

DOI:10.14394/eidos.jpc.2019.0017

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## The Reinforcement of Political Myth? Hans Blumenberg, Hannah Arendt and the History of the Twentieth Century

### Abstract:

It seems that the first two decades of the twenty first century demonstrate political mythology to be still functioning in the political life of the West. In this context, it is interesting to view the recent publications of Hans Blumenberg's *Nachlass: Präfiguration* ("Prefiguration," 2014) and *Rigorismus der Wahrheit* ("Rigorism of Truth," 2015), as they reveal unpredicted complications for the interpretation of his philosophy of myth as well as of his political stances. They also evoke some more general questions concerning the role of myth in our contemporary political life. The aim of this article is to present the paradoxes connected with the posthumously published Blumenberg critique of Hannah Arendt and to situate it in the wider context of twentieth century political thought, specifically the work of Sorel, Schmitt, Rosenberg and Cassirer. It is also to point to more general ethical and political ambiguities connected with the problem of political mythology in the present.

### Keywords:

political myth, Eichmann's trial, Hannah Arendt, Hans Blumenberg, violence

### Introduction

In order to be able to approach the problem of political mythology in the recent history of Europe, we need to distinguish the adroit and conscious political use of myth, which is a relatively new phenomenon, from the

political power of myth, which is as old as mythology itself. Since the beginning of human culture myths have had not only the function of explaining the universe but also that of legitimizing and justifying cosmological and political power relations, consolidating communities, providing a sense of order and so forth. The situation seems to have been strengthened with the nineteenth century Romanticism and its rehabilitation of myth and deification of history.<sup>1</sup> But it is only in the early twentieth century that the idea emerged of *constructing* new myths, myths specifically designed to deliver a strong political message, and not only of reviving or supporting the old myths and letting them infuse the national or societal imagination. Thus, insofar as the old myths had first and foremost an existential character, being answers for the general needs of the human condition, and additionally having political significance, the new myths, being intentional constructs of their creators, are political *par excellence*.

Although the expression “political mythology” sounds ominous, it is not necessary to automatically regard political myths as pernicious phenomena. Myths can play a predominant role in the collective formation of nations or societies. What is more, this formative function need not necessarily result in the manipulative creation of a new man as we know it from its totalitarian manifestations. One can also imagine a positive function of mythical components, especially where a decision cannot be made on a purely rational or legal basis or when the meaning of events far exceeds these bases. For instance, the trials of former Nazis cannot be reduced simply to their legal function. The Nuremberg trials were the first awakenings of European societies after World War II. Eichmann’s trial – apart from being a problematic legitimizing act of the state of Israel – for the first time bestowed the victims with the right to public speech, although this speech could be seen as irrelevant from the legal point of view of Eichmann’s guilt. Similarly, the Frankfurt trials, although they fell short of the goals of their director Fritz Bauer, served the purpose of being a lesson to German society, sleepy from the politics of silence and *Wirtschaftswunder*. In these trials, the accused transformed into figures or symbols of wider historical phenomena that exceeded their simple legal role.

On the other hand, political myths are potentially dangerous, and it seems that during the first two decades of the twenty-first century they are regaining their power and exceeding the limited and controlled pedagogical function they served in the second half of the twentieth century (good examples being political slogans like: “Make America great again!”, or promises, like in Poland: “Soon, very soon, we will get hold of the Truth of the assassinations in Smolensk”). It seems now that the role of philosophical analysis is rather to dismantle those myths than to help in constructing them.

Here I would like to anchor my presentation of the problem of political mythology in the particular case of the silent critique of Hannah Arendt by Hans Blumenberg with regard to the wider background of the twentieth century intellectual history.

### *Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem as a Phenomenology of Evil*

Since the Eichmann controversy is commonly known among scholars of philosophy and political thought, it does not need to be presented in detail. It seems to be sufficient to remind the reader of the crux of Hannah Arendt’s argument.

In 1961 Arendt did not possess adequate language to describe what she saw in the dock of the Jerusalem court. She had published the two-volume *Origins of Totalitarianism* a decade earlier wherein she developed certain key-concepts for analysis of totalitarian rule – like mass pan-movements, propaganda and terror – and had identified the unique anthropological mechanisms of totalitarian organization. Her understanding of the

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1) See Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946).

nature of evil at the time was inspired by the Kantian concept of radical evil. Unlike the Christian conception where evil is viewed as the negative power whose origin is the lack of good, absolute evil refers rather to a positive (in an ontological, not ethical sense, of course), yet demonic phenomenon that escapes rational description, “the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil which could no longer be understood and explained by the evil motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power, and cowardice; and which therefore anger could not revenge, love could not endure, friendship could not forgive.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet, once Arendt saw and heard Adolf Eichmann, it was clear that her concept of absolute evil could not be of much help: it was too metaphysical, too profound and too Faustian. She, like many others, had expected someone else. The ingeniousness of Hannah Arendt laid in her instant readiness to abandon her own well established images and start anew. Here, her phenomenological skill comes to the fore in an unobvious way. The main task of the report, apart from its many legal and historical aspects, was to unfold the new phenomenon of evil. Arendt developed a new language to describe this phenomenon, because she desired, at all costs, to understand and conceptualize what seemed to be unfathomable. The stakes of this desire were high and of a not purely intellectual nature, since the analysis of the phenomenon opens up a path to reconcile with the past.

For Arendt, Adolf Eichmann was the exact, though unexpected, full appearance of evil. What she did in her analysis was to unfold the phenomenon in every detail that composed the final diagnosis: evil can be extreme without being radical in the metaphysical sense. Even more: it can be extreme *because* it is not radical. Eichmann was not a monster (as Gideon Hausner, the attorney general, claimed). He was a diligent and conformist office worker, a bureaucrat focused on his own career who was neither able nor willing to give an account of what he was *really* doing, of the meaning of his deeds, one who in Arendt’s words, “never met his midnight disaster.”<sup>3</sup> This incapacity for inner dialogue along with the inability to put oneself imaginatively in another’s position Arendt identified as an inability to think, the central factor of the banality of evil.

Eichmann is a massive, yet banal, genocidal criminal whose inability to think is perfectly reflected in his inability to speak (as he says, “Officialese [*Amtssprache*] is my only language”<sup>4</sup>). This is why Arendt’s phenomenological analysis of the nature of Nazi evil is focused on the linguistic level of clichés and slogans that have been adopted and repeated by the accused. Hannah Arendt’s personal verdict is sounded when she writes: “Despite all the efforts of the prosecution, everybody could see that this man was not a ‘monster’, but it was difficult indeed not to suspect that he was a clown.”<sup>5</sup>

It is exactly this diagnosis that evoked so much critical passion on both continents. If we bracket the outrage caused by Arendt’s judgment of the Jewish councils and the emotional response elicited more by her ironic tone than the subject matter of her story (“the horrible could not only be ludicrous but outright funny”<sup>6</sup>), we can say that it was this, “portrait of Eichmann as a diligent yet ‘banal’ bureaucratic criminal,”<sup>7</sup> that was unacceptable.

Arendt’s analysis suggested Eichmann represented the nature of a new type of evil itself. In a way, he was only the augmented embodiment of what happened in the minds of the majority of the German citizenry who silently assented to what happened. In not being a monster, Eichmann could represent any member of this society, he could be a personified non-wicked everybody, a Heideggerian *the they*. On the other hand, from the

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2) Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest Book, 1985), 459.

3) Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” in *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 188.

4) Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 48.

5) *Ibid.*, 54.

6) *Ibid.*, 48.

7) Amos Elon, “The Excommunication of Hannah Arendt,” in Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, xii.

point of view of the Israelis, if he was a completely new type of evil, his deeds could not be inscribed into the narrative of anti-Semitism the Israeli government of David Ben-Gurion desired. All in all, Arendt was generally criticized for not being right in her diagnosis, for instance for misunderstanding Eichmann's demeanor and taking for granted what was, as Deborah Lipstadt has argued, a studied pose. Most commonly however, Arendt's diagnosis of Eichmann's moral illiteracy was (mis-)interpreted as justification of his deeds.

### Blumenberg's Critique

Hans Blumenberg's criticism of Arendt is astounding in its originality. Unlike many others, he did not chastise Arendt for mistakes, distortions and misinterpretations. On the contrary, he was convinced that Arendt was basically right in her diagnosis. Yet, he subjected *The Report* to severe critique which he never showed to anybody, let alone published. Although Blumenberg cited, "a consideration for Hans Jonas"<sup>8</sup> (a close friend of Arendt) as a reason for this self-restraint, it seems that there is more to it: as we will see, his critique complicates the reception of his own thought.

In his *Rigorismus der Wahrheit* ("Rigorism of Truth")<sup>9</sup> Blumenberg establishes an analogy between Freud and Arendt. The affinity does not concern the subject matter of their thought, which is unremarkable if one knows Arendt's negative attitude towards psychoanalysis. The analogy is of a different kind: both Freud and Arendt, according to Blumenberg, share a common intellectual feature: *the absolutism of truth*. Freud in his *Moses and Monotheism* offered the provocative thesis of Moses being Egyptian and not Hebrew. As an Egyptian he led the Israelites out of Egypt, only to be murdered by them and subsequently worshipped as the slain Father of Judaism so that his followers could expiate their guilt. By this revelation, Freud deprived his folk of the founder of their religion.

Hannah Arendt, according to Blumenberg, in her *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, performed an analogous (though in a reversed way) act: by unmasking the shallowness and banality of the criminal, she deprived the Jewish people of a negative father-founder for the state of Israel. Blumenberg writes: "Just as Freud had taken Moses away from his people, so too does Hannah Arendt take Adolf Eichmann away from the state of Israel."<sup>10</sup>

It is not that Blumenberg denies the correctness of Freud's and Arendt's analyses. What he denies is their *right to be right* in two very critical moments of Jewish history. Just as Freud placed his "truth" in 1939, "the worst possible moment in which to take away from a humiliated and beaten down people the man who in the beginning had justified their faith in history,"<sup>11</sup> so did Hannah Arendt in 1963, the critical moment for the state existence of the Jewish nation, take away the mythical figure who could serve as a founding myth of the state. Blumenberg asks: "Should the truth be told? Maybe. Should the truth be always told? For sure not. Should the truth have been told in this particular moment? That the negative state here is a clown?"<sup>12</sup>

The parallel between Moses and Eichmann is shocking and certainly one of the reasons why Blumenberg not only decided not to publish these controversial remarks of the 1980s, but also never showed them to anybody.

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8) Hans Blumenberg, "The Letter to Henning Ritter, 10 February 1988," *Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach*, in Hannes Bajohr, "Der Preis der Wahrheit: Hans Blumenberg über Hannah Arendts *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," *Merkur* 69, no. 5 (2015), 559.

9) Hans Blumenberg, *Rigorismus der Wahrheit. "Moses der Ägypter" und weitere Materialien zu Freud und Arendt*, ed. Ahlrich Meyer (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2015).

10) *Ibid.*, 15; for a translation, see Angus Nicholls, "Hans Blumenberg on Political Myth," *Iyyun. The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (2016), 27.

11) *Ibid.*, 9; for a translation, again see Nicholls, "Hans Blumenberg on Political Myth," 27.

12) *Ibid.*, 82.

It suffices to state here that Blumenberg believed both to be mythical figures – Moses a positive, Eichmann a negative one – but nevertheless pragmatically useful for the political existence of the nation.

Blumenberg's point is that the truth is out of place where existence, even political existence, is at stake: he writes, "one cannot have both at the same time: the analysis and the myth."<sup>13</sup> Where Arendt chose analysis, Blumenberg advocates myth: "there are states that can be only founded by their enemies."<sup>14</sup> Although Blumenberg did not say it openly, the consequence of this statement seems to be clear: the existence of Israel is an aftermath of the Holocaust. The mistake of Hannah Arendt is her attempt to deconstruct the political mythology of the Eichmann figure. For instance, her legal argumentation and her demand that Eichmann be tried in an international court for crimes against humanity is, for Blumenberg, a symptom of a moral rigorousness that makes her blind to the exceptional political and historical circumstances. According to Blumenberg, the Israeli government was right to concentrate all the guilt in Eichmann and make him a scapegoat, a personification of all Nazi evil. It was right to stage a show trial irrespective of any legal objections. The legitimacy of this trial could not be based on universal legal rules. It had to be based on the state of emergency which Hannah Arendt – thinking sociologically, not politically (and in addition from the North American point of view) – did not recognize, in Blumenberg's view. One of the functions of the trial was to create a mythological figure of a scapegoat who could bear the entirety of Nazi guilt. This is why all the witnesses who apparently had seen Eichmann in all the possible places were needed; that is why the guilt for all the German atrocities had to concentrate on him. Although such evidence could not support the indictment and judges had to exclude it in the legal procedure, it was appropriately in place in the mythological-political sphere.

Had Eichmann been tried in an international court only for what he had actually done, he could have not played the role of the mythical enemy. The function of the Jerusalem trial could not have been limited to demonstration of a personal guilt and to passing a legal penalty that demands the awareness of this personal guilt. Eichmann's execution, again, was not a plain legal act. It was a ritual. Eichmann could not have been punished, but he could have been killed. This ritual was a legitimizing act of Israel. According to Blumenberg, the nation had every right to capture and kill its historical enemy and make it a foundational act of its political existence. In this mythological perspective, the worst thing that could have been done was to destroy the mythological figure by denouncing him as a clown and discrediting the state act. When Arendt named Eichmann the clown, "it was not irony but cynicism. She was oblivious to the catharsis of the state-founding act."<sup>15</sup> That is why, in Blumenberg's verdict, "Arendt shouldn't have written this book."<sup>16</sup>

If the main sin of Arendt is that she did not understand or did not want to understand the mythical necessity of archaic violence, the question arises as to the role of political mythology in Blumenberg's thought. But before we try to approach this question, we need to turn to the history of the understanding of political mythology in the twentieth century.

### The Attack of Myth: Sorel, Schmitt, and Rosenberg

One of the first to develop a theory of political-mythological *design* was George Sorel in his *Reflections on Violence*. Sorel's construction of a radical leftist myth of the general proletarian strike was on no account an old myth bestowed anew with consolidating or legitimizing functions. Instead, Sorel sought a new, radical

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13) Ibid., 18.

14) Ibid., 13.

15) Ibid., 76.

16) Ibid., 20.

mythical opening for the revolutionary faction of the nineteenth century syndicalism: as he writes, “there can be no national epics about things which the people cannot picture to themselves as reproducible in the near future; popular poetry implies future much more than the past.”<sup>17</sup>

The idea of the general proletarian strike enforces a change in the understanding of myth. It is no longer a story referring to the past and delivering an ultimate explanation or justification of the given or imagined order (like, let’s say, in Plato). First, it is more an image than a narrative. Second, its primary dimension is not the past but the future. It was Sorel who first discovered the power of such images:

Appeal must be made to collections of images which, taken together and through intuition alone, before any considered analyses can be made, are capable of evoking the mass of sentiments which correspond to the different manifestations of socialism against society. The syndicalists solve this problem perfectly by concentrating the whole of socialism in the drama of general strike.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, his mythology is aimed at the opposite of classical political myths, whose purpose was to conserve power-relations; that is, it is aimed at the total destruction of the given political order. In this way, inadvertently, Sorel set up a pattern for the great rehabilitation of myth and the twentieth century political mythology *per se*. Thomas Mann did not exaggerate when he called *Reflections* a book of the epoch (*Doctor Faustus*). It strongly inspired not only revolutionary Marxist works (like Walter Benjamin’s *On Violence*) but also many on the opposite side of the political scene.

It is not an accident that in the young Weimar Republic it was the conservative, right-wing jurist Carl Schmitt who referred to Sorel. By no means did he need to support Sorel’s proletarian revolutionary approach in order to understand and willingly embrace the power of “evoking the mass of sentiments” by a collection of images. He used Sorel’s arguments as a support in his attack on public debate and parliamentary democracy. Having accepted Sorel’s vitalistic irrationalism and his discovery of the power of new myths, Schmitt rejected, of course, the revolutionary content of myth as a general strike. In his *Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* he strived to demonstrate that national myths are more powerful, universal and prevailing than the myth of class struggle. In this way, he used Sorel’s argumentation to achieve the opposite goal: instead of an international proletarian movement, a mythological securing of nationalism. But he was entirely convinced by Sorel’s recognition of the fundamental meaning of political myth: “In direct intuition the enthusiastic mass creates a mythical image that pushes its energy forward and gives it the strength of martyrdom as well as the courage to use force.”<sup>19</sup> And he seems to entirely support Sorel’s agonistic understanding of myth: “Whatever value human life has does not come from reason; it emerges from a state of war between those who are inspired by great mythical images to join the battle.”<sup>20</sup>

Sorel’s analysis, deprived of its radical leftist content, but maintaining its logic, supported the main features of Schmitt’s political philosophy: anti-liberalism and anti-parliamentarianism, his dictatorial vision of democracy as an utterance of the general will of the people in acts of acclamation, his idea of the political as a contradistinction between friend and foe, and, last but not least, his decisionism and his concept of sovereignty. In one aspect, though, he felt that political mythology can be dangerous: mythology is essentially pluralistic and polytheistic. As such it can undermine a monotheistic political theology based on Catholicism. That is why

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17) George Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 91.

18) *Ibid.*, 113.

19) Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2000), 68.

20) *Ibid.*, 71.

Schmitt was ready to accept mythology as an incentive for national consolidation, but once it fulfilled its function, to replace it with religious dogma as a stable basis and legitimization of the public sphere. Nevertheless, Schmitt managed to turn attention to Sorel's ideas in Germany and translated his revolutionary thought into the political language of the Weimar Republic, bestowing its right wing with a new rhetorical power.<sup>21</sup>

This power came to fulfillment in Alfred Rosenberg's *The Myth of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Hannah Arendt says of this work that it "certainly shows no aspiration whatsoever to 'scholarship.'"<sup>22</sup> It is not only because Rosenberg is probably not able to fulfill such aspirations. It is also because he – like so many others in Germany at that time – did not believe in neutral science. It was common to ascribe the crisis of inter-war Europe to the lack of myths and concentrate intellectual power on creating new myths. In this way Rosenberg follows Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger and others.<sup>23</sup> He is convinced that the previous traditions consolidating Europe, like Christianity and humanism, went bankrupt during the First World War. In the place of these ideas he proposes to invent or reinforce a new-old Germanic national myth. He – unlike many other national socialist ideologues – understands race not purely biologically and anthropologically, but develops specific spiritual and cultural speculations about the Nordic type. Race is, for him, "the image of soul."<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, "new faith" – as he himself calls it – relies entirely on the Myth of Blood. Spiritualism meets here naturalism and amalgamates into what he calls the mysticism of race. Thus, he is well aware that rational argument or critical knowledge is not a good starting point for a national upsurge and that "only the Myth and its forms are truly alive. This is the thing for which men are ready to die."<sup>25</sup> Myth is a site in which politics and (pagan) cults unify: the existence of the people is rooted in the "allegorical images of the first awakening."<sup>26</sup> There is no need to add that the basic content of the new, mythical imagery is that of an eternal combat of German genius with the Jewish demon.

In this way we can say that the formal principle of political mythology as an image of final combat, firstly formulated by Sorel, gains its content in Schmitt's principle of the political as the constant defining of enemies and by Rosenberg is developed to a paroxysm of racism. It helps us not only to discern the new from the old myths, but also political mythology from ideology: the latter being still an intellectual construct, while the first is a compelling image and emotion more than a theory.

### Counterthrust: Ernst Cassirer

Ernst Cassirer devoted his last book to the dismantling of political myth. *The Myth of the State*, written in exile in America shortly before his death in 1945, was the first comprehensive attempt to analyze the genesis of the myths of the twentieth century and their tragic consequences. In order to fulfill this task, Cassirer reconstructed the history of Western political thought from Plato to Heidegger. This history is seen as a specific dialectic of mythical thinking and the attempts of overcoming mythology and putting political theory on a rational basis. The highlights of these attempts are Plato and Machiavelli. Plato postulated expelling the poets and mytho-

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21) Already in 1923 he quoted affirmatively Mussolini: "We have created a myth, this myth is a belief, a noble enthusiasm; it does not need to be reality, it is a striving and a hope, belief and courage. Our myth is the nation, the great nation which we want to make into a concrete reality for ourselves," Schmitt, *The Crisis*, 76. Schmitt once again referred to mythological imagery years later, on the eve of the Second World War, in his mythological interpretation of Hobbes's *Leviathan*.

22) Arendt, *The Originsof Totalitarianism*, 449.

23) See Helmut Berding, ed., *Mythos und Nation. Studien zur Entwicklung des Kollektiven Bewußtseins in der Neuzeit 3* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2016), 257–258.

24) Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 6, accessed May 25, 2019, Archive.org.

25) Ibid., 150.

26) Ibid.

graphs from the state and established a new rational and, at the same time, ethical principle for politics: the idea of Good. Machiavelli, on the verge of a new epoch, managed to bestow politics with a new, long forgotten autonomy and independence from theocratic hierarchies that defined political thinking in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, political thinking of modernity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries mostly (apart from Hobbes) came back to the ethical principle: they based their theories of the state on natural law.

The nineteenth century broke with this ideal. The German Romantics “discovered” history anew and – after the Enlightenment’s contempt of myth as a previous, un-enlightened stage of human history – reevaluated myths positively. According to Cassirer, the most prominent figures who prepared the ground for new myths in the twentieth century were Schelling, Hegel, Carlyle and Gobineau. Schelling in his search for the origins of poetry rehabilitated mythology which had been downgraded in the Enlightenment. Hegel made the state a center of historical life and the object of a new cult. Carlyle promulgated a cult of heroes in history. Gobineau deified race as a subject of history and propagated the natural inequality of races. None of these writers is in any way responsible for the way their speculations supported national socialism. But they initiated a dangerous glorification of the past and the treating of history as a source of law and final authority.

Nevertheless, although contemporary political myths refer to nineteenth century thought, they are completely new constructs. The societies of the twentieth century in one way resemble primitive communities: they resort to myth and magic in times of crisis. But the way of mythologizing reality is completely different. In modern educated societies myths do not spread naturally. They need the conscious support of adroit technicians. The natural soil for political mythology is a collective desire that can be personified in a mythical figure. If that desire is insatiable in any other way (as it was not in the Weimar republic), it focuses on a leader. The former social, ethical and legal orders are considered worthless and replaced with the power and authority of the leader. New myths are an amalgam of primal instincts and elaborated modern techniques: the new politician “is the priest of a new, entirely irrational and mysterious religion. But when he has to defend and propagate this religion he proceeds very methodically. Nothing is left to chance.”<sup>27</sup> New myths are not games of free imagination. “They are artificial things that can be manufactured as any other modern weapon – as machine guns or airplanes.”<sup>28</sup> The role of philosophy in the uneven fight against myths is at least to understand the techniques of the new mythologizing. Cassirer’s efforts concentrate on the deconstruction and disclosure of mechanisms of mythological machinery.

The end of totalitarian powers in Europe did not mean the end of political mythology. One can, for instance, find mythical aspects of the foundational acts of new post-war states. Cassirer’s first analysis provides a robust tool for at least recognizing and describing the moment of the creation of new myths.

### The Rehabilitation of Political Myth? Blumenberg’s Ambivalences

So far, we have seen a historical polarization of the *assessment* of political mythology. First, the affirmation that started in the early twentieth century and lasted until 1945. Then, as a reaction to the catastrophe of World War II, attempts to demythologize politics, the earliest and most expressive being Ernst Cassirer’s work. Seen in this light, Blumenberg’s perspective is very interesting insofar as it complicates the sinusoidal line of political mythology, leading from its rise in the first half of the twentieth century to its demise in the second. As stated above, his critique focuses on Arendt’s ironic and hard-hitting depiction of Eichmann as a clown. According to Blumenberg, by doing so, Arendt deprived Israel of its negative father-founder. In other words, she deprived Jews

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27) Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 282.

28) *Ibid.*



of their only possible legitimizing political myth. We have a strange ambivalence here: Blumenberg was at the same time a disciple and intellectual ally of Ernst Cassirer (although not without reservations<sup>29</sup>) and a severe critic of pre-Nazi and Nazi political mythology (*Präfiguration*) on the one hand, and a supporter of the political foundation myth of the state Israel, who attacked Arendt for legal rigor and out of place objectivism, on the other.

We have gotten used to thinking of Hans Blumenberg as a philosophical offspring of Ernst Cassirer, who could, although not without reservations, be associated with the spirit of Enlightenment (I believe his *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* of 1966 still belongs to this spirit). Then in the *Work on Myth* of 1979 we have the affirmation of myth as a human artifact that serves as a pragmatic tool to mitigate the overwhelming power of absolute reality. Blumenberg develops this argument by addressing mostly classical Greek mythology with its anti-absolutist function of dividing the totality of nature into personified powers familiar to humans. Although we do not find any outright political philosophy in this work, it can be inferred from Blumenberg's philosophical analysis of myth, particularly from his opposition between myths and dogmas. While myths are stories told to create distance between human beings and overwhelming reality, and mollify the absolutist face of this reality, dogmas have the opposite function: they accept only one version of history. While polytheist myths are pluralistic and support the liberal and democratic division of powers, dogmas consolidate power in one figure, the monotheistic God. While myths are flexible and can be revised and retold in the changing circumstances, maintaining their anthropological function, dogmas are rigid and contribute to the absolutism of theology.

This is also one of Blumenberg's arguments against Carl Schmitt and his political theology. If we could politically identify Blumenberg from the *Work on Myth*, he would be more a liberal and skeptical pluralist than anything else. Nevertheless, one thing is clear: myth is positively valued. This is the reason why Blumenberg did not include the final chapter on political myths, titled *Präfiguration* ("Prefiguration"). It was published separately and posthumously and is, at least partly, a critique of political myth in so far as it chastises the young Ernst Kantorowicz for the remythization of the figure of Friedrich the II of Hohenstaufen (1194–1250): "What is legitimate for life and the living, endangers the function of the historian, a function that retains its actuality also in times thirsty for myths and figures."<sup>30</sup> He also unmasks Hitler's distorted justification of military actions (Stalingrad) that he claimed to have found in the reversed prefigurations of Frederick the Great (1712–1786) and Karl the XII (1682–1718). Although Blumenberg understands the rhetorical function of political myths, he is still aware of the danger of political mythology: "Blending the rhetoric with metaphysics is the weakness of our tradition, as well as its interpreters."<sup>31</sup>

In this context, Blumenberg's critique of Arendt is perplexing. He remythologizes Zionism with conscious affirmative references to the categories of his political and philosophical adversary, Carl Schmitt (and, what is more, dangerously along with the "historiosophic" argumentation of Robert Servatius, Eichmann's defender in court, who claimed that Hitler involuntarily helped Jews to found their own state).<sup>32</sup>

Here two sets of open questions must be posited: (1) How is it that Schmitt, the former Nazi collaborator, provides categories to understand the politics of the Jewish state?; what does the Schmittian state of exception do in Blumenberg's political thinking?; and what does the previously and severely criticized category of enemy

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29) The reader will find more about the Blumenberg-Cassirer dialogue in: Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences. Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Myth* (New York: Routledge 2015), 93–103.

30) Hans Blumenberg, *Präfiguration. Arbeit am politischen Mythos*, ed. Angus Nicholls and Felix Heidenreich (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), 21.

31) *Ibid.*, 25.

32) See Ahlrich Meyer, "Nachwort des Herausgebers," in Blumenberg, *Rigorismus*, 121–122.

do?<sup>33</sup> (2) How did Blumenberg become an advocate not only of myths but also of ancient and violent scapegoat rituals, as described and exposed by René Girard?<sup>34</sup>

The publications of *Nachlass* are still too fresh (*Rigorismus* in 2015; *Präfiguration* 2014) to deliver ultimate answers to those questions. Yet one thing is sure: an understanding of *Rigorismus* cannot be abstracted from Blumenberg's biography. As a half-Jew he suffered profoundly under the Nazi state and he was apparently deeply and personally wounded by Arendt's *Eichmann*. But my point is that there is more to it: when seen in the theoretical context, it can be said that the empirical problem of political mythology in a way cracks the Blumenbergian philosophy of culture, based on a positive assessment of myth as an anthropological feature. This explains why Blumenberg could not include a chapter on political myths in his *Work on Myth*. The anthropological premises also explain his conviction that political myth can be fought only with another myth, just as one God can be challenged only by another God (Compare, Goethe's: *nemo contra deum nisi deus ipse* – which Blumenberg interpreted in a polytheistic way). This also sheds some light on his critique of Arendt: neutrality and rationalism are out of place as weapons against the dominance of a formidable and pernicious mythology. The Nazi myth can be fought only with the same mythological weapon. Blumenberg believed that in this particular case the anti-Semitic myth of the twentieth century could be fought only with another myth, and he protected this Zionist myth from any attempts to dismantle it through rationalism and matter-of-fact analyses.

### Concluding Questions

If I am right that Blumenberg's stance is too complex to be simply discredited as biographical and idiosyncratic, we need to take seriously Blumenberg's lesson. One does not need to support Blumenberg's critique of Arendt or his views on Eichmann as a negative father founder of Israel to accept his intuition that events such as trials for war crimes are never purely legal matters: there is a mythical component inscribed in them. This is a challenging insight into the nature of politics.

If, as Blumenberg claims, myth can be countered only by another myth, political myth can be at the same time dangerous and liberating. And together with that component there opens a space for the collective formation of peoples. Blumenberg's attitude reveals the interesting ambivalence within the problematic of political mythology.

First, it would mean that the attempts to get ourselves rid of political mythology by implementing rational premises are prone to relapse into mythology themselves: for instance, the idea that in Eastern Europe after 1989 the socialist ideology can be replaced with the purely rational logic of the free market. It is always the case that this "rationality" also includes some mythological components not very far from other, more conspicuous mythologies.

Second, if myths can be challenged only by other myths, it is dangerous for democrats and liberals to fight powerful mythology with rationalistic claims. It can be that democracy, pluralism and solidarity also need a powerful mythological weapon of their own. Thus, if we want to outweigh the nationalistic and xenophobic myths that spread in the Western world, we need to challenge them with other pluralistic and democratic myths, instead of the presumptuous claim of being a reasonable and rational isle amidst the mythological backwaters.

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33) See Hans Blumenberg, "Die Heterogonie von 'Feind' und 'Freund'," in *Vollzähligkeit der Sterne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997).

34) See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979).

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