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

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Chapter 1

Cassirer: The Concept of Political Myth
1. Introduction.

The legitimating potential of a powerful political myth is clearly apparent in the politics of Serbia during the last decade of the twentieth century. The underrating of the Kosovo Myth as an authoritative source of political legitimacy for the Milosevic regime was a contributing factor in the four Balkan Wars of the 1990's, including NATO's war against Serbia over Kosovo.¹ It was the underrating of political myth by the opponents of Fascism during the 1920's and 1930's that led the German philosopher, Ernst Cassirer to write The Myth of The State²: an analysis of political myth as much as a warning against its re-emergence. While a number of writers such as Henry Tudor, Political Myth³, John Girling, Myths and Politics in Western Societies: Evaluating the Crisis of Modernity in the United States, Germany, and Great Britain,⁴ and Christopher Flood, Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction⁵ have taken up and extended the theoretical aspects of Cassirer's work, no current writers on this subject exhibit Cassirer's sense of immediacy and urgency. Vladimir Tismaneanu's

Footnotes:

¹ I will discuss the Kosovo Myth in some depth in the next chapter as an introduction to modern political myths.
³ Tudor, H. Political Myth, op cit.
⁴ Girling, J. Myths and Politics in Western Societies: Evaluating the Crisis of Modernity in the United States, Germany, and Great Britain, op cit.
Europe\textsuperscript{6} examines the re-emergence of legitimating political myths in Central Europe and the former Soviet Union and has some of the sense of foreboding exhibited in the closing chapters of Cassirer's \textit{The Myth of The State}. In the context of Tismaneanu's general observations and the reality of a political myth in action in Serbia, Cassirer's mid-century cautionary study of political myth warrants further attention and analysis.

Cassirer's main concern is the ease with which mythic consciousness can be deliberately created to structure a political program and mobilise a population to support it. His context is the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazi Party. \textit{The Myth of The State} is not an analysis of Fascism as such, but an analysis of what Cassirer sees as the salient features of political myth: features which can re-emerge within a different political framework in a different historical context. It is the premise of my study that political myth is latent in all communities and re-emerges as a potential legitimating or de-legitimating phenomenon during periods of social stress or crisis. However, before discussing political myth in a more current historical context, I will examine Cassirer's approach to political myth within the context of his time: Nazi Germany. It is beyond the scope of my study to delve into the history of Nazism in any depth. Rather, two brief descriptions of the calculated creation of a mythic consciousness will be used as a lead into Cassirer's theory of political myth.

\textsuperscript{6} Tismaneanu, V. \textit{Fantasies of Salvation: Democracy, Nationalism, and Myth in Post-Communist Europe}, \textit{op cit.}
The first example is a comparatively insignificant concert given during the last days of World War II. Amidst the rubble and chaos of a bombed out Berlin during the death throes of the 1000 Year Reich, the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra performed a final concert on April 12th 1945 that was replete with symbolic significance. Albert Speer had deliberately chosen a program of Wagner for the final concert. “For the beginning I had ordered Brünnhilde’s last aria and the finale from Götterdämmerung – a rather bathetic and also melancholy gesture pointing to the end of the Reich.”

Speer’s concert is more than a ‘melacholy gesture’. The potent symbolism of Brünnhilde ascending the funeral pyre to join Siegfried in death, followed by the destruction of Valhalla would have been well understood by the audience. Since the late nineteenth century Wagner’s operatic narrative “symbolised for his audience the elemental force of German nationalism,” and “the Ring came to symbolise Germany’s destiny of victory, aggrandisement, heroism, and solidarity.”

Playing Die Götterdämmerung literally brought to an end a mythic consciousness reflected in Nietzsche’s prophesy that, “in some inaccessible abyss the German spirit still rests and dreams, undestroyed in glorious health, profundity, and Dionysian strength, like a knight sunk in slumber”. The heroic slumbering knight who would arise to save the German people is Siegfried who has been betrayed and ‘stabbed in the back’. Hitler used the same imagery following a rally in 1920 when he wrote that “a fire was kindled from whose flame one day the sword must come which would regain

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8 Girling, J. op cit, p.99
9 ibid, p.103.
10 Quoted by ibid, p.104.
freedom for the German Siegfried and life for the German nation."\(^{11}\) Alfred Rosenberg, the Nazi ideologist and author of the influential *Der Mythus des 20 Jahrhunderts* also picked up on Nietzsche's prophesy.

Let no one believe that the German spirit has forever lost its mythical home ... some day it will find itself awake in all the morning freshness following a tremendous sleep: then it will slay dragons, destroy vicious dwarfs, wake Brünnhilde — and even Wotan's spear will be unable to stop its course.\(^{12}\)

In staging his final concert, Albert Speer is not so much consciously putting to rest Siegfried and the 'German spirit' as operating within a powerful mythic paradigm. Speer's account of the concert\(^{13}\) indicates that each piece was specifically chosen to create an emotional impact. Nicolaus von Below, who sat with Albert Speer remarks, "can there ever have been such a moment, such an experience?"\(^{14}\) It is the deliberate creation of a mythic consciousness through the manipulation of such 'moments' and 'experiences' that is the subject of Ernst Cassirer's sustained attack on the power of political myth. Unfortunately Cassirer did not live to witness the final destruction of Fascism or the publication of *The Myth of The State*; he died on April 13\(^{th}\), the day following the Berlin concert.

A more substantial example of the calculated creation of a mythic consciousness can be seen in the Nazi commemorative ceremony which honoured the martyrs of the attempted putsch of 1923. A brief outline of this ceremony offers a historical context for Cassirer's conception of political myth. The

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\(^{11}\) Quoted by *ibid.*

\(^{12}\) Quoted by *ibid.*

\(^{13}\) In his history of the fall of Berlin, Cornelius Ryan states that Speer's account should not be taken at face value as even the date, program and performers of this concert have been disputed. See Ryan, C. *The Last Battle*, Collins, London, 1966, p. 303.

commemorative ceremony is an elaborately staged ritual performance designed to evoke a collective emotional response towards the 'sacred' founding myth of the National Socialist Party. The failed putsch of 1923 is transformed into a 'blood baptism', a turning point that symbolises the rebirth of the national community through struggle, sacrifice, discipline and faith. The founding myth is presented in the form of a dramatic narrative performed on the actual 'sacred site' of the attempted putsch in Munich. The political liturgy began on November 8th 1923, with Hitler addressing the other survivors of the attempted putsch at the Munich Burgerbraukeller from where the putsch originated. On the next day, November 9th, the former putschists ritually followed the route taken in 1923 to the Feldherrnhalle. The marchers, a 'blood order', were preceded by the actual Blood Flag of 1923 the,

flag which was also used every year on Reichsparty Day at Nuremberg for the consecration of the banners and flags of the Party's organisations, as Hitler, accompanied by the bearer of the Blood Flag, marched along the ranks of standard-bearers, stopping in front of each one to perform an act of mystical transmission as he gripped the material of the Blood Flag in one hand and the fabric of the flag to be consecrated in the other. The mythic qualities of the flag gave a sense of timelessness and continuity to the ceremony. A feeling of timeless continuity was heightened in 1935 when the sixteen martyrs of 1923 were 'resurrected' as 'blood witnesses' before being immortalised in the newly built Ehrentempel. The ritual that followed is well summarised by Paul Connerton.

16 Flood, C. op cit, p. 189.
The route was marked by two hundred and forty columns, each bearing the name of one of 'the fallen of the movement'. As the head of the procession reached each column the names of one of the dead was called out. As the procession arrived at the Feldhernhalle sixteen cannon shots rang out, one for each of the sixteen fallen of 1923. As the coffins were placed on carriages for conveyance to the Ehrentempel, Hitler laid a wreath on the memorial. At the Ehrentempel the names of the sixteen 'blood witnesses were called out individually, the chorus of Hitler Youth responded to the intonation of each name with the cry "Here!" and after each cry three shots rang out in salute.17

Such a ritualised performance of the National Socialist foundation myth must also be seen within the broader context of the National Socialist commemorative calendar which began with Hitler's seizure of power on January 30th 1933 and ended on November 9th with the commemoration of the martyrs just described. Connerton states that,

the 'sacred' event of the putsch prefigured victory, while the 'sacred' event of the seizure of power finally gave real shape to the content of revelation, the 'Reich'. Between the two events a mythic concordance is established. The crucial recurring date of this mythic narrative is 9 November.18

Hitler's presence gave unity and coherence to the 'mythic concordance'; the Fuhrer appeared as the mythical hero personifying the spirit of Germany.

The Fuhrer was the central reference point of the celebrations. The Fuhrer-myth united the different rituals and endowed Hitler's charisma with supernatural powers, making him the integrating and legitimating force of the National Socialist regime.19

It is the legitimating potential of myth presented as a 'sacred' narrative and performed at a 'sacred site' that uses "the logic of associated response, a felt logic which finds truth in emotional response."20 It is the potential of the 'emotional response' "to arouse in the audience a willing acceptance of the irrational beliefs

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18 ibid, p. 43 See Connerton for a more detailed analysis of all the commemorative dates in this liturgical calendar. See also Thamer, H-U. 'The Orchestration of the National Community : The Nuremberg Party Rallies of the NSDAP', in Berghaus, G. (Ed.) op cit.
19 ibid, pp. 185-186.
of ... myth\textsuperscript{21} that underpins Cassirer’s analysis of political myth in \textit{The Myth of The State}.

The Berlin concert and the Nazi foundation myth are but two examples among many that provide a context for Cassirer’s analysis and outlook on political myth. I do not propose to examine Nazi cultic mythology in any depth; most examples have a similar theme to the ones cited. Cassirer’s concern is that both examples represent a regression from the rational world exemplified by the ideals of the Enlightenment. Both examples also represent the deliberate creation of a mythic consciousness; what Cassirer refers to as the technique of myth. For Cassirer, because a political myth can be ‘manufactured’, it can therefore be rationally refuted. \textit{The Myth of The State} is designed to provide the logic to identify, confront and destroy political myths. For Cassirer, one of the most powerful techniques of political myth is its ritual performance which transfigures history into a metaphysical present that suspends normal time. The historical reality of the failed 1923 putsch is transformed into a ‘sacred’ event and embedded in a performative cycle that takes it outside further historical re-interpretation. As a political myth the putsch cannot be understood in terms of ‘historical reality’, but only in terms of the values it had placed upon it. To Cassirer one of the most dangerous features of political myth is that through ritual performance myth imposes supreme values such as race, blood and sacrifice as a substitute for critical rational thought. The urgency that underlies the later part of Cassirer’s analysis of political myth is explained within the context of his time.

\textsuperscript{21} \textit{ibid}, p.50.
Cassirer believes that political myth can be confronted and destroyed by committed intellectuals and a resilient culture, but he underestimates the emotional, or to him, the irrational attraction of a political myth.

In this chapter I will critically examine Cassirer’s analysis of political myth. However, it is necessary to begin with Georges Sorel an earlier writer on political myth who, unlike Cassirer, fully understands the emotional and ‘irrational’ attraction that a powerful political myth can exert.

2. Georges Sorel.

Cassirer’s systematic but somewhat clinical study of the techniques of political myth never explicitly analyses the emotional power of myth to inspire political action as a matter of faith. Cassirer makes no reference to Georges Sorel even though Sorel’s 1906 *Reflections on Violence* discusses this very question and must have been well known to Cassirer. Sorel’s anti-rational philosophical approach as well as his politics would have been anathema to Cassirer. It explains why Sorel’s important insights into the emotional power of political myth are never fully developed or acknowledged by Cassirer. While Cassirer’s study of political myth forms the basis for understanding political myth at the end of the twentieth century, and is therefore the focus of my chapter, it is necessary to supplement Cassirer’s analysis with Sorel’s insight. In his study of the intellectual history of Post-Communist European societies, Vladimir Tismaneanu comments

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that, "of all the political thinkers associated with the Marxian tradition, none has preserved more actuality, at least at this juncture of cognitive anarchy, than the French thinker Georges Sorel." Tismaneanu uses Sorel rather than Cassirer to conceptualise the hold nationalist myths of salvation attain in Central and Southern European societies. Tismaneanu acknowledges that Sorel was wrong, to be sure, about the all-embracing value of the myth of the general strike. No less mistaken was he regarding the sanctifying, cathartic virtue of proletarian violence. But one thing he did understand clearly ... the power of myth as a discourse or story about origins, movement, and direction, a source of pride for the disempowered and a balm for the humiliated self.... (Sorel) understood better than so many of the official socialists of his age that individuals do not engage in politics for the sake of Cartesian demonstrations but for vivid, attractive, magnetizing images that can structure their mental world. Sorel's theory of the emotional power of mythic images is what Tismaneanu identifies as being important to understanding the resilience and power of current political myth. In a clear reference to Sorel's approach, Terry Eagleton also recognises the enabling qualities of the mythic image. In discussing the personal sacrifices men and women are prepared to make for a variety of political causes Eagleton poses a question towards the end of his analysis of ideology.

Men and women engaged in such conflicts do not live by theory alone; socialists have not given their lives over the generations for the tenet that the ratio of fixed to variable capital gives rise to tendential fall-off in the rate of profit. It is not in defence of the doctrine of base and superstructure that men and women are prepared to embrace hardship and persecution in the course of political struggle. Oppressed groups tell themselves epic narratives of their history, celebrate their solidarity in song and ritual, fashion collective symbols of their common endeavour. Is this to be scornfully dismissed as so much mental befuddlement?25

Political myth may indeed be perceived as 'mental befuddlement', a false
consciousness, but if political myth is to be understood and confronted, it cannot be ‘scornfully dismissed’ in such terms. Sorel, in fact, pursued the question posed by Eagleton in *Reflections on Violence*, "where he is largely concerned with the fact that men engaged in violent popular upheavals often display a degree of courage and readiness for self-sacrifice which cannot be accounted for in narrowly pragmatic terms." To Sorel ‘courage’ and ‘self-sacrifice’ are historical realities and cannot be intellectually argued away as ‘so much mental befuddlement’.

Sorel sees it as an empirical, historical fact that people will die for the objects of their faith, though not for the objects of their reasoning, and will maintain the objects of their faith in the face of evidence to the contrary, precisely because that evidence is interpreted in the light of their faith. For Sorel therefore, political myth is best conceptualised in terms of faith. He sees that faith which motivates ‘courage’ and ‘self-sacrifice’ cannot be fully comprehended through rational philosophical analysis.

To understand Sorel’s conception of political myth as an enabling emotional image akin to religious faith, it is necessary to explain briefly the context for his approach. For Sorel, the Enlightenment belief in rational progress is an illusion; a dangerous illusion that elevates the values of social harmony and humanitarian optimism above the ‘true values’ of struggle and war. Sorel’s rejection of the ideal of the eighteenth century tradition, and indeed his crusade

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27 Flood, C. *op cit*, p. 73.
28 In this there was a close affinity with Fascist attitudes as expressed by Mussolini in 1926. "we represent a new principle in the world; we represent the exact, categorical, definitive antithesis of the whole world of democracy, plutocracy, freemasonry, in short the whole world of the immortal principles of 1789." Quoted by Talmon, J.L. *The Myth of the Nation and the Vision of Revolution: The Origins*
against those ideals, stems from disillusionment with his experiences as a Dreyfusard and a reaction to "what he sees as the dreary positivism of the Second International". Sorel's philosophical approach is marked by what Talmon describes as "an aggressive and overwhelming pessimism". Sorel sees civilisation in terms of a continuous struggle against tendencies towards decomposition, decay and dissolution which ultimately lead to destruction and ruin. For Sorel, "what gave meaning and grandeur to our life was the state of tension and unyielding struggle to ward off the forces of decay and destruction, and above all the yearning and striving for deliverance." As a revolutionary syndicalist Sorel believes the struggle to be the 'sacred task' of the proletariat, organised in syndicates, who are, "a force predestined by history to enthrone a new civilisation and a heroic morality on the ruins of the decaying bourgeois world". For Sorel, the new civilisation can be achieved only outside the parliamentary process which is dominated by professional politicians and by intellectuals steeped in the stultifying Enlightenment belief in humanitarian rationalism. The parliamentary process of bargaining and compromise is a reflection of a morally corrupt bourgeoisie which is unable to take the Nietzschean 'heroic leap' of taking direct, violent action. Violence, not compromise, ensures the authenticity of proletarian action, for "violence became creative at the very moment when it destroyed power. Power preserved order,

29 ibid, pp. 459-460.
30 ibid, pp. 456-457.
31 Eagleton, T. op cit, p. 186.
32 Talmon, J.L op cit, p.454.
33 ibid.
34 ibid, p. 458.
while violence destroyed it; power was compulsion, while violence was freedom; power was decadent, while violence was authentic"\textsuperscript{35}. Sorel's antagonism towards the ideals of the Enlightenment; his general pessimism; his rejection of rationalism and his mystical belief in the cathartic power of violence places him in a completely different philosophical paradigm to Cassirer. It is necessary however, to acknowledge the important contribution that Sorel makes towards a theory of political myth before examining Cassirer's approach in detail.

For Sorel a political myth is a unifying image that appeals to the emotions rather than the intellect. Eagleton comments that,

\begin{quote}
political ideas are no longer to be assessed as scientifically correct or erroneous: they must be grasped instead as vital organising principles, unifying forces which are 'true' in so far as they engender the 'noblest and deepest sentiments' in the working class and spur them to revolutionary action.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

Political ideas or social philosophy are envisaged as myth whose emotive power presents a cohesive image of the whole rather than the parts. Sorel writes that,

\begin{quote}
the myth must be judged as a means of acting on the present; any attempt to discuss how far it can be taken literally as future history is devoid of sense. It is the myth in its entirety which is alone important. Its parts are only of interest in so far as they bring out the main idea.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

To Sorel a myth is to be grasped 'in its entirety' and not as the sum of its parts.

Too much detail would be counterproductive, Sorel argues, not only because it renders the myth vulnerable to rational criticism but also because it reduces its emotive, dramatic qualities, hence its efficacy. To be effective, the myth must crystallize the latent aspirations of the group, so that it becomes a source of motivation and an object of faith.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{36} Eagleton, T. \textit{op cit}, p.187.
\textsuperscript{37} Sorel, G \textit{op cit}, p.135-36.
\textsuperscript{38} Flood, C. \textit{op cit}, p. 72.
Sorel states that "myths are not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act." It is not rational analysis that inspires the proletariat to heroic action; "they are impelled to act by the pouvoir moteur of a great myth."

Myth appeals to the instincts, not the intellect; it is not a vision of an ideal society of the future but an image of direct political action in the present. Sabine suggests that Sorel’s myth "supplies the cohesion and drive to release revolutionary energy." Eagleton concurs; "what matters is the elan of an image rather than the exactitude of a theory." Sorel’s perception of the destabilising function of myth, is well summed up by Isaiah Berlin.

For Sorel, the function of myths is not to stabilize, but to direct energies and inspire action. They do this by embodying a dynamic vision of the movement of life, the more potent because not rational, and therefore not subject to criticism and refutation....Myths need have no historical reality; they direct our emotions, mobilise our will, give purpose to all that we are and do and make .... Myths are wholes perceived instantaneously by the imagination .... They reveal, as mere words cannot, hitherto invisible potentialities in the past and present, and so drive men to concentrated efforts to bring about their realisation .... The function of myth is to create an 'epic state of mind' The vivid immediacy of Sorel’s mythic images suspends normal mundane time and induces an ‘epic state of mind’ or, in Cassirer’s terms, a state of ‘mythic consciousness’. Such an image is also practically immune from rational analysis. The power of framing a political program in the form of a myth is evident. Sabine remarks, “to analyze a myth or to inquire whether it is true – even to ask whether

39 Sorel, G. op cit, p.32-33.
40 Tudor, H. op cit, p.14. pouvoir moteur: the driving force; impelling; to empower through motivation.
42 Eagleton, T. op cit, p.187.
it is practicable – is meaningless.” To Sorel the factual accuracy of a myth is irrelevant; in fact the very form of a myth precludes it from any form of rational analysis. Sorel states;

a myth cannot be refuted, since it is, at bottom, identical with the convictions of a group, being the expression of these convictions in the language of movement; and it is, in consequence, unanalysable into parts which could be placed on the plane of historical descriptions.

To Sorel therefore, a myth is a matter of faith, an image of transformational action which “present(s) itself as a seamless whole, cast in the language of movement, and thus indivisible like movement itself, so that it is impermeable to analytical dissection and demolition.” It is the resistance to rational analysis that gives political myth its apparent unassailable power in providing a pouvoir moteur to direct action. Henry Tudor comments;

it is, at bottom, a matter of faith; and herein lies its strength. Because a myth has nothing specific to propose and gives no reason for what it asserts, it eludes the critical efforts of ‘intellectualist philosophy’. Unlike a program or a prediction, a myth cannot be refuted.

Christopher Flood comments that, “Georges Sorel is the modern herald of the concept of myth as a form of deliberately manipulative communication for ideological purposes.” Sorel’s ideological purpose is to use the unifying power of a great myth to inspire the proletariat in their struggle against capitalist bourgeois society. For Sorel, the instrument of struggle is the general strike which, although an end in itself, is also a Romantic symbol, “the only idea that could have any value as a motive force.”

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44 Sabine, G.H. *op cit*, p.894.
45 Sorel, G *op cit*, p.33.
46 Flood, C. *op cit*, p.48.
47 Tudor, H. *op cit*, p.15-16.
48 Flood, C. *op cit*, p. 47.
49 Sorel, G *op cit*, p.32.
practicalities of the strike itself or with what emerges from the victorious conclusion of such a strike. Sorel states that it is the sustaining heroic vision of the strike that is important.

Strikes have engendered in the proletariat the noblest, deepest, and most moving sentiments that they possess; the general strike groups them all in a co-ordinated picture, and, by bringing them together, gives to each one of them its maximum of intensity; appealing to their painful memories of particular conflicts, it colours with an intense life all the details of the composition presented to consciousness.\textsuperscript{50}

The General Strike is an emotional unifying event, an act of faith that enables the proletariat to forge an historic break with the past. In commenting on Sorel’s political program, Eagleton states, “the general strike is a myth, it exists as an image or enabling fiction which will unify the proletariat, organise their political consciousness and inspire them to heroic action.”\textsuperscript{51} The practical objectives of the General Strike have no importance outside the strike itself. What is important is the pouvoir moteur that such a heroic image has for the proletariat. Talmon comments,

> What Sorel seems to have had in mind is the overwhelming will to win, the supreme confidence of conquerors, the iron determination to go to the bitter end, in the face of which the adversary reels, because he lacks the conviction and the self assurance of those who embody manifest destiny and know it.\textsuperscript{52}

Sorel’s conception of political myth is as a coherent image of action as well as the collective action itself. It does not provide a blueprint for a future society, but an image of direct action; a heroic vision of a determination to act and thus break the chain of historical determinism. Consequently, Sorel is quite adamant that political myths are not to be confused with Utopias for,

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{50} \textit{ibid.}, p.137.
\textsuperscript{51} Eagleton, T. \textit{op cit}, p.186.
\textsuperscript{52} Talmon, J.L \textit{op cit}, p. 464.
\end{footnotes}
whilst contemporary myths lead men to prepare themselves for a combat which will
destroy the existing state of things, the effect of Utopias has always been to direct men's
minds towards reforms which can be brought about by patching up the existing system.\

Utopias are theoretical constructs linked to the Enlightenment ideals of rational
progress. Sorel states;

"A Utopia is ... an intellectual product; it is the work of theorists who, after observing and
discussing the known facts, seek to establish a model to which they can compare existing
society in order to estimate the amount of good and evil it contains".\

Sorel argues that unlike myth which resists rational analysis, "a Utopia, on the
contrary, can be discussed like any other social constitution." Because a Utopia
can be subjected to rational discussion it cannot act as a stimulus to violent
political action.

Sorel would have understood the emotive power of Albert Speer’s concert
and the mystic unity of the commemoration of the 1923 martyrs in terms of their
mythic imagery. What would have been important to Sorel is that the dramatic
imagery could have been grasped as a whole and accepted as a matter of faith.
Historical truth is irrelevant; what is important is the power of the image to
induce an ‘epic state of mind’, where time is suspended and ‘truth’ is framed as
an emotional response. In the following chapter on the Kosovo Myth I will take
Sorel’s insight into the mobilising power of dramatic imagery to demonstrate how
Serbian representations of the past were used to create a ‘culture of fear’ and
frame historical ‘truth’ as an emotional response. For Sorel such a response could
not be comprehended through rational philosophical analysis. However, Cassirer

53 Sorel, G op cit, p.33.
54 ibid, p.32-33.
55 ibid, p.33.
sets out to analyse rationally such responses in *The Myth of the State*. Where Sorel perceives political myth in terms of an enabling image of action, Cassirer sees political myth as being deliberately created to underpin a specific political need. For Cassirer the conscious use of myth as a source of legitimation is an irrational regression from the ideals of the Enlightenment. Cassirer's approach is to confront and destroy political myth by subjecting it to rational philosophical analysis.

Cassirer's work is a more substantial analysis with which to begin to understand the phenomenon of political myth. His focus on myth as 'manufactured according to need' however, underestimates the emotional power of myth as the *pouvoir moteur* for political action. Sorel's insights into myth as the enabling image needs to be taken into account alongside Cassirer's more rational analysis.


Ernst Cassirer's study of political myth is important as the first detailed and coherent analysis of such a phenomenon. Cassirer's approach to myth goes through two distinct phases. The first phase is represented by volume two of his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* where he formulates a logic of mythic consciousness. Cassirer uses a theory of 'symbolic forms' to explain not only the

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internal coherence of myth but its continued influence in modern society. By treating myths as symbolic forms Cassirer gives them equal status with other forms of knowledge. In acknowledging the persistence of mythic consciousness Cassirer is influenced by German Romanticism which sees myth being a more inherent part of human nature than scientific rationality. However, Cassirer’s philosophical background is firmly based on the ideals of the Enlightenment; one ideal being that ‘mythos’ is necessarily replaced by ‘logos’ with the advance of scientific rationalism. The ideal that myth be replaced by rationalism, provides the framework for Cassirer’s analysis. He identifies mythic consciousness with being ‘primitive’ and contrasts it with the scientific, empirical consciousness of the modern world. The unstated assumption in his approach is that once the step from ‘mythos’ to ‘logos’ has been taken, myth automatically loses its relevance. To Cassirer, therefore, the use of myth by the National Socialists is an inexplicable regression.

The second phase of Cassirer’s approach to myth is a direct response to the National Socialists’ inexplicable regression. In The Myth of The State, Cassirer applies his logic of mythic consciousness as developed in The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, to modern political myths. Modern political myths bear no resemblance to the Romantic conception of myths as the products of a free, poetic imagination. That modern political myths were a new phenomenon is emphasised by Christopher Flood.

For Cassirer there is a vital difference between the traditional and the modern uses of myth. In traditional societies the makers and users of myth experience myth as a revealed reality.

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to which they passively acquiesce. In modern societies mythmaking – accompanied by the use of incantations, slogans, neologisms, and semantic distortions – has become an extremely sophisticated, self-conscious activity which makes use of the most advanced techniques available to manufacture and circulate the products.\textsuperscript{58}

Modern political myths are manufactured according to need. It is the conscious use of myth as a source of political legitimation that concerns Cassirer. He is concerned because myth is deeply antagonistic to rationality. For Cassirer, the cultural catastrophe of the Third Reich is the consequence of founding a modern state on irrationality.

The Myth of The State is written as a warning; a warning that, despite the impact of modernism and the apparent advance of secular scientific rationality, political myth still plays a legitimating function in modern states. It is Cassirer’s insight into political myth as a potential legitimating authority that will be developed as an underlying theme throughout my study of political myth. The Myth of The State is also a warning because Cassirer believes such a legitimating function to be irrational and a regression from the ideals of the Enlightenment. Finally The Myth of The State is a warning because the technique of modern political myth had been untouched even though National Socialism had been defeated by force of arms. The basis of Cassirer’s warning is that “we should not commit the same error a second time.”\textsuperscript{59} by dismissing political myth as “absurd and incongruous” and therefore not taking it seriously. In his warning Cassirer places a challenge.

\textsuperscript{58} Flood, C. \textit{op cit}, p.77  
\textsuperscript{59} Cassirer, E. \textit{op cit}, p. 296.
In order to fight an enemy you must know him .... To know him means not only to know his defects and weaknesses; it means to know his strength. We should carefully study the origin, the structure, the methods, and the technique of the political myths. We should see the adversary face to face in order to know how to combat him.

Cassirer’s challenge has not been taken up and his warning is still pertinent at the close of the twentieth century. My study will take up Cassirer’s challenge by carefully analysing the Kosovo Myth as an example of a current political myth. From this analysis of the Kosovo Myth I will demonstrate that the ‘face’ of modern political myth has developed another dimension to Cassirer’s conceptualisation. In taking up Cassirer’s challenge to confront political myth ‘face to face’ it is therefore necessary to identify the ‘new face’ of political myth which I will detail in chapters 3 to 6. My study will also share some of Cassirer’s concerns about the use of myth as a source of political legitimation, which is the subject of chapter 7, but I will not pursue his combative tone.

Cassirer’s concern with myth is prompted in part, by what he considers to be an alarming development in Twentieth Century political theory: the powerful reappearance of mythical thought. In The Myth of The State Cassirer seeks to account for the rise of mythic thought, to understand its effectiveness and to check its misuse. Cassirer’s concern with myth can also be traced back to his

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60 ibid.  
61 See ibid., P.3.  
62 See Kaufmann, F. ‘Cassirer, Neo-Kantianism, and Phenomenology’ in Schilpp, P.A. [Ed.] The Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, Tudor Publishing Company, New York, 1958, p.838. In his biographical essay on Cassirer, Dimitry Gawronsky stated that after leaving Germany Cassirer worked on applying his philosophy of symbolic forms to an analysis of the crisis confronting Western Civilisation. Cassirer “persistently worked on what he now considered to be his main task, namely, an undertaking of the driving forces of human history, especially those forces which made possible the appalling growth of totalitarianism.” Gawronsky, D. ‘Ernst Cassirer : His Life and His Work’ , in Schilpp, P.A. [Ed.], op cit.
1925 study, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol 2: Mythic Thought*. The work is not a political study although Ivan Strenski places Cassirer's thought within the context of Weimar Germany and argues, "Cassirer had strong and even over-riding moral and public reasons for studying myth. He wanted to counteract irrationalist trends among his own intellectual class." What concerns Cassirer is "the preponderance of mythical thought over rational thought." Cassirer argues that modern political theory "greatly underrated the strength of the political myths" because it assumes myth belongs to a more 'primitive' cultural and mental stage in human development. The Enlightenment effectively restricts myth to the aesthetic imagination and it is the Enlightenment's interpretation that modern political theory is largely based on. Cassirer states that for myth "to play a decisive role in modern political life was a fact that was in strict opposition to our firmest theoretical convictions." The firmest theoretical conviction is that rational thought has triumphed since the Enlightenment. Flood comments, "Cassirer is not horrified merely by the consequences which he attributes to the rise of mythical thought in the twentieth century but also by the affront that modern myth poses to his developmental conception of intellectual history." The developmental conception of Western philosophical tradition

63 Cassirer, E. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume Two: Mythical Thought*, op cit.
66 Cassirer, E. *The Myth of The State*, op cit, p.3.
68 ibid, p.235.
69 In commenting on the study of myth up to his time Cassirer observed that "all ... studies were based on one presupposition. Philosophers, ethnologists and sociologists agreed that human culture had long ago outgrown its mythic age." ibid, p.244.
70 Flood, C. *op cit*, p.75.
frames both the narrative structure and the purpose of The Myth of The State. Cassirer acknowledges the triumphs of rational method in the fields of scientific knowledge and the technical mastery of nature, “but in man’s practical and social life this defeat of rational thought seems to be complete and irrevocable.”

Cassirer argues, “rational and scientific thought fail at the level of human culture and surrender to their most dangerous enemy” mythic thought. The presupposition that rational thought has triumphed over myth is what Cassirer challenges in The Myth of The State when he poses the question:

if myth is a typical outcome of the primitive, that is to say the prelogical mind, how can we account for its sudden reappearance under the conditions of our own highly sophisticated culture?

For Cassirer 'our highly sophisticated culture' is a product of the Enlightenment, a culture that shaped its own history through rational problem-solving. The enlightened optimistic mind therefore has difficulty comprehending the magnitude of the cultural collapse represented by the triumph of National Socialism.

The Myth of The State seeks to comprehend such cultural collapse, not so much in terms of the rise of National Socialism but in terms of the reemergence of their chief political weapon: political myth. Cassirer argues the effectiveness of modern political myth rests on its technique, primarily its use of mass communication. Flood notes, “it could be argued that Cassirer presents the

72 Cassirer, E. The Myth of The State, op cit, p.3.
73 ibid.
modern myths as a perverse synthesis: a reversion to the primitive but combined with a mode of execution which is dependent on the technical advances achieved by the progress of reason in the course of history." 75 Recent historical experience convinced Cassirer that "the technique of political myths decided the victory of the National Socialist movement in Germany." 76 The Nazi technique was to effectively create a mythic consciousness which blocked critical thinking at its source, in the individual mind. That individuals willingly sacrificed autonomy and self-responsibility 77 is for Cassirer the true power of myth. He comments, "of all the sad experiences of these last twelve years this is perhaps the most dreadful one." 78 The erosion of critical thinking by a mythic consciousness weakened the Weimar Republic's attempts to 'rationally' deal with the political and economic crisis of the early 1930's. In fact, Cassirer makes it clear that attempts at 'economic rationalism' only compounded the Weimar Republic's failure to find a viable solution.

The political leaders of the Weimar Republic .... completely failed to understand the character and the strength of the new weapon used against them .... They thought and spoke in terms of economics; they were convinced that economy is the mainspring of political life and the solution of all social problems. 79

75 Flood, C. op cit, p.267.
77 In referring to The Myth of The State, Albert Speer says that Cassirer correctly identified the source of Nazi success in the elimination of the self-responsible personality. "Now I was completely under Hitler's spell, unreservedly and unthinkingly held by him. I was ready to follow him anywhere .... Years later, in Spandau, I read Ernst Cassirer's comment on the men who of their own accord threw away man's highest privilege: to be an autonomous person." Speer, A. op cit, p.49.
Cassirer is less able to explain why a 'rational' economic solution was not a viable one. He asserts that in times of crisis\textsuperscript{80} myth reasserts itself because culture's intellectual, ethical and artistic forces lose their power to critically limit myth. In examining reasons for the re-emergence of mythic thought, Cassirer is not so much discussing a political or moral crisis as a crisis in thought.

To Cassirer, "a perfect diagnosis of the present crisis of human culture"\textsuperscript{81} is offered by Albert Schweitzer in 1922. Schweitzer identifies the overwhelming influence of nationalism and the 'collective spirit' as the causes for man's loss of self, a loss of independence and individuality.\textsuperscript{82} In supporting this view Cassirer adds the loss of any positive vision of man that could serve as a guide and measure of human action. Such a positive vision is now impossible because technological life specifically fragments intellectual and cultural experience, as well as more generally fragmenting all fields of human knowledge. Fragmentation leads to the weakening of the intellectual, ethical and artistic forces of culture and permits mythic thought to permeate social life. In his preface to Philosophy of Enlightenment\textsuperscript{83} Cassirer holds up the Enlightenment as an age to judge our own by. For Cassirer the real systematic value of the philosophy of this age lies in its development, in the intellectual energy which spurs it on, and in the enthusiasm with which it attacks all its various problems.\textsuperscript{84} It is philosophic

\textsuperscript{80} Cassirer "associates political myth particularly with collective response to crises occurring within or between social groups – though the objective reality of the threat is less important than the way in which it is perceived by those affected." Flood, C. op cit, p.79.

\textsuperscript{81} ibid, p.231.

\textsuperscript{82} See ibid, p. 231 - 232 for Cassirer's comments on Schweitzer.

\textsuperscript{83} See preface v - xii of Cassirer, E. The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, op cit, for details.

\textsuperscript{84} ibid., p. v.
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unity, the belief in the power of rational thought that Cassirer wishes to impose on the fragmented society of the Twentieth Century.


In order to understand culture in terms of a unified system of knowledge, Cassirer seeks to accommodate myth with his belief in the power of rational thought. In formulating his theory of myth, Cassirer acknowledges the influence of Giambattista Vico and Friedrich Schelling. Cassirer recognises Vico as the first serious philosopher of myth because he treats myth both as a symbol and a form of knowledge. He is also attracted to Vico’s rejection of the Cartesian division of knowledge and his theory that it is ‘poetic vision’ that allows the human world to understand its unity. Schelling also sees myth in terms of a symbolic system of ideas and stresses that myth was a necessary and vital component of human culture. Schelling’s identification of the role myth plays in nation-building resurfaces in Cassirer’s The Myth of The State.

The intellectual origins of Cassirer’s approach to myth can be directly traced back to the Italian thinker, Giambattista Vico. Cassirer regards Vico as the first philosopher of myth for, “when Vico made his first systematic attempt to

create a 'logic of the imagination' he turned back to the world of myth." Vico's approach to myth is well summed up in Berlin's study of Vico and Herder.

Mythology is neither, as was held by neo-classical theorists in the Renaissance, the picaresque inventions of the poets seeking to stimulate our imagination, nor, as rationalists maintained, lying fables spread by unscrupulous priests or other self-interested charlatans, to deceive or lull the ignorant masses. Nor are they, as the Euhemerists declared, confused memories of extraordinary men, promoted by popular imagination to divine or heroic status. Myths, according to Vico, are systematic ways of seeing, understanding, and reaching to the world.

For Vico, myth is a form of knowledge, "a symbol in the same way that spoken or written language is a symbol." For Cassirer, Vico's conception of myth is the key to understanding it and he acknowledges Vico's insight in his introduction to Mythic Thought: "for Vico the true unity of human culture is represented in the triad of language, art, and myth." Cassirer's concern for 'the unity of human culture' attracts him to Vico's thought. Vico's theory of 'poetic wisdom' allows the human world to understand itself as a unity, a unity perceived through its own origins. These origins are found in poetic images as and become part of mythic consciousness. Cassirer notes, "mankind could not begin with abstract thought or with rational language. It had to pass through the era of the symbolic language of myth and poetry. The first nations did not think in concepts but in poetic images." To Cassirer poetic images represent the truth and he rejects "the rationalistic tendency to establish a linkage between myth and illusion, myth and...

89 Cassirer, E. The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume Two : Mythical Thought, op cit, p. 3.
error, even myth and delusion."91 Such rejection reflects Vico's deep opposition to Descartes's philosophical approach to human knowledge. Vico's critique of the Enlightenment not only influenced Cassirer, who argues against a Cartesian model that excluded the humanities from any claim to knowledge, but also Horkheimer and the social and cultural concepts of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School.92 For Cassirer, Vico is the founder of a theory of knowledge based upon cultural ideals. Vico's theory of 'imaginary universals' also influences Cassirer's thinking. Verene notes that Cassirer's conception of symbolic forms93 is very close to Vico's and argues that the close association opens the possibility of using Vico's thought as a means of interpreting contemporary society.

We live in a Cartesian age - that the separation that Descartes enacted in his own thought between the reason of the intellect and the forms of the humanistic imagination has become the shape of contemporary life itself. Because of this, Vico's thought is significant, not simply for the scholarly views it contains, but because it speaks directly to the problems of the contemporary age. It holds out to us the possibility of making sense of the human world as a product of the imaginative reason. The basis for this possibility lies in Vico's theory of the imaginative universal.94

The possibility of 'the imagined universal' is utilised by Cassirer when he applies his theory of symbolic forms to myth.

92 See Angela Jacobelli for parallels between Vico and critical theory. Jacobelli, A.M. 'The Role of the Intellectual in Giambattista Vico', in Tagliacozzo, G & Verene, D.P. *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*. The John Hopkins university Press, Baltimore, 1976, pp. 419 - 421. Martin Jay in *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923 - 1950*. Heinemann, London, 1976, notes that, "in fact, Vico was one of Horkheimer's early intellectual heroes", p. 49. Jay also makes the point that, "Vico's attack on Cartesian metaphysics and the growing idolatory of mathematics set him apart from his contemporaries. So too did his insight that man could know history better than the natural world because man was history's maker. Vico had also transcended the limitations of the Enlightenment interpretation of the origins of myths, which he saw less as priestly tricks than as the projections of human needs onto nature. In so arguing, Vico had anticipated the later Marxist view of ideology. Thus, despite his cyclical theory of the rise and fall of civilisations, which was similar to Machiavelli's, he was unique in seeing that human activity was the key to understanding historical development." *ibid*, pp. 257-258.
94 *ibid*, p. 317.
Cassirer is also influenced by the German idealist philosopher Friedrich Schelling. In his last phase of philosophical development Schelling, sought to erect a positive philosophy, based on the evolution of the divine principle in human history, especially in myths and religion, which he felt opposed and thus completed his own earlier, negative, merely, rational philosophy.\textsuperscript{95} Mythology is explained by Schelling as a symbolic system of ideas with its own \textit{a priori} structure.\textsuperscript{96} Schelling's approach to myth rests on the critical problem of the origin of aesthetic and ethical judgement which Kant had inquired into. Cassirer notes that "it was one of the principal aims of Schelling's system to give myth its right and legitimate place in human civilization."\textsuperscript{97} However, he notes also that, by elevating myth to the "highest dignity",\textsuperscript{98} Schelling was in direct opposition to the scientific rationalism espoused by the Enlightenment. As Cassirer expresses it, "Schelling called for a union of the 'monotheism of reason' and the 'polytheism of the imagination', that is, a mythology of reason"\textsuperscript{99}. Schelling's approach is quoted by Cassirer in \textit{Mythic Thought} as, a quest,

\begin{quote}
to discover reason in this seeming unreason, meaning in this apparent meaninglessness, and not as has hitherto been done, by making an arbitrary distinction; that is, by declaring something which one believes to be rational and meaningful to be the essential, and everything else to be mere accident, cloak, or perversion. Our intention must rather be to make the form itself appear necessary, hence rational.\textsuperscript{100}
\end{quote}

Such is Cassirer's approach in his early writing on myth, but by the time of

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{96} "in \textit{Philosophie der Mythologie} he explained mythology as a symbolic system of ideas with it own \textit{a priori} structure as necessary for its functioning as, according to Kant, the a priori structure of the understanding is necessary for logical thought." \textit{ibid}, p.309.
\textsuperscript{97} Cassirer, E. \textit{The Myth of The State}, \textit{op cit}, p.183.
\textsuperscript{98} \textit{ibid}, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{100} \textit{ibid.}, p. 5.
\end{footnotes}
writing *The Myth of The State* he recognises that, “instead of being the opposite of philosophic thought myth has become its ally; and, in a sense, its consummation.”\textsuperscript{101} Looking back on Schelling’s theory of myth Cassirer notes, “the way was paved that could later lead to the rehabilitation and glorification of myth that we find in modern politics.”\textsuperscript{102} In *Mythic Thought* Cassirer quotes the following passage from Schelling.

> What is a nation, or what makes a nation? Certainly it is not the mere spatial coexistence of a greater or lesser number of similar individuals, but rather a community of consciousness among them. This community has its immediate expression only in a common language; but wherein shall we seek this community itself or its foundation except in a common world view, and wherein can this common world view in turn be originally contained and given to a people except in its mythology? Hence it would seem impossible that mythology should come to an already existing nation unless it arises through the invention of individuals within this nation or by a common instinctive production. This, too, seems impossible, because it is inconceivable that a nation should exist without mythology.\textsuperscript{103}

It is unlikely at the time that Cassirer comprehended the importance the idea would have for his later work, *The Myth of The State*.

5. Cassirer’s Concept of Mythic Consciousness

The most important aspect of Cassirer’s approach to political myth for my study is his analysis of mythic consciousness as a consciously created collective state of mind. To understand why Cassirer identifies a style of thinking as mythic in *The Myth of The State* it is necessary to examine his conception of what

\textsuperscript{101} Cassirer, E. *The Myth of The State*, op cit, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{102} ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Cassirer, E. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Volume Two: *Mythical Thought*, op cit, p. 177.
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Cassirer constitutes a mythic consciousness. His starting point is the persistence of mythic thought in modern culture. Cassirer's approach is clearly summed up by Christopher Flood.

Although Cassirer is saddened by the contemporary retreat of reason in favour of myth, he can still argue that myth involves an intellectual as well as an affective dimension in the symbolic ordering and objectification of emotions through language, however, extravagant its content. Indeed, the ability of myth to crystallise, concentrate, and release emotions in a verbal representation is precisely what constitutes its power.\(^{104}\)

Cassirer recognises the intellectual dimension of myth but is disturbed by the power of myth to frame emotional responses at the expense of responses based on rational analysis. For Cassirer the intellectual, ethical and cultural forces unleashed by the Enlightenment only subdue myth; they did not eradicate it. The re-emergence of myth as a powerful political tool in the hands of the National Socialists convinced Cassirer that the power of myth had to be intellectually destroyed. He sets out to destroy the power of myth in The Myth of the State by characterising it as a dark force that has to be overcome. For example, he states that, "the world of human culture ... could not arise until the darkness of myth was fought and overcome."\(^{105}\) For Cassirer, civilised human culture is still in danger, for even if myth no longer commands the whole, it still survives in the different aspects of culture. Cassirer's concern is that mythic thought once again has the potential to 'command the whole' through the manipulation of the mass media. What distinguishes modern myth from our traditional conception of myth “as the result of an unconscious activity and as a free product of the imagination,”\(^{106}\) is that modern myth is the product of a deliberate process using

\(^{104}\) Flood, C. op cit, p.76.
\(^{105}\) Cassirer, E. The Myth of The State, op cit, p. 297-98.
\(^{106}\) ibid, p. 282.
Specific techniques. It is "myth made according to plan. The new political myths
do not grow up freely .... these are artificial things fabricated by very skilful and
cunning artisans." Cassirer's cunning artisans were the National Socialists who
cloaked their ideology in mythic form immunising it from rational examination.

Myth rather than legality became the legitimating raison d'etre of the state. To
Cassirer it is the legitimating power of myth that has to be recognised and
defeated. The only defence against myth is knowledge gained by taking myth
seriously.

Cassirer's conception of myth is most thoroughly developed in his
Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Mythic Thought. His philosophical theories are
classified according to their origins. Donald Verene says in his introduction to
Symbol, Myth and Culture, "Cassirer himself was not really a member of any
philosophical movement, nor did he found one." Cassirer's neo-Kantian origins
are only marginally useful in understanding his The Myth of The State. Of more
importance to my study is Henry Tudor's assessment of Cassirer as "the theorist
who, more than any other has drawn attention to the use of myths in
contemporary politics." Cassirer not only draws attention to the political uses
of myth, he develops a comprehensive theory of myth as part of his philosophy of

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107 ibid.
108 Attempts to categorise Cassirer's philosophic thought have been varied. He has been variously seen as
developing a neo-Kantian epistemology of scientific knowledge, Krois, J.M. Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and
40, Kaufmann op cit, p. 840; as a neo-Kantian phenomenologist, Montagu, M.F.A. 'Cassirer on
109 Cassirer, E, in Verene, D.P. [Ed.] Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer
110 Tudor, H. op cit, p. 31.
culture. Culture is seen as, “a total project of the human spirit made up of the various symbolic forms such as myth, religion, language, art, history, and science.”\(^1\) Cassirer’s approach to the philosophy of myth is described by some authors as conciliatory.\(^2\) It is best expressed by John Krois.

He sought to accomplish no less than a reconstruction of twentieth century philosophy, reintegrating the two hostile directions of science-oriented philosophy (best represented by the Vienna Circle of logical positivism) and (often antiscientific) Lebensphilosophie - which for Cassirer includes the whole lineage of postidealistic philosophy from Kierkegaard to Heidegger. Cassirer’s means for this reintegration were later to be hailed as ‘new’ under such names as ‘semiotics’, ‘structuralism’ and ‘hermeneutics’.\(^3\) It is outside the scope of my study to examine Cassirer’s broad philosophic program other than to point out that his approach to myth forms part of an integrated approach to culture in general.

Myth must be understood within a cultural framework but the totality of mythic consciousness makes logical analysis difficult. For a start mythical thought is a state of consciousness in which there is no distinction between the personal and the impersonal, for “every manifestation of personal existence melts into the totality of life surrounding it.”\(^4\) Mythic thought does not derive from an objective reality but from a semantic phenomenon. As Cassirer states,

\(^2\) As Strenski put it, “Cassirer was undertaking nothing less than a reconciliation of romanticism with rationalism, primitivism with modernism, tribalism with cosmopolitanism.” Strenski I. op cit, p. 32. Avens sees this desire to reconcile the extremes of rationalism and romanticism to Cassirer’s ambivalent attitude towards myth. “On the one hand, he shares the view of the Romantics that myth-making is an elemental function of the human mind and an essential ingredient not only in the life of the primitive but of the modern man as well . . . On the other hand as a critical idealist of neo-Kantian persuasion, Cassirer is fundamentally a rationalist and is deeply suspicious of the irrational demonic power of myth.” Avens, R. Imagination is Reality: Western Nirvana in Jung, Hillman, Barfield, and Cassirer, Spring Publications, Dallas, Texas, 1980, p. 50.
\(^3\) Krois, J.M. op cit, p. xi.
\(^4\) ibid, p. 104.
the mythical world is concrete not because it has to do with sensuous, objective contents, not because it excludes and repels all merely abstract factors - all this is merely signification and sign; it is concrete because in it the two factors, thing and signification, are undifferentiated, because they merge, grow together, concreace in an immediate unity.115

Another difficulty for a philosophical theory of myth is that the mythic world is experienced as something objectively real. Cassirer claims that "the problem is not the material content of mythology, but the intensity with which it is experienced, with which it is believed - as only something endowed with objective reality can be believed."116 Mythic consciousness is overwhelmed117 by what confronts it because "it has no will to understand the object by encompassing it logically and articulating it with a complex of causes and effects; it is simply overpowered by the object."118 Cassirer argues that attempts to rationally categorise and systematise myth have failed; the philosophical need to account for the significance and power exerted on human consciousness by myth."119 persists. Cassirer spells out the difficulties of approaching myth from the point of view of theoretical ideals of knowledge and truth.120 He argues against considering mythic thought as merely 'primitive' or 'prelogical'121 because it is fundamentally different and cannot be dismissed easily as irrelevant.

Human culture originated in myth, language and technical ability, but mythic consciousness does not precede discursive thought. Where mythic thought

116 ibid, p.5.
117 Heidegger identified the overwhelming nature of mythic consciousness to the 'geworfenheit' (thrownness) of human existence and criticises Cassirer for not showing how myth is deeply rooted in man's being in the world. See Heidegger, M. 'Review of Ernst Cassirer's Mythical Thought' in Hart, J.G & Maraldo, J.C. [Eds.] The Piety of Thinking, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1976.
118 Cassirer, E. The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume Two: Mythical Thought, op cit, p. 74.
119 See ibid, p. 6.
120 See Cassirer, E. An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture, op cit, p. 79.
121 See ibid, p.80.
'overwhelms' discursive thought, the development of self-critical belief is facilitated. Cassirer states, “myth is non-theoretical in its very meaning and essence. It defies and challenges our fundamental categories of thought. Its logic is incommensurate with all our conceptions of empirical or scientific truth.”\cite{122} He argues myth cannot be dismissed as 'unscientific'.

Mythic consciousness must be understood within the framework of human consciousness in general. For Cassirer human consciousness has three functions that are all expressed symbolically. Firstly there is an expressive function, a perceived world of objects presented directly by symbols. Symbols can be seen in the ritual presentation of myth. Secondly there is a representational function, the function of language where objects are perceived and differentiated apart from the symbol. Finally there is a theoretical or significative function where an abstract world of meaning, divorced from an object, is systematically created through language. In the Kantian sense, \cite{123} “every interpretation of the world - be it artistic, mythical, or scientific - has at base an activity of the mind that creates worlds of images.”\cite{124} Therefore, in Cassirer’s words “symbolic thought and symbolic behaviour are among the most characteristic features of human life, and ... the whole progress of human culture\cite{125} is based on these conditions.”\cite{126} Cassirer insists that myth must be placed within the context of the ‘progress of

\begin{itemize}
\item \cite{122} ibid, p. 73.
\item \cite{123} “All forms brought into being by the mind are due to a creative force, to a spontaneous act in the Kantian sense.” Montagu, M.F.A. op cit, p. 362.
\item \cite{124} Ferretti, S. Cassirer, Panofsky, and Warburg : Symbol, Art, and History. Yale University Press, New Haven, 1984, p. 101.
\item \cite{125} To Cassirer culture is the unity of the basic symbolic forms of myth, language and technical expertise.
\item \cite{126} Cassirer, E. An Essay on Man : An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture. op cit.,p. 27.
\end{itemize}
human culture’. Mythic knowledge has tended to be seen as irrational and hence relegated to the ‘emotions’ where it has not been considered worthy of serious attention.

In proposing a ‘form’ of mythic consciousness, Cassirer seeks a principle of unity and is not concerned with the metaphysical, psychological, historical or social origins of ideas. Such a pursuit he sees as “vain and futile.” To Cassirer the coherence of mythic thought is derived from emotional unity and not logical or ‘rational’ thought processes. According to Cassirer failure to understand such emotional unity has led to a failure to understand myth in general.

All attempts to intellectualise myth - to explain it as allegorical expression or a theoretical or moral truth - have completely failed. They ignored the fundamental facts of mythical experience. The real substratum of myth is not a substratum of thought but of feeling.

Myths persist because they appeal to the ‘emotions’ especially a sense of the unity of life. Cassirer implies,

corrected to believe that they did, impulsively concluded that they did ... In this way, myths represented in some sense the paradigm of an active irrationally constituted cultural form.

\[127\] See Langer, S. Philosophy in a New Way, p. 97 and Avens, R. op cit, p. 58.
\[128\] Cassirer’s belief in the unity of myth has not gone unchallenged. Ferretti, S notes: “The unity he strives for and creates with such admirable dedication and optimistic sureness is not sustained by a sufficient and persuasive theoretical basis. It is a unity grounded upon Kantian authority and scientific conceptuality which he never adequately questions, considers a problem or examines thoroughly. On the contrary, he abandons himself to it as if it were an inalienable certainty.” Ferretti, S. op cit, pp. 84-85. Strenski, I is more sceptical. “There is also something bogus about the unity of myth.” Strenski, I. op cit, p. 29.
\[130\] Cassirer, E. An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture, op cit, p. 72.
\[131\] ibid, p. 81.
\[132\] Strenski, I. op cit, p. 33.
Strenski remarks that the emotion underlying the unity of myth, das lebensgefühl, "connotes an especially sentimental attitude to mindlessness perhaps unknown outside the tradition of German Romanticism," and suggests it is the antithesis of modernity. The characteristic feature of mythic consciousness is emotional unity, a feature that resists logical rational analysis.

Cassirer's solution to subjecting myth to rational analysis is to treat mythic consciousness as a symbolic form. His theory of symbolic forms is the key to understanding myth as a fundamental human activity. Cassirer's concern with myth must be seen within the wider context of his philosophy of symbolic forms which he offers as an 'alternative approach', an approach he calls an 'anthropological philosophy'. Cassirer states his purpose clearly in his Essay on Man.

The philosophy of symbolic forms starts from the presupposition that, if there is any definition of the nature or 'essence' of man, this definition can only be understood as a functional one, not a substantial one. Man's outstanding characteristic, his distinguishing mark is the system of human activities which defines and determines the circle of 'humanity'. Language, myth, religion, art, science, history and the constituents, the various sectors of this circle. A philosophy of man would therefore be a philosophy which would give us insight into the fundamental structure of each of these human activities, and which at the same time would enable us to understand them as an organic whole.

For Cassirer the fundamental unifying structure is the 'symbolic form' and it is the central premise of his early philosophical thought. Cassirer argues in his

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133 ibid, p. 31.
134 Cassirer, E. op cit, p. 67.
135 ibid, p.67-68.
136 It is essentially an epistemological approach in that thought, knowledge and consciousness are based on symbols.
opening chapter of *Essay on Man*, *The Crisis in Man's Knowledge of Himself*, that man could no longer understand himself and his world as a unity. 137 Knowledge has become fragmented, but Cassirer seeks unity in a recognition of man as *animal symbolicum*. "It is the symbol that pervades all the activities of man on which all culture depends."138 Cassirer defines man as *animal symbolicum* because, "he has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium."139 There can be no turning back to a natural order, "man cannot escape from his own achievement" because he now "lives in a symbolic universe."140 In Ferretti's study of Cassirer "the symbol141 is the formula in which intellectual activity is basically explicated."142 Susanne Langer points out, "all mythic constructions are symbols of value."143 The symbolic value of myth is emphasised also by Aven's comment that, "myth as symbolic form is a distinct and original way of knowledge which must be evaluated not by norms taken from alien disciplines but in terms of its own form and structure."144 The idea that myth as symbolic form has to be evaluated in terms of its own form and structure is further developed by Susanne Langer, a follower of Cassirer. She offers a linguistic approach that distinguishes between

137 see *ibid*, pp 1-22.
139 Cassirer, E. *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, *op cit*, p.25.
140 *ibid*.
141 To Avens "the symbol is born when the image acquires the function of representation." Avens, R. *op cit*, p.90.
142 Ferretti, S. *op cit*, p.94.
144 Avens, R. *op cit*, p.58.
myth as a form of non-discursive or presentational symbolism and the discursive symbolism of language itself.

The meanings given through language are successively understood, and gathered into a whole by the process called discourse; the meanings of all other symbolic elements that compose a larger, articulate symbol are understood only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within the total structure. Their very functioning as symbols depends on the fact that they are involved in a simultaneous, integral presentation. This kind of semantic may be called 'presentational symbolism', to characterise its essential distinction from discursive symbolism, or 'language' proper.145

Myth as 'presentational symbolism' is a semiotic approach within Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms and offers an approach to understanding myth as an autonomous cultural form. Rather than treating myth as irrational and therefore irrelevant, Cassirer's conception of myth as a symbolic form of knowledge allows it to be evaluated in terms of its own unique form and structure. The analysis of modern myth as a symbolic form of knowledge is undertaken in Cassirer's The Myth of The State.

6. The Nature of Modern Political Myths

In discussing the new politicians who propagated and manipulated a 'myth of the state', Cassirer emphasises the premeditated nature of modern political myths as a unique feature and states that, "myth has always been described as the result of an unconscious activity and as a free product of imagination. But here we find myth made according to plan."146 This point is reinforced by Flood who comments that,

145 Langer, S. op cit., p. 97.
the resurgence of myth is not merely a regression or a cyclical return to a state which would be identical to that of the pre-rational era. There is the important difference that the making of myths is a conscious process on the part of today’s leaders, and the propagation of myths is accomplished with the aid of the most sophisticated modern techniques.147

Modern political myth is therefore a conscious invention, or in Cassirer’s words ‘a technique’, a skill that can be learnt and applied to any political system at any time. Cassirer refers to such a technique as, “a new type of completely rationalised myth”148, but his principal thesis is that the ‘new’ myths function in substantially the same way as traditional myths. The power of all myth is that it is essentially an elemental social phenomenon. Cassirer follows Durkheim149 in that, “not nature but society is the true model of myth. All its fundamental motives are projections of man’s social life.”150 As Cassirer clearly states in Myth of the State, “myth is an objectification of man’s social experience, not his individual experience.”151 For Cassirer the function of myth is to unite the individual with the group through ritual.

Cassirer identifies four techniques of myth that achieve this end. The first two techniques, the manipulation of language and the ritualisation of action effectively limit individual thought and action. The next two techniques, the elimination of ideal values and the reinterpretation of history provide an effective substitute for thought and action. However, such techniques can come into play only when the life of a community is threatened. For Cassirer it is the binding

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147 Flood, C. *op cit*, p.267.
150 Cassirer, E. *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, *op cit*, 79.
151 Cassirer, E. *The Myth of The State*, *op cit*, p. 47.
intellectual, ethical and artistic forces of culture that hold myth in check. When these cultural forces are weakened, mythic thought can begin to permeate social life. Cassirer traces the weakening of cultural forces to the conflict between Romanticism and the Enlightenment, creating specifically what he calls the 'Myth of the Twentieth Century'. The effects of weakening cultural forces came together during the Weimar Republic's period to create an environment conducive to the development of political myths. The processes of myth development had extended well back into the nineteenth century, but "while the soul for the Myth of the Twentieth Century had been prepared long before, it could not have born its fruit without the skilful use of the new technical tool."\(^{152}\) Cassirer sees the 'new technical tool' as a "powerful political weapon"\(^{153}\), a weapon against which a rational liberal society has few defences. For Cassirer, defences can best be strengthened through an analysis of "the origin, the structure, methods, and the technique of the political myths."\(^{154}\) For Cassirer then, rational knowledge is still the greatest defence against the irrationalism of political myths.

6.1 Impact of Romanticism

The first reason that Cassirer gives for weakening cultural forces that keeps myth in check is the impact of Romanticism.\(^{155}\) Much of Myth of the State is a

\(^{152}\) ibid, p. 277.
\(^{153}\) ibid.
\(^{154}\) ibid, p. 296.
\(^{155}\) While Cassirer would be the first to recognise the wide range of thinking represented by this term it is worth quoting Jacques Barzun's warning. He criticises the search for a unifying thread to Romanticism such as irrationalism because, "the field is then open to argument over the correctness of the description and over
history of political philosophy focusing on the struggle against the power and influence of myth. Cassirer traces the struggle back to Plato and consistently argues through 130 pages that, “since the times of Plato all great thinkers have made the greatest efforts to find a rational theory of politics”\footnote{Cassirer, E. The Myth of The State, op cit, p. 294.}. Cassirer presents his argument as a coherent process through to Machiavelli and the apparent triumph of the ideal of the rational state in the Enlightenment. However, there are flaws in conceptually representing such a process as a collective metaphysical struggle against the irrational power of myth. Christopher Flood points out that, \footnote{See ibid, pp. 257-276 for a detailed discussion of Cassirer’s approach.}

the narrative dimension of ... (The Myth of The State) represents the development of human culture as a dramatic, quest-like confrontation, complete with incremental periods of intellectual apprenticeship, pitting mythical thought and rational thought in confrontation with each other throughout (Western) history as each seeks a definitive victory within the collective consciousness of man.\footnote{Flood, C. op cit, p.269-270.}

While recognising conceptual flaws in Cassirer’s approach, it needs to be acknowledged that Cassirer consciously uses the metaphor of struggle and conflict\footnote{See ibid, pp. 257-276 for a detailed discussion of Cassirer’s approach.} to dramatise the consequences of political myth gaining an ascendancy over rational thought. In Cassirer’s conceptual narrative the great advances made by political theory are called into question by the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment. Cassirer comments that Romanticism must be blamed for being “the first and the most prolific source of the myth of the twentieth century. According to many writers it is what produced the concept of the ‘totalitarian
state”159. However, it is not so much a political vision that the Romanticists held, but a poetic one. Cassirer writes,

The ‘totalitarian’ view of the romantic writer was, in its origin and meaning, a cultural not a political view. The universe they were longing for was a universe of human culture. They never meant to politicize but to ‘poetize’ the world. To pervade all spheres of human life - religion, history, even natural science - with the ‘poetic spirit’ was declared by Friedrich Schlegel as the highest aim of the romantic movement.160

The Romanticists’ highest aim might be to ‘poeticize the world’, but they offer no coherent theory of society. As Strauss points out, “the political insufficiency of romantic aestheticism, in its turn, paved the way for the ‘realistic’ political use of myth in the twentieth century.”161 Cassirer identifies “two points that are of vital importance in the struggle between Romanticism and Enlightenment. The first was the new interest in history; the second the new conception and valuation of myth.”162 The thinkers of the Enlightenment, “if they looked back to the past, they did so because they wanted to prepare a better future. The future of mankind, the rise of a new political and social order, was their great theme and real concern.”163 In direct opposition to this outlook Cassirer stated that,

the romantics love the past for the past’s sake. To them the past is not only a fact but also one of the highest ideals. This idealization and spiritualization of the past is one of the most distinctive characteristics of romantic thought. Everything becomes understandable, justifiable, legitimated as soon as we can trace back to its origin.164

160 ibid.
163 ibid, p.181.
164 ibid.
The second characteristic of romantic thought according to Cassirer is the reestablishment of myth to its 'legitimate' role in civilization. The Enlightenment philosophers viewed myth as, "a barbarous thing, a strange and uncouth mass of confused ideas and gross superstitions, a mere monstrosity. Between myth and philosophy there could be no point of contact". To the Romantic thinkers mythic thought gained equal status with philosophic thought for "myth becomes not only a subject of the highest intellectual interest but also a subject of awe and veneration. It is regarded as the mainspring of human culture. Art, history, and poetry originate in myth." The nineteenth century Romantic thinkers prepared the ground for the rise of political myth, but Cassirer stops short of making them responsible for the subsequent political use of myth in the twentieth century.

6.2 Myth of the Twentieth Century.

The second reason that Cassirer gave for weakening cultural forces that keep myth in check, is the rise of what he terms 'the Myth of the Twentieth Century', "an evident echo of the notorious book of the same name – Der Mythus des 20. Jahrhunderts – by the Nazi propagandist and ideologue, Alfred Rosenberg." The 'myth of the Twentieth Century' came into being through an amalgamation of hero worship, race worship and state worship. Cassirer associates these three strands with Carlyle, Gobineau and Hegel. Christopher Flood analyses the way Cassirer uses a chronological narrative structure to

165 ibid, p. 182.
166 ibid, p. 183.
167 Flood, C. op cit, p.258.
emphasise the ongoing historical struggle between rational and mythical thought. He notes,

the successive chapters on the subject of Carlyle, Gobineau, and Hegel are not ordered by chronology. Hegel was of an earlier generation from Carlyle or Gobineau but appears to be placed directly before the chapter on the twentieth century resurgence of myth (which mentions Germany alone by name), because Cassirer considers him to have had the most important link to the contemporary situation.\textsuperscript{168} What Hood is emphasising is Cassirer's whole approach to political myth which is presented in the form of a "a dramatic, didactic narrative told from the viewpoint of a narrator whose authority derives from a privileged, totalizing insight into the motives and forces which drive history."\textsuperscript{169} Even though Cassirer's context is Nazi Germany he does not want to be limited to an analysis of that regime. His wider purpose is to combat political myth in any historical context and this is why he uses three representative thinkers of whom only Hegel is German. At no point does Cassirer imply that Carlyle, Gobineau or Hegel created the Myth of the Twentieth Century.\textsuperscript{170} He chooses them as representatives of a style of thinking that taken together contribute to the weakening of a reasoned response to the rise of a mythic consciousness which eventually finds expression in Nazi Germany.

\textsuperscript{168} \textit{ibid}, p.260.
\textsuperscript{169} \textit{ibid}.
\textsuperscript{170} George Sabine missed Cassirer's point in his criticism that "it is hard to believe that the three men mentioned were a solvent of sufficient force to bring about the disruption of European culture." Sabine, G.H. 'Review of The Myth of The State by Ernst Cassirer', \textit{The Philosophical Review}, Vol. 56, 1947, p. 317.
6.2.1 Hero Worship.

The first component of Cassirer's 'Myth of the Twentieth Century' is hero worship. His representative for this style of thinking is Thomas Carlyle rather than Nietzsche, whose thinking has a more direct impact on the events he is analysing. Cassirer argues that Carlyle's 1840 lecture series, On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History\(^{171}\), is a reaction against the ideals of the Enlightenment.

... the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Carlyle saw no other escape from the subversive influence of these ideals than by a return to hero worship. He declared hero worship to be the only thing that can save us from decay, ruin, and complete anarchy.\(^{172}\) For Carlyle, hero worship offers the best hope of stabilising the political order for "hero worship was the oldest and firmest element in Man's social and cultural life."\(^{173}\) Carlyle offers no coherent theory to back this claim and in fact "felt under no obligation to answer the question: What is a hero? But he tried to show, who the great heroic men were."\(^{174}\) He speaks "with great contempt of all logical methods (because) logic can never penetrate into the secret of reality."\(^{175}\) Carlyle's heroes are beyond logical reality, for their deeds, their individual genius, springs from the demonic powers of their own souls and not from controlled reason. In a more recent analysis of the hero in Western society, John Ralston Saul refers to Carlyle's work as a "malevolent contribution"\(^{176}\) to the "concept of


\(^{173}\) ibid, p. 189.

\(^{174}\) ibid, p. 194.

\(^{175}\) ibid, p. 193.

Cassirer: The Concept of Political Myth

The modern saviour. Saul argues that the modern hero arose at the point of conflict between the democratic impulses of the nineteenth century and the need for rational management. The hero is,

a facile combination of the democratic and the rational approaches - simultaneously popular and efficient. He was popular thanks to the combining of the majesty proper to kings with the worship proper to God in order to twist public opinion into adulation. He was efficient because his power left him free to administer without social restraint. Saul states that it is Carlyle who imbues the hero with mythological power while at the same time he is the repository of a community's romantic fantasies. Carlyle's "approach was fawning, indeed worshipful. And with phrases such as the 'the strong just man,' he successfully inserted this new invention of rational dictatorship into the age-old mythological structure of heroic leadership".

For Cassirer the 'mythological leader's' heroic 'will to power' transcends the 'logic of history' and has appeal to both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Nietzsche's writings on the innate superiority of the hero, his 'superman' who opposes ordered bourgeois complacency and the 'slave morality' of the masses, is later to find its way into Nazi ideology through the writings of Baeumiler and Rosenberg. Acceptance of hero worship made it possible for Nazi mythmakers

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177 ibid, p.340.
178 ibid, p. 319.
179 ibid, 340.
180 Schopenhauer wrote that the "will is the thing-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world. Life, the visible world, the phenomenon, is only the mirror of the will." Quoted by Anchor, R. Germany Confronts Modernisation: German Culture and Society, 1790-1890. D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1972, p. 87. Anchor goes on to comment that Schopenhauer's "will is a blind, insatiable force, the purely egoistic impulse to survive no matter what. It works towards no rational, universal end and makes use of the intellect only to justify and rationalise its self-seeking acts." ibid., p. 88.
181 Nietzsche's emphasis on the power of the will was made part of the Nazi world view by Alfred Baeumiler. See Mosse, G.L. Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich. W.H. Allen, London, 1966, pp. 97 - 101, and Pois, R. (Ed.) Alfred Rosenberg: Selected Writings. Jonathan Cape, London, 1970. Anchor also sees this belief in a 'superman' as feeding an irrational response to modernisation. "At the very moment when Central Europe was finally being swept into the current of
to reach back into German history in search of heroes to counter what they present as the meaninglessness of life under the Weimar Republic.\textsuperscript{182} To the Nazis, “the proper use of the will was what made a man into a hero; it provided the impetus for transforming aspiration into reality.”\textsuperscript{183} Ian Kershaw points out in his analysis of image and reality in the Third Reich, that the Nazis were also building on a deep-seated cultural tradition\textsuperscript{184}. Cassirer’s purpose however, is not to limit his analysis of political myth through specific reference to the roots of ‘heroic leadership’ in German culture. He eschews the more culturally specific Nietzsche for the more ‘neutral’ Carlyle. The link between Carlyle and Nazi hero worship,\textsuperscript{185} is implied rather than explicitly stated. Of more importance for Cassirer is the style of thinking, a \textit{mythic consciousness}, that underlies the cult of the hero. It is a style of thinking that makes possible the success of the technique of myth. Saul reminds us that the presentational symbolism employed by Hitler is, 

the model which has been retained by the image makers of today and indeed by rational civilization. We have become accustomed to the high, spartan podiums from which a single, dramatically lit leader speaks while surrounded by a darkness in which large crowds have been assembled. Modern political conventions or rallies are primarily derived from

\footnotesize{modernisation, Germany’s foremost thinker was formulating a philosophy designed to enable the individual to resist and cut himself adrift from that current.” Anchor, R. \textit{op cit}, p. 141. See also Girling, J. \textit{op cit}, p. 91-104. \textsuperscript{182} “The wholehearted commitment to Weimar required the repudiation of all such mythology. By its very existence, the Republic was a calculated affront to the heroes and clichés that every German child knew, many German politicians invoked, and, it turned out, most Germans cherished.” Gay, P. \textit{Weimar Culture : The Outsider as Insider}, Secker & Warburg, London, 1968, p. 87. \textsuperscript{183} Mosse, G.L. \textit{op, cit.}, p. xxvii. \textsuperscript{184} For an extended analysis of the hero cult that underpinned the \textit{Fuhrerprinzip} see Ch. 1, \textit{‘Führer of the Coming Germany : The Hitler Image in the Weimar Era’}, p. 13 – 47 in Kershaw, I. \textit{The Hitler Myth}: Image and Reality in The Third Reich, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989. \textsuperscript{185} For example even though Eric Bentley was at pains to point out that Carlyle’s theory of hero worship had another more positive side he still wrote in 1945 that “this ‘evil’ influence has also ended - for the present at any rate - with the death of Hitler and Mussolini .... Carlyle is now a nullity. He will probably remain so.” Bentley, E. \textit{A Century of Hero-Worship} ( 2nd Ed. ), Beacon Press, Boston, 1957, p. 4. For a defence of Carlyle’s theory of heroes see Rosenberg, P. \textit{The Seventh Hero : Thomas Carlyle and the Theory of Radical Activism}, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1974, pp. 188 - 203.}
those of Nuremberg. We now accept as normal the spectacular and officially joyous celebrations, involving massed flags, music and projected images of the leader. Saul is suggesting that modern presentations of the leader as hero have slipped virtually unnoticed into Western political culture. It is exactly the point being made by Cassirer in The Myth of the State. Modern political myth can only be combated through knowledge of its ‘technique’ and the presentational symbolism employed to project a political leader is one of the techniques identified by Cassirer as being at the heart of modern political myths.

6.2.2 Race Worship

The second component of the Myth of the Twentieth Century is race worship. Cassirer’s representative for this style of thinking is the French writer Count Arthur de Gobineau\textsuperscript{187}. The cornerstone of Gobineau’s \textit{Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines} (1853 - 56) is that only the white race had the will and the power to create a cultural life. He bases his idea on the conviction that, “according to an inexorable natural law, the inferior races are forever condemned ‘to crawl before the feet of their masters.’”\textsuperscript{188} Gobineau’s theory, that the key to history is the rise and fall of races began to exert a significant influence in Germany when it was taken up by Richard Wagner’s circle\textsuperscript{189} and the Pan-

\textsuperscript{186} Saul, J.R. \textit{op cit}, p. 342-343.
\textsuperscript{187} Gobineau was the first important racial ideologist who spawned a growing volume of literature on race, including the influential Houston Stewart Chamberlain. See Cohen, C. [Ed.] \textit{Communism, Fascism and Democracy: The Theoretical Foundations}, 2nd Ed., Random House, New York, 1972, pp. 305 - 308.
\textsuperscript{188} Cassirer, E. \textit{The Myth of The State}, \textit{op cit}, p. 242. For the influence Gobineau was to have on Hitler’s racial theories see Fest, J.C. \textit{Hitler, Weidenfeld and Nicolson}, London, 1974, pp. 210-213.
German League in the 1890's. Gorbineau's ideas are given a more coherent form by the Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg. Rosenberg also makes substantial use of the ideas of Houston Stewart Chamberlain who introduces the concept of a *Mythus*, “a mysterious super-national infusion of spirit which binds a given people to the eternal forces of nature.” The given people are the German race. John Girling points out that it is Chamberlain who fused together the concepts of race and nation; of the hero as the ‘quintessence’ of race, and of the binding power of an overarching *Mythus*. Building on both Chamberlain and Gorbineau, Rosenberg deifies both history and the Aryan race.

Today, a new belief is arising: the *Mythus* of the blood; the belief that the godly essence of man itself is to be defended through the blood; that belief which embodies the clearest knowledge that the Nordic race represents that *Mysterium* which has overthrown and replaced the old sacraments.

It is ‘*mythus* of the blood’ that underlies Nazi concepts of *blut und boden* (‘blood and soil’) which when combined with *volk und heimat* (‘a people and a homeland’), create a mystical union of racial purity and national destiny. To achieve their racial destiny however, Germans had to be prepared for violent struggle. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler signals the importance of racial purity and the necessity of preparing the coming generation for the “supreme combat that will decide the destinies of the world” Hitler writes;

190 The roots of Rosenberg’s thought stemmed from German Romanticism; a tendency to view history in terms of international conspiracies; the work of ‘scientific racists’ such as Chamberlain and Gorbineau, and a distorted reading of Nietzsche. See Pois, R. (Ed.) *Alfred Rosenberg: Selected Writings*, op cit, pp. 19-24.
191 An Englishman who became a German citizen and married the daughter of Richard Wagner.
193 See Girling, J. *op cit*, p.107
194 Pois, R. (Ed.) *A op cit*, p.82. The significance of this replacement of the old sacraments was fully realised by the ‘Confessional Church’ of Germany which attacked the National Socialist movement in 1935 of ”setting up the myth of race and people, of making idols out of blood, race, nation, honor, and liberty, in place of God, and of demanding, as a new religion, faith in eternal Germany.” Girling, J. *op cit*, p. 81.
No boy or girl must leave school without having attained a clear insight into the meaning of racial purity and the importance of maintaining the racial blood unadulterated. Thus the first indispensable condition for the preservation of our race will have been established and thus the future cultural progress of our people will be assured.\textsuperscript{196}

As with hero worship, Cassirer is concerned with the thinking that underlies such a belief. According to Cassirer, Gobineau's elevation of race as the only viable cultural value is "an attempt to destroy all other values."\textsuperscript{197} The elimination of ideal values means that "a man is great, noble, virtuous, not by his actions but by his blood."\textsuperscript{198} Virtue cannot be acquired as it is a characteristic of "the physical and mental qualities of the race."\textsuperscript{199} Cassirer is conscious of the consequences of race worship, but it is not the main point he makes. The 'logic' that makes racial superiority the absolute value, can be used to advance any other value as the absolute one.

\textbf{6.2.3 State Worship}

The third component of Cassirer's 'Myth of the Twentieth Century' is worship of the state. To Cassirer it originates in Hegel's theory of the state.

It was the tragic fate of Hegel that he unconsciously unchained the most irrational powers that have ever appeared in man's social and political life. No other philosophical system has done so much for the preparation of fascism and imperialism as Hegel's doctrine of the state - this 'divine Idea as it exists on earth'\textsuperscript{200}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{196} \textit{ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{197} Cassirer, E. \textit{The Myth of The State}, \textit{op cit}, p. 232.
\item \textsuperscript{198} \textit{ibid}, p. 236.
\item \textsuperscript{199} \textit{ibid}, p. 237.
\item \textsuperscript{200} \textit{ibid}, p. 273.
\end{itemize}
Cassirer's concern is that a 'divine idea' is not bound by any ideal values such as morality. Hegel rejects Natural Rights' theories of the state which restrict it legally or morally through a contract. According to Cassirer, Hegel rejects the 'mechanical' theories, according to which the state is no more than an aggregate of individual wills, held together by the legal bonds of a social contract or a contract of submission. Like the romantic political writers Hegel insists that the state possesses an 'organic' unity. To Hegel 'organic unity' is "not only the representative but the very incarnation of the 'spirit of the world'". Cassirer comments that even the idea that, in every epoch of history, there is one and only one nation that is the real representation of the world spirit and that this nation has the right to rule all the others was first expressed by Hegel.

The consequences of such an idea are reinforced by Hegel's interest in the 'truth' of the state which he says lies in power, not morality. Exceptional individuals, or heroes, who are the real makers of history, are also exempted from moral constraints. Heroes are Cassirer's main concern for "in Hegel's system the worship of the state is combined with hero worship." For Cassirer it is such a combination of the state and the individual that was so easily exploited by National Socialism. As Pois remarks, Hegel's theories contain "the clearest and most ruthless program of fascism that has ever been propounded by any political

201 ibid, p. 265.
202 ibid, p. 263.
203 ibid, p. 273.
204 ibid, p. 267. Hitler further extended the state to encompass racial purity. "The worth of a state can be determined only by asking how far it actually succeeds in promoting the well-being of a definite race ..." Hitler, A op cit, p. 222.
205 In fact the state was subsumed within the National Socialist movement. As Alfred Rosenberg stated in 1934, "what has been completed during this past year, and what remains to be completed over a broader radius, is not the so-called totality of the state, but the totality of the National Socialist movement. The state is no longer an entity which, be it close to the party and the movement or be it a mechanical apparatus, is a ruling instrument; rather it is an instrument of the National Socialist Weltanschauung." Pois, R. (Ed.) op cit, p. 191.
or philosophic writer."\textsuperscript{206} The direct influence of Hegelianism on National Socialism can be disputed\textsuperscript{207}, but as with hero worship and race worship Cassirer is drawing attention to a style of thinking which he characterises as mythic. It is the tendency towards a mythic world view, here represented by hero, race and state worship, that Cassirer identifies as preparing the ground for the conscious manipulation of myth: his technique of myth.

### 6.3 Cultural Failure

The third reason for the weakening of cultural forces that keep myth in check refers specifically to the unique circumstances that surrounded the Weimar Republic. Cassirer is not concerned with the acute socio-political crisis that confronted Weimar, but with the failure of culture to resist the growth of irrational political responses. He wryly comments "if reason has failed us, there remains always the \textit{ultima ratio}, the power of the miraculous and mysterious."\textsuperscript{208} An economic crisis does not create political myths, it merely facilitates their growth. In a specific reference to Germany, Cassirer writes;

In the times of inflation and unemployment Germany's whole social and economic system was threatened with a complete collapse. The normal resources seemed to have been exhausted. This was the natural soil upon which the political myths could grow up.\textsuperscript{209}

\textsuperscript{206} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{208} Cassirer, E. \textit{The Myth of The State}, \textit{op cit}, p. 279.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid, 278.
Myths can grow only if there is a corresponding loss of confidence in the existing cultural forces of a community. For Cassirer responsibility for the weakening of cultural forces that could keep mythic thought in check rests with German intellectuals. The role and responsibility for intellectuals to create and maintain the cultural strength of a community is a theme developed by Dubravka Ugresic in her essays on post-communist Yugoslavia. Ivan Strenski argues that Cassirer’s *Mythic Thought* (1925) is aimed at German intellectuals called the Mandarins’ by Fritz Ringer. The ‘Mandarins’ were generally discontented with modernity and reacted against what they saw as the increasing bureaucratization of modern technological society. Cassirer shares the same unease about the mechanization of modern life, but he is opposed to ‘Mandarin’ mythologising of Germany’s past, particularly the rise of völkisch thought. *Völkisch* thought implies the nation is endowed with a mysterious essence which in Germany’s case had been weakened by the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment. For the ‘Mandarins’, their true destiny was to reconstitute themselves as members of an organic, national/racial community (volksgemeinschaft) which has supposedly existed before the waning of the cultural forces sustaining it.

Cultural forces were to be revitalised by a return to an imagined historical and cultural past. *Völkisch* thought offers no coherent political program but it certainly provides a rich source of political myths that are exploited by the National Socialists. Cassirer argues that rather than strengthening the cultural

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210 Ugresic, D. *op cit*.
defences of a liberal democratic society many German intellectuals actively undermined it.213

Their disenchantment with the ideal of objectivity made public discussion difficult, and their exultation of subjectivity opened a door for authoritarianism. Their infatuation with the "inner man" left the "outer man" in the hands of others all too willing to command.214 Cassirer wants to generalise his approach to political myth beyond the specific circumstances of Weimar Germany, but it is obvious that unique circumstances substantially contributed to the later success of the technique of myth.

7. The Technique of Myth

Cassirer believes that what distinguishes modern political myths from previous myths is that they can be deliberately created to serve political needs. For Cassirer, the ability to create a myth is based on what he refers to as the technique of myth. Cassirer identifies four techniques of myth used in Germany by the National Socialists. However, he does not wish to tie these techniques to a specific historical context for he believes that they can be used by future regimes. Cassirer identifies the manipulation of language, the communication of myth through ritual performance, the substitution of critical thought by "supreme

213 As Stern pointed out "for large segments of the educated classes, the Weimar Republic was discredited in advance, morally bankrupt before it was established. For four years the Germans had battled the West, and many of them had elevated that struggle, too, into the metaphysical realm, believing that the Germanic and the Western characters were antithetical. When the republic did come it was almost a parody of their fears. This was the liberal state, as they had dreaded it - divided, defenseless, and defeated, the victim of selfish interests at home and abroad. As for the culture of Weimar, could a more dissonant triumph of modernity be imagined? Powerful as cultural despair, Caesarism, and nationalist hope had already been in the prewar consciousness, the very weakness of Weimar inflamed these feelings and made them stronger still." Stern, F. The Politics of Cultural Despair : A Study in the Rise of the German Ideology. University of California Press, Berkeley, 1963, p. xxix.
214 Strekiski, I. op cit, p. 21.
values' and the distortion of history as the four ingredients that constitute a technique of myth.

7.1 Manipulation of Language.

The first technique of myth is the manipulation of language so that it effectively limits individual thought and action. Such limits are achieved by shifting the function of language from the semantic to the 'magical'. Cassirer comments that "in primitive societies the magic word has a predominant and overwhelming influence. It does not describe things or relations of things; it tries to produce effects and to change the course of nature."\textsuperscript{215} In his analysis of the Nazi use of language, Cassirer notes the same process, "words which formerly were used in a descriptive, logical, or semantic sense, are now used as magic words that are destined to produce certain effects and to stir up certain emotions."\textsuperscript{216} What is different about these words is "the emotional atmosphere which surrounds and envelops them."\textsuperscript{217} The shift from descriptive to emotive language is designed to limit or prevent rational communication as, "the continual use of carefully slanted language can block disinterested discussion. Such discussion requires putting a stop to the feelings that accompany the emotive words. In strongly emotive language, such distance is unattainable."\textsuperscript{218} Emotive appeal is a characteristic of both mythic and religious language, but what has changed for Cassirer is the technical ability to manipulate language on a national

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Cassirer, E. The Myth of The State, op cit., p. 282 - 83.
\item ibid, p. 283.
\item ibid, p. 283.
\item Krois, J.M. op cit. p. 193
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
scale. Cassirer is concerned at the ramifications of this development because in his epistemological scheme it is language that distinguishes humans as *animal symbolicum* and provides the common ground upon which human culture and society depend. Without the ordering medium of rational or cognitive discourse there can be no rational society.\(^{219}\) In his *Essay on Man* Cassirer writes,

> Language has often been identified with reason, or with the very source of reason. But it is easy to see that this definition fails to cover the whole field ..., it offers us a part of the whole. For side by side with logical or scientific language there is a language of poetic imagination.\(^{220}\)

For Cassirer it is the ‘language of poetic imagination’ that is manipulated to create political myth. The conscious shifting of meaning away from the language of rational discourse to the emotionally charged ‘magical’ language of the poetic imagination is a powerful factor in myth creation.

### 7.2 Use of Ritual

Cassirer’s second technique of myth that restricts spontaneous thought and action is ritual. Ritual is the ‘magical’ language of myth in action. Where myth represents the *epic* element that provides the unifying narrative to explain a community, ritual represents the *dramatic* element which actively renews and reinforces mythic bonds that unify a society. Thamer points out in his study of Nazi ritual,

> The principle objective behind these massive spectacles was to offer visual evidence of the German community united behind its leader. The ritualised rally of all National Socialist

\(^{219}\) Krois points out that “by this emphasis on the primacy of the language community, Cassirer undercuts Hegel’s conception of the supremacy of the state.” *ibid*, 169.

\(^{220}\) Cassirer, E. *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, *op cit*, p. 25.
organisations was carefully stage-managed to present an impressive image of mass support for the new regime.\textsuperscript{221}

Not only are ceremonies ‘carefully stage-managed’ but, as Berghaus comments, they are also ‘created’.

Rituals are designed to co-ordinate conspecifics towards some social action that creates or re-establishes order. Their function is to control instinctual reactions to environmental, social, psychological change and to regulate transformations of an organic system, while at the same time preserving and maintaining its integrity.\textsuperscript{222}

The ‘New Order’ looks to the future, but fascist rituals “tried to recapture a mythical past and with it old traditions which to many people provided the only hope of overcoming the chaos of the present”\textsuperscript{223}. One of the traditions is the mythic bond associated with the völkisch movement which celebrates a völkisch world view based on images of a mythic Teutonic past. Open air rituals were first staged in the late nineteenth century and later appropriated by the Nazis.\textsuperscript{224} George Mosse comments, “in an age of industrialisation and class conflict man was to be integrated into his Volk; his true self would be activated and his feeling of alienation transformed into one of belonging.”\textsuperscript{225} Individuals ‘lived out’ the political myths of the state through ritual performance which become a substitute for political action. Ritual performances elicit an emotional rather than a logical response from participants and, over time,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{224} See Strenski, I. \textit{op cit}, p. 34-35.
\item \textsuperscript{225} Mosse, G.L. \textit{op cit.}, p. xxi.
\end{itemize}
Nothing is more likely to lull asleep all our active forces, our power of judgement and critical discernment, and to take away our feeling of personality and individual responsibility than the steady, uniform, and monotonous performance of the same rites.\textsuperscript{226} The constant reaffirmation of the community through displays of 'belonging' effectively eliminates the difference between public and private spheres.

Every political action has its special ritual. And since, in the totalitarian state, there is no private sphere, independent of political life, the whole life of man is suddenly inundated by a high tide of new rituals.\textsuperscript{227}

Cassirer argues that the ritualisation of life undermines awareness of personality and replaces individual responsibility with a collective responsibility.

\subsection*{7.3 Imposition of a Supreme Value.}

The third technique of myth is the elimination of ideal values by proclaiming a single, simple, supreme value. Cassirer argues that the supreme value substituted for critical thought is the myth of the master race which "worked like a strong corrosive and succeeded in dissolving and disintegrating all other values."\textsuperscript{228} Such thinking is represented by Gobineau's \textit{Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines} or in Rosenberg's writings. The following two extracts illustrate the way Rosenberg subsumes all other values in terms of race.

\begin{quote}
Soul means race viewed from within. And, visa-versa, race is the externalisation of soul. Awakening the race-soul to life means recognising its highest value and, under the direction of this value, providing organic configuration for the other values – in state, \textit{Kultur} and religion. This is the task of our century: to create a new human type from a new life-\textit{Mythus}.\textsuperscript{229}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{227} \textit{ibid}, p. 284.
\textsuperscript{228} \textit{ibid}, p.287.
\textsuperscript{229} Pois, R. (Ed.) \textit{op cit}, 34.
The inner voice now demands that the myth of blood and the myth of soul, race and ego, 
Volk and personality, blood and honour; that this myth, alone and uncompromisingly, must 
penetrate, bear and determine all life.\textsuperscript{230}

Rosenberg’s “highest value”, “race-soul” which “must” “determine all life” is resistant to rational refutation\textsuperscript{231}. Krois comments that,

\begin{quote}
it owes this simplicity to its form, not its content. Any content could be proclaimed this way, any race defined as the master race, any religious, political, or other content declared the measure of all other things. This kind of thinking imagines the world in a particular way. The image is an absolute, admitting no other one.\textsuperscript{232}
\end{quote}

To Cassirer it is the totality of such a world view that subsumes all the values of a liberal democratic society. “Even under the harshest political pressure men have not ceased living their own lives. There has always remained a sphere of personal freedom resistant to this pressure.”\textsuperscript{233} Cassirer argues however that, “modern political myths destroy all these ideas and ideals before they begin their work.”\textsuperscript{234}

In the following chapter I will examine in some detail the corrosive effects of racial values that exist at the core of the Kosovo Myth.

\textbf{7.4 Uses and Abuses of History.}

The final technique of myth is the conscious reinterpretation of history. The presentation of history as ‘fate’ or ‘destiny’ is aided, in Cassirer’s opinion, by the nihilistic outlook of philosophers such as Heidegger. Historical fatalism is another substitute for individual thought because the individual is made to feel powerless

\textsuperscript{230} \textit{ibid}, p. 97.
\textsuperscript{231} See Cassirer, \textit{ibid}, 238.
\textsuperscript{232} Krois, J.M. \textit{op cit}, p. 194.
\textsuperscript{233} Cassirer, E. \textit{The Myth of The State}, \textit{op cit}, p. 287.
to influence the future. The popularity of Spengler's *The Decline of The West* is an indication of how far a mythic conception of history penetrated German culture. To Cassirer "Spengler was a prophet of evil" who "described the decline and fall of all our cultural ideals as inevitable. No effort of thought or will, he declared, can change our destiny." Destiny is a higher power than human will, history has no purpose and individuals can do nothing but accept their fate. To Spengler history is mystical, to be understood poetically rather than rationally. Such a view was readily accessed by the Nazi mythmakers. To Cassirer it is a clear example of the reinterpretation of history as myth. "In almost all mythologies of the world we meet with the idea of an inevitable, inexorable, irrevocable destiny. Fatalism seems to be inseparable from mythic thought." Contributing to the sense of fatalism is Cassirer's philosophical rival from the days of the Davos debates, Martin Heidegger. Cassirer is critical of Heidegger who he uses as a paradigm for philosophical thinking that abrogates its own fundamental theoretical and ethical ideals to advocate submission to fate.

Cassirer paraphrases Heidegger's approach to fate as,

> such an existential philosophy does not claim to give us an objective and universally valid truth .... existence has a historical character. It is bound up with the special conditions under which the individual lives. To change these conditions is impossible. In order to express his thought Heidegger had to coin a new term. He spoke of the *Geworfenheit* of man (the being-thrown ). To be thrown into the stream of time is a fundamental and

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234 *ibid.*

235 *ibid.*, p.291.


237 However Spengler did not support National Socialism as "he did not accept the theory of Aryan blood and the volkish myth, which were in his view reprehensible - part romantic fantasy, part relics of nineteenth-century Darwinist positivism." Laqueur, W. *Weimar : A Cultural History 1918 - 1933.* Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1974, p. 93.

inalterable feature of our human situation. We cannot emerge from this stream and we cannot change its course. We have to accept the historical conditions of our existence. Such a view of Heidegger's influence on Weimar Germany is supported in Peter Gay's study Weimar Culture. Gay sees Heidegger's philosophy as a "disdainful rejection of modern urban rationalist civilisation, an eruptive nihilism." and comments that, "Heidegger's work amounted to a denigration of Weimar, that creature of reason, and an exultation of movements like that of the Nazis." However Walter Laqueur reaches the opposite viewpoint in his Weimar. Even the argument that German existential philosophy paved the way for fascist irrationalism contains no more than a small grain of truth. Nazism, like all other totalitarian movements, had no use for negative nihilistic philosophy; it needed positive, optimistic, 'heroic' ideas.

Cassirer did not have the advantage of hindsight, but the point he is making is that taken together Spengler's and Heidegger's approaches to history as fate, encourage a passive attitude to what is presented as inexorable destiny. Such thinking is a "pliable instrument in the hands of political leaders." An examination of the Kosovo Myth in the following chapter will demonstrate just how pliable an instrument history is in mobilising populist support for a political program. The uses and abuses of history, or more correctly 'the past' is one of the central themes of my study of modern political myth.

240 Cassirer, E. The Myth of The State, op cit., p. 293
241 Gay, P. op cit., p. 82.
242 ibid.
243 Laqueur, W. op cit., p. 205.
244 Cassirer, E. The Myth of The State, op cit., p. 293. Cassirer used Spengler and Heidegger as he had used Carlyle, Gobineau and Hegel; as examples of a style of thinking that facilitated the growth of a mythic consciousness. "I do not wish to be misunderstood. I do not mean to say that the cultural pessimism of Spengler or that works like Heidegger's Sein und Zeit (Being and Time) were, to any large degree, responsible for the development of the political ideas in Germany. The ideology of National Socialism has not been made by philosophic thinkers. It has grown up from quite a different soil. But there is an indirect connection between the general course of ideas that we can study in the case of Spengler or Heidegger and
8. Conclusion.

The historical context of Cassirer's analysis of political myth is the rise to power of National Socialism in Germany. The calculated creation of a mythic consciousness, as displayed in the two examples at the beginning of this chapter, represent for Cassirer an inexplicable regression from the rational ideals espoused by the Enlightenment. The ability of a regime to use myth consciously as a source of political legitimation represents more than a historical catastrophe to Cassirer; it represents a crisis in rational thought. While he is reacting to a specific historical reality, Cassirer undertook his analysis of political myth as a warning against its re-emergence at a later time. Cassirer sets out to account for the re-emergence of mythic thought in the modern world; to analyse how and why such thought is still politically powerful, and to provide the knowledge and analytical skills to confront and destroy political myth wherever it might arise in the future.

I argue in the following chapter that the Kosovo Myth played a pivotal, but not altogether clearly understood, role in the break up of Yugoslavia. In analysing the Kosovo Myth I have heeded Cassirer's advice that it is only through knowledge that a political myth may be confronted and destroyed. However, an analysis of the Kosovo Myth demonstrates that while Cassirer's approach to political myth offers valuable insights into the 'techniques' of political myth, The Myth of The State does not comprehensively explain a contemporary political
myth. I have therefore used my analysis of the Kosovo Myth to demonstrate that political myth has re-emerged in a different guise to that envisaged by Cassirer. In giving Cassirer's analysis of political myth a current historical context, I will argue that Cassirer's basic approach is still relevant, but that his analytical framework needs to be modified and extended to include collective memory, tradition and commemoration as core elements of modern political myths.

My study will therefore continue where Cassirer left off. It is my contention that political myth has re-emerged in the later twentieth century as a political phenomenon and it is not receiving the critical attention that is its due. For Cassirer, responsibility for maintaining the cultural strength of a society rests with intellectuals. Cassirer argues that they let Germany down during the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps, as a leading former Yugoslav intellectual Dragan Klaic suggests, responsibility in the face of political myth, was not being heeded at the end of the twentieth century.

Whether living in exile abroad or in silence at home, former Yugoslav artists, writers and others live in the knowledge that they failed to prevent the break-up of their country and the ensuing war. They have proved unable either to counter nationalist hatred and paranoia or to gather themselves across ethnic lines and build a democratic opposition based on the multicultural ethos of the Yugoslavia they once knew. Even those not subscribing to the worst excesses of the warmongers and profiteers will be forced to attempt an explanation to themselves and to others of what they could not prevent. Cassirer would have argued that the cultural catastrophe that has engulfed the Balkans could have been prevented if political myth was treated seriously and confronted at its source.
Cassirer believed that because political myth was the product of a deliberate process using specific techniques, it could be rationally refuted and destroyed. However, what Cassirer underplayed was the irrational appeal of myth; its appeal to the emotions rather than the intellect. While Sorel never attempted the depth of philosophical analysis displayed by Cassirer, his insight into myths as an enabling image that inspired political action as a matter of faith will be taken into account in the study that follows. What follows in the next five chapters is an analysis of the nature of modern political myths based on the ideas already developed by Cassirer. I use an analysis of the Kosovo Myth to provide a historical context for understanding modern political myth. I also use the Kosovo Myth to draw out a number of characteristics that must be subjected to a more theoretical analysis before a conceptualisation of modern political myth can be undertaken. My argument is that to understand current political myths it is necessary to analyse the nature of modern memory, the uses of tradition and the way myths are created and transformed through ritual symbolism. While the outward form of a political myth might have mutated since Cassirer’s analysis, the essence of myth as symbolic thought and symbolic behaviour is unchanged. I will therefore argue that Cassirer’s insight into the legitimating potential of a political myth is just as valid at the end of the twentieth century as it was at mid-century. Cassirer’s historical context was National Socialism, the context for this study will be the uses and abuses of Serbia’s political Myth of Kosovo.