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

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Conclusion
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I began my study of political myth with Dubravka Ugresic’s observation that the Balkan Wars of the 1990’s were fought over control of the past. My analysis of the Kosovo Myth in chapter 2 reinforced Ugresic’s observation and revealed that the struggle to control the past was a major contributing factor in the political disintegration of Yugoslavia. The conscious manipulation of the past, including the systematic destruction of cultural heritage sites and the ‘ethnic cleansing’ of entire populations prompted me to re-examine of role the past plays in modern societies.

The past that was contested in the former Yugoslavia was not the past in the chronological sense. The past does not exist in the past; it exists in the present. The past is reconfigured and integrated into the present to conform to the current needs of a political community. The past is an image of the past that has been collectively constructed by a political community to validate its claims to legitimate authority. The ability of a political community to have its interpretation of the past accepted is an important source of legitimacy. What was being contested was not an abstract ideal of the past, but the legitimacy conferred by the past. What the Yugoslav crisis demonstrated was the political importance of the past as a source of legitimating authority.

These studies are the tip of a burgeoning, reawakened interest in the role the past still plays in contemporary society. I maintain that is more than a coincidence that the heightened scholarly interest in the past during the last decade of the twentieth
century has coincided with the political and military struggle for the past in the former Yugoslavia. I also maintain that the rash of state-sponsored national commemorative ceremonies since 1988 and the re-emergence of debates over the past, ranging from the Historikerstreit in Germany through to the reconciliation and 'sorry' movement in Australia, are connected. My contention is that the common thread that binds together a resurgent scholarly interest in the past, commemorative activity, the emergence of the past as a political issue and the war in Yugoslavia over the past, is political myth.

My argument in this thesis is that political myth provides a conceptual framework that brings together recent scholarly works on the relationship of the past to the present, whether the focus is on collective memory, heritage, nostalgia, memory sites, monuments, museums, tradition or commemoration. I have shown also that an analysis of political myth in its historical context, such as I have done with the Kosovo Myth, provides valuable insights into the characteristic features of a modern political myth. By taking such insights into modern political myth and developing them in terms of the more theoretical literature on the past, I have extended the conceptual framework of political myth to include collective memory, tradition and commemoration.

The core of a political myth is an image of the past. I have argued that political myth is essentially the ritualized presentation of the collective memories and
traditions of a society in terms of a political present. A political myth communicates a community’s symbolically significant ‘sacred’ past and endows this past with political meaning in the present. In giving the past symbolic meaning, political myth also structures and gives coherence to the collective memories and traditions of a community. The relationship between memory, tradition and commemoration is thus a dynamic one. I have argued throughout my thesis that it is through collective memory and tradition that a community constructs an image of the past and gives that past both normative and symbolic value. I have argued also that it is in the commemorative process that this past is sacralised and that it is the *symbolic sacralised past that is communicated through political myth*.

However, my thesis goes beyond an analysis of modern political myths. I propose that the past, as represented and communicated through political myth, is a powerful source of legitimation. In developing such a proposition I introduced a cautionary note about the potential danger that emerging political myths pose for modern societies. While recognising that all societies have their political myths and that these are generally little more than the ‘common meanings’ that underpin any community, my concern has focused on those political myths that become a significant factor in the legitimating process. The current historical context of my concern is the cultural catastrophe that has engulfed Serbia as a consequence of the contrived and spurious uses made of the Kosovo myth as a source of legitimation.
The context of my concern from a theoretical point of view goes back to Ernst Cassirer's *The Myth of the State*.

My study of modern political myth began with Cassirer for two reasons. First, Cassirer recognised that a political myth could be consciously created by a political elite as a source of legitimation. For Cassirer, the ease with which a mythic consciousness could be created deliberately to structure a political program and mobilise a population to support it, represented a cultural catastrophe; a crisis in rational thought. Second, Cassirer undertook an analysis of political myth as a warning against its re-emergence at a later time. Cassirer's purpose was to account for the re-emergence of mythic thought in the modern world; to analyse how and why such thought was still politically powerful, and to provide the theoretical knowledge and analytical skills not only to confront, but to destroy political myth wherever it arose in the future. Neither of these two factors have been examined and developed by later writers on political myth.

Henry Tudor's *Political Myth* provides a commentary on different approaches to myth in general and applies these to developing a concept of political myth. Tudor's concept of myth as narrative, and the importance of a foundation myth to the creation of a community's sense of identity have been developed in my study, but Tudor did not pursue Cassirer's line of thought in any depth. Neither did Gilbert Cuthbertson's *Political Myth and Epic* which focuses on creation myths and
categorisation of myth. Cohen's monograph on *The Management of Myths* comes closest to recognising the legitimating potential of political myths, but the focus of his study is limited to the parochial politics of a Newfoundland community. Girling's *Myth and Politics in Western Societies* is essentially a series of case studies of political myth in the United States, Germany and Great Britain. Christopher Flood's *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction* is the most thorough approach to political myth that has been written and contains a critical analysis of most writers on political myth including Cassirer. I have used Flood's insights throughout my thesis to advance my own argument, especially his analysis of the interrelationship of political myth, ideology and narrative. However, while these works are important to developing the concept of political myth, they are limited by a focus on the nature of myth, rather than *what* makes a myth political.

I have therefore returned to Cassirer's approach to political myth as a conscious creation to provide an elite with a source of legitimation. Cassirer's approach to political myth can be extended readily to include recent scholarship on collective memory, tradition and commemoration as important components of modern political myths. Cassirer's sense of disquiet, which I share, about the ease with which a political myth can be created also more readily accommodates the re-emergence of political myth in post-communist Europe, of which I have taken the Kosovo Myth as the most dramatic example.
To Cassirer's approach to political myth I have added Georges Sorel. A limitation of Cassirer's approach was an overly mechanistic view of political myth. Because Cassirer believed that political myth was the product of a deliberate process using specific techniques, he argued that myth could be rationally refuted and destroyed. Cassirer played down what he considered to be the irrational appeal of political myth; its appeal to the emotions rather than the intellect. Sorel's insight into political myth was that it provided an enabling image, a *pouvoir moteur* that inspired political action as a matter of faith. I have taken Sorel's concept of political myth as an enabling image and included it in my analysis of modern political myths.

The binding contextual example I have used for the whole thesis is the Kosovo Myth. From an analysis of such a 'myth in action' I have emphasised those features of a contemporary political myth that needed further theoretical clarification. I have identified memory, tradition and commemoration as the principal components of the Kosovo Myth in its projection of a mobilising image of the Serbian past. Just as I used the Kosovo Myth to establish the broad parameters of my thesis as a whole, I have used specific examples to illustrate the three main components of political myth. In the appendices that follow I have included specific case studies to demonstrate my conceptualisation of collective memory, tradition and commemoration. Appendix 1 contains an analysis of the Katyn Massacre in the context of Polish collective memory; Appendix 2 analyses the Masada Tradition in the development of Israeli
national consciousness and Appendix 3 analyses the Columbus Quincentennial as an example of a contested commemoration.

These four studies, and the numerous examples I have used throughout my thesis, provide a context for my theoretical development of the concept of political myth. They reveal also a further dimension to any study of political myth, and that is the legitimating potential carried by a political myth. I have therefore argued that any theory of political legitimacy must take into account the role of political myth.

Political legitimacy is not the focus of my thesis, but in the course of my explanatory study in chapter 7 of how political myth might be incorporated into a theory of legitimacy, I uncovered what I consider to be a disquieting trend. My argument is that legitimacy for governments and political systems is both elusive and problematic and that political myth can be used to supplement waning sources of normative authority, or, in times of crisis or social stress, supplant such sources altogether. My concern with such a trend mirrors that of Cassirer: that political myth can be consciously created to mobilise a population in support of the often dubious legitimacy claims of a political elite.

I have argued throughout my thesis that the past, as represented and communicated by political myth, is a powerful source of legitimation. I have also
shown that the consciously 'constructed' symbolic past communicated by a political myth is often both spurious and illusory and contrived by political elites to mask unresolved legitimacy deficits in modern societies. Consequently I conclude that legitimacy based on political myth is a dangerous deception. What political myth offers can never be more than a simulated, ersatz form of compensatory legitimacy. I maintain that Ernst Cassirer's mid-twentieth century warnings about the dangers posed to modern societies by emerging political myth is relevant still.