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## Myth as a Means of Ordering and Organizing Social Reality

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### Abstract

This study investigates the phenomenon of social myth as a factor of forming and transforming the consciousness of social actors. It is defined that one of the factors of appealing to mythological representation of reality is the crisis of scientific orientations of modernism. In this plane, the article studies phenomenological receptions of myth as well as the process of mythologization of modern social reality. Moreover, attention is drawn to the fact that mythologization fixes an idea of social reality and its axiological (value) dimension in the consciousness of separate individuals and their groups. Myths are axiological indicators; the more controversial society values are the greater number of myths is produced by social consciousness to eliminate these contradictions. The difference between modern and archaic myth has both qualitative and quantitative aspects. Modern society generates a great number of myths with much more narrow content. This is a consequence of "specialization" of myths, their orientation towards solving particular local tasks: political, economic, etc. Functional and structural changes of social myths can be accounted for by critical, permanently transitional condition of society in which myth compensates the unformed elements of new social practices. However, the content side of myth is not a crisis but social request and values of particular culture. The question about the necessity to fight against myths probably should be answered negatively if we don't mean the most dangerous myths posing a serious threat for society. Myths are in harmony with social consciousness and arise in places where there is a fault between current and desirable normativity. Thus, when social practices become stable social consciousness itself displaces and nullifies myths that are responsible for harmonization of new order and they become demanded.

**Keywords:** Myth, Social myth, Myth making, Representation of social reality, Myth phenomenology, Mythologization of consciousness.

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## **I. Introduction: the crisis of modern scientism and mythological representation of social reality**

Despite the colossal advance of science and impressive innovations in technology, the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety has increased in modern society since the desire to cognize the world on the basis of positive rational science and logic turned out to be invalid. Already in the middle of the 19th century the ideologist of positivism Auguste Comte wrote, "From now on the totality of our intellectual evolution does not allow another possible outcome rather than the creation of <...> a truthfully normal arrangement of human mind imparting the lacking completeness and reality to positive thinking in order to establish harmony between philosophical genius and general common sense, which could not exist adequately so far" (Comte, 1830-1842). Therefore, positivist and science philosophers tried to distant themselves from dogmas, traditions and myths in their "realistic" reconstructions of society characteristic of modernism.

However, when the abrupt shift of social dynamics to acceleration occurred leading to progressive increase in the number of mobile connections and dominants of social development, irrelevance of linear formal-logical understanding of social world became evident. At first sight, that is what led to a paradox situation of expanding the functional field of mythological consciousness that has always existed beyond any contradictions and expectations of social metamorphoses. Social myths feeding traditions have always been and still remain guarantees for the sustainable development of society. It is worth noting that not only in traditional but also in modern society myths alongside tradition in some way regulate the functioning of social norms (Baklanov et al., 2015).

Moreover, the crisis of scientific formal-logical rationality characteristic of society of modernism generated in social reflection the multiplicity of non-traditional ways of representing the surrounding world basing on a specifically sensual mode of reproduction of the actual reality. In this context, the reconstruction of the world picture must be carried out regarding the changes that occur in society. A drastic transformation of the habitual rational world picture that took place in the second half of the 20th century resulted in strengthening mythological thinking of a modern human. The elements of mythological consciousness can be found in any, even rationally thinking person manifesting themselves in a subconscious (or unconscious) desire to give meaning and relative stability to the present and the future. This need is projected into everyday life giving rise to a sense of social and personal comfort. In addition, the institutions of society such as the media and political power through the increased use of advertising and political propaganda increasingly make the subject of society think basing on the application of brands, stamps and ideologemes (Krueger, 2015). Thus, despite the fact that in his theory M. Weber argued quite soundly the increasing rationalization of society, myth did not vanish from social life with the change of sociality type and with the growth in the degree of society modernization. Both in traditional and in industrial society myth is a most important part of representing social being and consciousness that to a large extent influence the formation of perception of the world (Bubandt, 2014). According to E. Cassirer, "Myth is always next to us and it only hides in the darkness expecting due hour" (1853: 384).

Myth is a language of description that due to its symbolic nature turned out to be a convenient form to manifest main models of individual and social behavior. It is the basic and, in fact, original phenomenon of human culture. The beginning of the research and modern interpretations of myths can be related to the

Age of the Enlightenment, to be more exact, to the work of G. Vico "The Topics of History: The Deep Structure of the New Science" (Vico, 1976). The further thinkers of the Age of the Enlightenment, B. de Fontenelle, Voltaire, D. Diderot, C. de Montesquieu, who considered myth as a variety and a result of superstition and hoax, were much more regressive in the research of the myth nature compared to the concept of G. Vico.

F. Schelling develops a theory of myth polemically aimed against classic allegorism; according to this theory mythological image does not "denote" something but it is something meaning that it is a content form that exists in the unity with its content.

Myth was investigated afterwards by many social and humanitarian theorists from F. Nietzsche and C. Jung to R. Barthes who laid the basis for new understanding of myth nature as a semiotic phenomenon of everyday culture.

## **II. Phenomenological receptions of myth**

The analysis of various theories of myth shows that basically all these theories consider myth by analogy with other forms of culture, which does not allow us to distinguish the specificity of mythological consciousness. In this connection, it makes sense to consider myth not as a kind of concept of scientific consciousness inherent in a particular epoch but as a phenomenon of consciousness. From the point of view of the phenomenological approach, myth is considered not only as an object, but also as a method of investigating itself. At the same time, this state of affairs seems absurd since it is logically impossible to reflect on the myth and not to turn it into an object. Myth itself also does not have the means to construct a method for investigating itself, myth is non-reflexive; moreover, the myth is destroyed from rational analysis. Syncretism is characteristic of mythological consciousness; there is no distinction between a subject and an object within it. This methodological deadlock is also observed in the study of existing methods of describing the phenomenon of consciousness (Baddorf, 2017).

In the research "Symbol and Consciousness" M.K. Mamardashvili and A.M. Pyatigorsky describe and analyze the source of origin of the given paradoxes. They conclude that "consciousness is always of a higher level than the elements of content that constitute the experience of consciousness" (1997). This concerns the fact that in the moment of reflexive procedure we always cognize the content of reflexive act but not the form; the conditions of producing the form are "concealed" from consciousness since they are originated is the very process of producing the form. Therefore, myth definitely cannot be an object of theoretical research as any behavior in any order of description can become such an object including behavior (description) of a researcher himself. Mythology objectifies myth including all the procedures of mythological cognition of the world: instruments, basic notions and terms that appear in the description of an object, the basic relations established between these notions and terms.

The difference between myth and mythology can be eliminated by means of a phenomenological shift technique. In order to carry out this procedure, it is necessary to get rid of the position of the external observer who conceals the mythological structure of consciousness from us, that is, it is necessary to create

a "third" position which includes the position of the observer and observed as his particular cases. In this connection, the concept of "the other" is introduced, where "the other" denotes the structure of consciousness which is a form of reflexive acts of consciousness not related to the content of these acts. Myth is regarded as "the other" not in the sense of an object but as a fact of one's own or another's consciousness not dependent on the subjectivity of consciousness. Myth is understood as a form of consciousness realizing itself through content and through the perception of this content. Carrying out incessant phenomenological shifts in thinking philosophers suggest the possibility of observing an unobserved being, that is, the possibility of ontology observed through psychology. The form of consciousness is a meaning-generating construction. Having some generalized but at the same time analytically not fully traceable content the form always assumes some uncertainty that can be overcome in the acts of transcendence. The particular content of the form predetermined in the acts of consciousness is always historical and in this sense the form is understood as a phenomenon but the form itself cannot be reduced to these contents since it possesses originating function compared to them. In this context myth can be understood as some "essential" phenomenon of consciousness that was generated as a result of random act of productive imagination of a prehistoric human; having satisfied human's existential need for meaning, it was risen to the level of the general and apodictic. Myth becomes a referent, a prototype that reproduces itself in an uncountable number of patterns of a sensual given – existence. At the same time it is necessary to differentiate between myth as an event and its "transformed form"; phenomenological reduction supplemented by destruction is able to do that.

However, at the level of communal consciousness and collective memory that basically cannot be purely rational myth turns out to be a fundamental and unique means of storing and using aggregate social experience, a guarantee for social identity. Individual perception sees a kind of its own reflection in archetypal information of social consciousness and, thus, it is inclined to identify itself partially or even completely with these archetypes and prototypes and to take credit for the content of collective experience.

On the other hand, myth can be used as an instrument for understanding the reality in which society exists (Kieschnick & Shahar, 2014). The very existence of myth that works in communal consciousness gives an answer to a wide range of generally significant questions. Taking various forms, myth freely penetrates social consciousness and compensates its faults. Offering a particular program of actions, it can serve as a role model. Losing one of its functions it preserves the others and acquires new ones. Its effectiveness is connected with the invariant "truthfulness" of myth set in advance and the doubts in "truthfulness" do not lead to its transformation, they result in complete failing and demounting of the whole myth. However, breaking down, myth automatically frees the place not for a rational attitude to this issue but for the affirmation of new myth; the assertion of rational discourse requires considerable efforts in overcoming mythological consciousness both from the individual and from the collective. In addition, modern myths capture small areas of reality and answer not to the question "what is everything" but to more specific and narrow questions, often mimicking in a form to a scientific or philosophical worldview. An important function of social therapy can be related to the functions of myth, which starts functioning when there is a collective trauma that requires not resolving the conflict but relieving the tension of consciousness.

Therefore, public consciousness manifested in specific forms produces different kinds of myths in all the spheres of social life, thereby mythologizing the contemporary picture of the world.

### **III. Myth making and the process of mythologization of modern social reality**

The higher the level of social uncertainty is, the higher the need for myth (social, national or political) becomes. In the process of myth making the surrounding reality is modeled and society is structured. As a result of this process mythologized consciousness "forms new distorted picture of reality, changes objective consciousness to subjective, imaginary symbolic one" (Bubandt, 2014: 105). Consequently, such a reconstructed picture of the world set particular worldview guidelines and value behavior orientations (Schackt, 2014). Relying on mythological structures, that the audience is not clearly aware of, enables to increase intensity of affect on different spheres of human activity (Szanto, 2015).

Modern mass culture, especially such its type as trash culture, is oriented towards the distraction of a person from the world of realia. An appeal to elite culture requires the person to apply considerable effort to comprehend the past in the present. We believe that an appeal to social memory that exists in such forms as myth, archetype and text may be one of the possible options for overcoming the existing ontological gap. It is these forms that most fully reflect the process of a gradual transition from traditional culture to modern one. In this context such a transition does not imply a complete elimination of one form of the social memory being but most likely demonstrates their mutual penetration. It is during the development of culture that a gradual transition from the mythological to the archetypal and from it to the textual being of social memory can most distinctly be traced. We believe that it is practically impossible to create clear boundaries (neither temporal nor functional-structural) between these forms of the social memory being. In the texts of culture that store the content of social memory in a latent or explicit form myths and archetypes are manifested with a necessity. The identification of a mythological or archetypal basis in the content of a text often allows better understanding of the deep value-semantic dominants of the social memory being. In our opinion, the latter circumstance will enable us to more accurately capture the specifics of preserving the content of social memory in the transitional epochs, when the content of one form of the social memory being "overlaps" with another most frequently (Bull & Mitchell, 2015).

Social myth also fulfills the function of image-visual and emotional filling of social practices. In order to incorporate new rational knowledge into the collective memory of society they must be transformed into visually recognizable holistic images, otherwise they will be difficult to integrate into already existing social experience (Huebner, 2011).

As a result of perceiving information processed in such a way a person perceiving it reconstructs the world picture and social phenomena at an unconscious level (Huebner, 2014). Due to the fact that the consequences of myth's influence are quite hard to predict at a rational level, during its introduction and operation mythologized perception of reality enables to render both constrictive and destructive influence on the masses behavior.

The fact that myth always aspires to become reality can be considered as a peculiarity of social myth and the groups that operate with it are interested in it. Political myth that is quite similar to myth in historical science can serve as an example. The process of substitution of reality occurs that G. Le Bon describes as follows, "All our artistic, political or social notions definitely bear the mark of illusions. Human sometimes reduces these illusions to ashes through dramatic upheavals but he is always obliged to recover them from the rubble again... Fallacy but not truth has always been the main factor of evolution of peoples" (Le Bon, 1982: 230-231).

Mythologization of history is one of the most frequently exploited and effective mechanisms of political theory and practice in general and of nationalistic concepts in particular (Lincoln, 2014). The efficacy and relevance of myth is manifested precisely in crisis periods; thus, the collapse of totalitarian mythology in Russia didn't result in demythologization of social consciousness but, quite the opposite, it became a powerful stimulus for new myth making which ideologists of radical nationalism were quick to exploit.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Myth acts as one of basic means of organizing and systematizing social reality. Moreover, social myths directly participate in forming and transforming social consciousness.

Mythologization fixes in the consciousness of individual social actors and their groups the idea that any object or process is a value which must be "protected" from possible risks or the idea that the very risks are values and their existence must be supported by society oriented towards the respect for freedom of choice.

Such "inclusion" may have both superficial (as a result of simple informing) and deep (social-ontological) character that involves introducing information about myth, myth making and possible social risks in different layers of worldview of social actors, sociocultural groups and communities.

#### **Conflict of interest**

The authors confirm that the data do not contain any conflict of interest.

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