example, Tudor states that, "a myth is, by definition, a story, that

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21 Flood, C.G. op cit, p. 120.
23 See Chapter 3 of Fighting Fictions: War, Narrative and National Identity for a detailed analysis of Margaret Thatcher's use of "enobling narratives to establish her radical policy agenda as the means to moral and spiritual as well as political redemption." ibid, p.26.
24 ibid, p.103.
25 Tismaneanu, V. op cit, p. 15.
Introduction

is, a narrative of events in dramatic form." In a theoretical analysis of myth in general, Alan Dundes argues that, "a myth is a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form .... The critical adjective sacred distinguishes myth from other forms of narrative." However, I argue that while political myths are essentially secular, the image of the past they transmit has been sacralised. In such a sense political myth can be conceptualised as "sacred myth; as an interpretation of reality based on immutable truth." As 'immutable truth', the past can be seen in terms of a "transfigured reality" for the story related by a myth "was told not unequivocally in the past tense but in the tense of a metaphysical present." As Moore observed, "mythic form reveals 'truth' metaphorically." Bruce Lincoln emphasises that for the 'sacred past' to be transmitted as 'transfigured reality', the narrative told by a myth must "posses both credibility and authority." Lincoln states that, "a narrative possessed of authority is one for which successful claims are made not only to the status of truth, but what is more, to the status of paradigmatic truth." It is the claiming of paradigmatic truth for a sacralised past that enables political myth to defy logical rigorous analysis. Thus as irrefutable 'truth' political myths are difficult to confront rationally.

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26 Tudor, H. op cit, p.16.
30 ibid.
31 Moore, M.P. op cit, p. 296.
33 ibid.
Before I outline the main proposition of my thesis I would like to point out that the disquieting tone that I have established in the introduction is deliberate. My objective in undertaking a study of political myth is both to rehabilitate political myth as a concept worthy of closer analysis, and to present a warning about the potential dangers emerging political myths pose for modern societies. All political communities have their political myths and it will be argued that these myths provide some of the common meanings, the 'glue' that holds a society together. I have no argument with such relatively benign myths. My concern focuses on those political myths that become powerful sources of legitimation, that mask unresolved legitimacy deficits, and that manipulate support for the often dubious legitimacy claims of a political elite. At an extreme level, these political myths become the raison d' être of a society. My further concern is that political myths are not treated seriously enough by political leaders, policy makers and political commentators, and that there is a tendency to dismiss political myths as manifestations of irrational political behaviour. I argue that there is a danger in underestimating the destructive capacity of a political myth. I will argue also that no society, no matter how politically sophisticated, is immune from the influence of political myth. I agree with Vladimir Tismaneanu that the return of political myth will emerge as an "expression of the crisis of modernity."\(^{34}\)

\(^{34}\) Tismaneanu, V. *op cit*, p.36.
The main proposition of my thesis is a relatively simple one: that the past as represented and communicated through political myth is a powerful source of legitimation. However, this proposition raises two basic problems; the nature of the past being communicated and the nature of the legitimacy being engendered by political myth. The underlying argument of my discussion of these two problems in chapter 3 to 7, is that a consciously ‘constructed’ symbolic past is both spurious and illusory and is contrived by political elites to mask unresolved legitimacy deficits in contemporary societies. As such, legitimacy based on political myth is a deception; a circumvention of ‘authentic’ sources of legitimating authority. I argue therefore that what political myth offers is a simulated ersatz form of legitimacy that can never be more than compensatory.

My argument that political myth is contrived by political elites to compensate for unresolved legitimacy deficits does not answer the question of how and why a political myth can emerge in a modern society as a source of legitimating authority. I suggest that the answer to the question of the emergence of political myth can be found in the nature of the relationship that a community develops with the past. It is through collective memory and tradition that a community constructs an image of the past and gives that past both normative value and ‘authenticity’. I argue that it is in the commemorative process that such a past is ‘sacralised’ and that it is the symbolic sacralised past that is communicated through political myth. The image of the past that is communicated is ‘symbolic truth’; its ‘authenticity’ from a historical point of
view is irrelevant for political myth communicates a sacralised past as myth which is impervious to rational refutation.

The strength and resilience of a mythologised past is that it is a representation of the collective memories and traditions of a community. To understand how the past, whether based on an historical event, spurious, or simply made up, can wield such legitimating authority through political myth, it is necessary to conceptualise collective memory, tradition and commemoration. Conceptualisation will give an insight into the nature of political myth but will not answer the question as to why political myth is resorted to as a source of legitimacy.

I will use an analysis of the development of the Kosovo Myth in Serbia to explore the question of why political myth is resorted to as a source of legitimation. I will argue that in the absence of any identifiable sources of legitimation in post-communist Serbia, the established Serbian political elite fell back on political myth as a compensatory form of legitimation. The Kosovo Myth was not only used as a source of legitimacy but to provide an enabling emotional image to mobilise a populist movement behind a political program based on ethnic exclusivity. What I will draw from this dramatic example is that in times of social stress, legitimation crisis, or where the very integrity of a political community is at stake, a well-developed political myth can offer an elite an ersatz form of compensatory legitimation. I will stress also that the perceived strength of such legitimation and the
perceived ease with which political myth can be appealed to makes political myth an attractive source of legitimation in all societies.

I will argue that it does not require a Yugoslav-type crisis for an elite to fall back on political myth to replace or supplement existing forms of legitimation. It is this point that creates the underlying concern that is expressed throughout my study. I maintain that legitimation based on political myth is a delusive sham, a substitute for elites having to 'win' legitimacy based on actual performance. My concern is that elites succeed in such deception because so little attention is paid to political myth. My thesis echoes Cassirer's warning of fifty years ago: to defeat political myth it is necessary to understand the sources of its authority and the way it can be manipulated to serve the often dubious needs of a political elite. What my thesis will provide is a conceptual framework against which the re-emergence of political myth in any community can be exposed through analysis, confronted at its birth and destroyed as a source of legitimation.

My argument is developed in three distinct sections. In the first section I offer a detailed analysis of Cassirer's The Myth of the State as the most relevant study to understanding modern political myths. The Myth of the State was written as a response to the rise to power of National Socialism and what Cassirer believed to be an inexplicable regression from the rational ideals espoused by the Enlightenment. Cassirer's analysis of political myth was also written as a warning against its re-
emergence at a later time. My second chapter in the first section is a response to Cassirer's warning in the form of a detailed analysis of the Kosovo Myth in Serbian politics during the 1990's. The re-emergence of a powerful legitimating political myth at the end of the twentieth century provides a relevant context for re-examining the nature of modern political myths. In the second section of my thesis which comprises chapter 3 to 6, I extend the meaning of political myth to include collective memory, heritage, nostalgia, memory sites, tradition and commemoration as essential components of modern political myths. Each conceptual category of collective memory, tradition and commemoration is backed up by specific case studies in the appendices to provide contextual relevance. The third section of my argument, comprising chapter 7, analyses how and why political myth can become a source of legitimating authority in all societies.

Just as Cassirer's context for writing *The Myth of the State* as a cautionary warning against the re-emergence of destructive political myth was the rise of Nazism, my context is the destructive impact of the Kosovo Myth on the Balkans during the last decade of the twentieth century. Just as Cassirer's purpose was to analyse political myth as a warning to future generations, my purpose is to extend Cassirer's work and develop a conceptual framework against which the re-emergence of future political myths can be exposed and confronted.